

sis. Descriptive statistics were run on all variables. Mean, median and SD were reported for continuous variables. Percentages were displayed for discrete ones. Maps of the independent variables aggregated per household cluster were produced to visualise their spatial pattern. For the spatial pattern of categorical variables, the percentage levels were displayed. For continuous variables, such as mothers BMIs, classes of BMI indicating underweight, normal weight, overweight and obesity, were used to visualise the spatial pattern. Correlation between the anthropometric status and the independent variables were ran on all variables to study the linear relationship with height-for-age. A hierarchical stepwise linear regression model was applied to determine the factors that were significant HAZ determinants. Three hierarchical stepwise models were run, with demographic and socio-economic factors that affect height-for-age entered first. The second block consisted of environmental variables and in the third block, the household clusters classification variables, based on the type of market that served each cluster. The independent variables retained in the final model were all significant at the $P \leq 0.05$ level. Given that most regression analyses have been criticised of overlooking or not correcting for the spatial dependence which biases the results of the regression models (Voss *et al.*, 2006; de Sherbinin, 2011), we checked for possible spatial autocorrelation in our analyses. Thus, the results of

the final model were validated by visualising the pattern of the residuals in ArcGIS, and running a spatial autocorrelation analysis using Global Moran's I to assess the non-spatial clustering of the model residuals. Spatial autocorrelation indicates that the errors in the model are not independent (Voss *et al.*, 2006). When spatial autocorrelation is present, it reduces the standard errors of the estimates, increases the t -values and reduces the P-value thereby leading to a bias in the model (Voss *et al.*, 2006). Moran's I is similar to Pearson's correlation coefficient, and has values ranging from -1 to 1, with positive values indicating high values surrounded by high values and, negative results showing spatial randomness. A prediction map based on the model predicted height-for-age z-scores per household cluster and per district was produced using natural breaks.

Results

The descriptive characteristics of the study population is presented in Table 2, while Figure 3 displays the spatial variability existing within the demographic and socio-economic variables per cluster. The high percentage of stunting is more common in the North, West and south-eastern part of Rwanda and varies from 0%

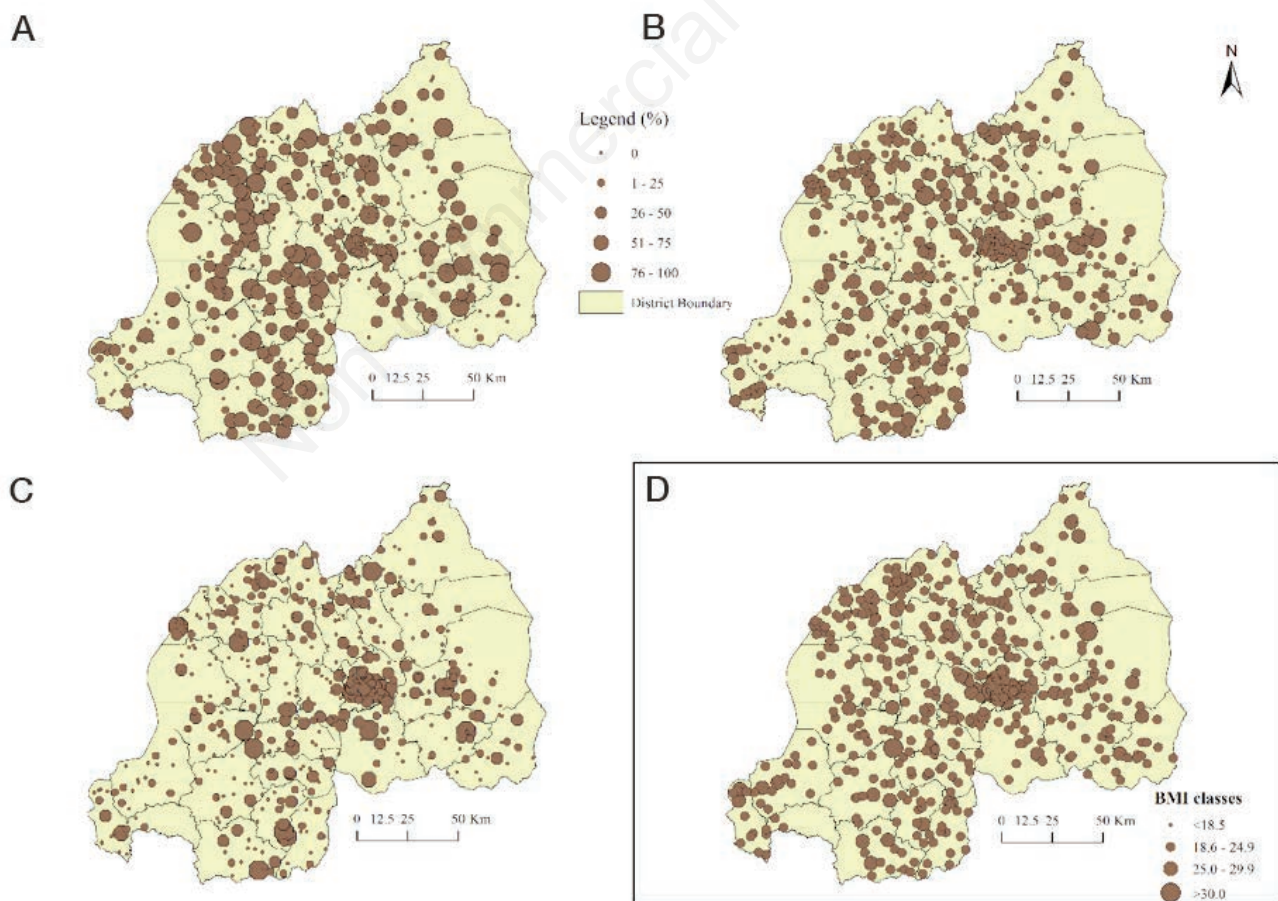


Figure 3. Prevalence rate of Demographic and Health Survey variables per cluster. A) Prevalence rate of stunting; B) percentage of exclusive breastfeeding; C) secondary and other higher education of mother; D) mothers' body mass index (BMI) classes per cluster.



to 100% in some clusters (Figure 3A). Exclusive breastfeeding of children less than six months was generally below 75% (Figure 3B). As expected, mothers with secondary education and higher mostly lived in Kigali (Figure 3C). On the other hand, the BMI of mothers were uniformly spread across the country (Figure 3D).

As shown in Figure 4, the percentage of children receiving deworming tablets in the last six months (Figure 4A) was higher across the country as opposed to the prevalence of diarrhoea (Figure 4B). The use of non-improved water source (Figure 4C) in the households was more pronounced in the East, North and some regions in the South. On the other hand, the use of non-improved sanitation (Figure 4D) was evenly spread across the four provinces of Rwanda.

Table 3 shows the results from the household cluster classification. Household clusters that were served by an urban market within a 5 and a 10-km radius were 21% and 32%, respectively. Household clusters served only by a rural market were 39% and 61% within the 5 and 10 km, respectively. Household clusters served by neither an urban nor a rural market within 5 km were 40% as opposed to 7% within 10 km.

Figure 5 shows the spatial distribution of the household clusters as served by an urban market or a rural market within a 5 km (Figure 5A) and 10 km radius (Figure 5B). The majority of household clusters that were served by a market at the top of the food supply chain were located in urban areas. According to our assumption of increased aflatoxin contamination along the food supply chain, these household clusters were considered as clusters with the least risk of exposure to higher aflatoxin level. Household clusters served by markets at the intermediate level in the food supply chain were mostly located in rural areas; and thus they will be more exposed to aflatoxins compared to clusters located in the urban areas, assuming the rural markets get their supply from the urban markets. Finally, the household clusters neither served by an urban nor a rural market within a 10-km radius, which is the third category, will be potentially the most exposed to higher levels of aflatoxins.

As can be seen in Table 4 showing the results of the hierarchical linear regression model, the child's age, mother's height, secondary education, being male, birth weight was significantly associated with height-for-age. From the biophysical factors, elevation was a significant predictor of height-for-age in children. Being served by a rural market within 10 km radius was negatively associated with the height-for-age in children. The HAZ significantly decreased as a cluster changed from being served by an urban market to being served by a rural market within a 10-km radius. The adjusted R^2 of the final model was 0.27, implying that 27% of the total variability in stunting can be explained by this significant empirical model.

Figure 6 shows the results of the spatial autocorrelation analysis with residuals on the x-axis and the lagged residuals on the y-axis. The lagged residuals represent the sum of weighted residuals of neighbouring household clusters indicating that there is no spatial autocorrelation among residuals, thereby confirming their independence. Figure 7B shows the spatial pattern of the predicted values of HAZ at the cluster-level in Rwanda, based on the model presented in Table 4, with the same mean HAZ aggregated to the district level. Overall, the central region of Rwanda has normal height-for-age values in contrast to the northern and the western regions that have mostly low height-for-age values. The aggregation to the district level, however, overshadows the clusters with higher HAZ, which are surrounded by clusters with lower HAZ.

As seen in Figure 7A, the same is observed from the comparison with the commonly reported stunting prevalence per district. Compared with Figure 1, the spatial variability in HAZ is lost due to data aggregation at the district levels.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics of dependent and independent variables used in the study.

| Variable | Mean | SD | No. of clusters | % |
|--|-------|-------|-----------------|-------|
| Continuous | | | | |
| Height-for-age | -1.2 | 1.5 | 1,467 | |
| Child age (months) | 11 | 7.0 | 1,514 | |
| Child birth weight (kg) | 3.3 | 0.6 | 1,509 | |
| Mother's BMI (kg/m ²) | 23.1 | 3.5 | 1,509 | |
| Mother's height (cm) | 156.9 | 6.1 | 1,509 | |
| Birth index (months) | 11.4 | 6.6 | 3,122 | |
| Wealth index | -0.1 | 0.8 | 3,122 | |
| Elevation (m) | 1702 | 348.0 | | |
| Slope (degrees) | 11.7 | 10.9 | | |
| Rainfall (mm) | 1208 | 259.0 | | |
| Relative humidity | 73.9 | 3.6 | | |
| Categorical | | | | |
| Stunting | | | 1,467 | 30.2 |
| Sex | | | 3,122 | |
| Female | | | | 50.1 |
| Male | | | | 49.9 |
| Exclusive breastfeeding | | | 2,972 | |
| Yes | | | | 25.3 |
| Mother's education | | | 3,122 | |
| No education | | | | 13.3 |
| Primary education | | | | 71.8 |
| Secondary education | | | | 12.5 |
| Higher | | | | 2.4 |
| Improved water source* | | | 3,074 | |
| Yes | | | | 72.5 |
| Improved sanitation ^o | | | 3,074 | |
| Yes | | | | 70.2 |
| Deworming tablets use in last six months | | | | 3,116 |
| Yes | | | | 48.6 |
| Diarrhoea in last two weeks | | | 3,122 | |
| Yes | | | | 17.0 |

Data source: Demographic and Health Survey, Rwanda 2014-2015 and authors' own calculations. SD, standard deviation; BMI, body mass index. *includes piped water, public tap/standpipe, tube well, borehole, protected well, protected spring, rainwater; ^oincludes connection to a piped sewer system, to a septic tank, to a pit latrine, ventilated improved pit latrine, pit latrine with slab, composting toilet. Shared improved facilities are also included.

Table 3. Household clusters classification.

| Variable | Sample size (%) | |
|--|-----------------|----------|
| | 5 km | 10 km |
| Distance categories | | |
| Household clusters served by an urban market | 106 (21) | 158 (32) |
| Household clusters exclusively served by a rural market | 90 (39) | 300 (61) |
| Household clusters served by neither an urban nor a rural market | 196 (40) | 34 (7) |

Discussion

We studied the determinants of the spatial pattern of height-for-age at the household cluster level in Rwanda considering demographic, socio-economic variables and environmental variables, with a proxy variable for aflatoxin exposure in children. Stunting prevalence in children in Rwanda was 30.2% which, according to the present stunting prevalence thresholds (de Onis *et*

al., 2019), is considered very high. Factors associated with stunting were the child's age, the mother's height, the mother's education, the child's gender and its birth weight. The direction of the relationship for each covariate was as expected. First, the age of children was negatively associated with height-for-age, a result that aligns with other studies in the sense that as a child becomes older, the risk of stunting increases (Dewey and Huffman, 2009). Second, the mother's height was positively associated with the

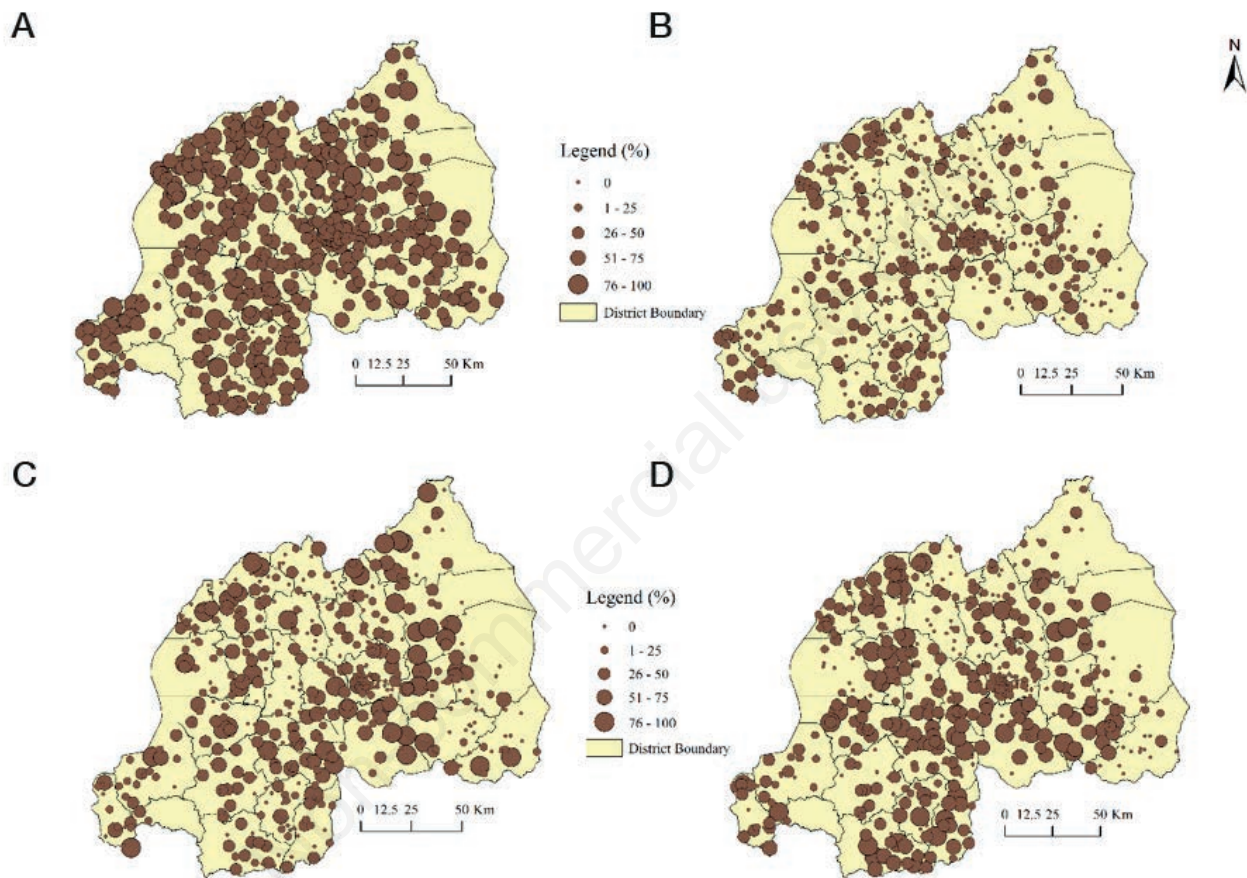


Figure 4. Prevalence rate of Demographic and Health Survey variables per cluster. A) Prevalence rate of using deworming tablets in last six months; B) percentage of diarrhoea in last two weeks; C) non-improved water source in the households; D) non-improved sanitation in household.

Table 4. Regression coefficients of the socio-economic, environmental and accessibility factors on height-for-age.

| Variables | Non-standardized coefficients | | Standardized coefficients | | 95% CI Lower, Upper |
|---|-------------------------------|----------------|---------------------------|--|------------------------|
| | B | Standard error | Beta | | |
| Child's age (months) | -0.08** | 0.01 | -0.328 | | -0.102, -0.062 |
| Mother's height (cm) | 0.06** | 0.01 | 0.223 | | 0.036, 0.078 |
| Secondary education or higher | 0.01* | 0.00 | 0.128 | | 0.002, 0.010 |
| Child being male | -0.01* | 0.00 | -0.132 | | -0.010, -0.002 |
| Child's birth weight (kg) | 0.32* | 0.13 | 0.102 | | 0.065, 0.583 |
| Elevation (m) | -0.00** | 0.00 | -0.207 | | -0.001, 0.000 |
| Cluster served by an urban <i>vs</i> a rural market | -0.18* | 0.09 | -0.086 | | -0.351, -0.007 |

B, Non-standardized coefficient; Beta, Standardized coefficient; CI, Confidence interval. * $P \leq 0.05$, ** $P \leq 0.001$. Adjusted R^2 of the model is 0.27.

height-for-age of her child, showing the relation between maternal nutrition and anthropometric status of the child. Maternal short stature is a high-risk factor of intra-uterine growth restriction, which has previously been linked to childhood stunting (Black *et al.*, 2013). Third, we found that secondary education or higher of the mother was positively associated with height-for-age. In Uganda, Wamani *et al.* (2007) found similar results. Chopra (2003) and Sakisaka *et al.* (2006) also identified that low maternal education was associated with lower height-for-age of children.

In our study, a child being male was negatively associated with height-for-age. Previous Rwandan DHS surveys (INSR and Macro, 2006; NISR *et al.*, 2010) have shown a similar pattern. The Rwanda DHS of 2010 showed that 47.4% of the boys were stunted compared to 41.4% of the girls. The Rwanda DHS of 2005 identified that 46.3% of the boys were stunted compared to 44.4% of the girls. In a study on sex differences in the nutritional status of HIV-exposed children in Rwanda, Condo *et al.* (2015) found significant differences in stunting status, with male children being more stunted than their female counterparts, although they did not find a significant difference in feeding practices between male and female children. As for birth weight, our findings showed that higher birth weight was positively associated with height-for-age. Black *et al.* (2013) have shown that children with normal birth weight are more protected against infections and have less mortality risk compared to children with a low birth weight.

Although exclusive breastfeeding, use of deworming tablets, access to improved water source and sanitation of the household are known to influence height-for-age (Stewart *et al.*, 2013), our multi-variate analysis did not identify any significant association. Preceding birth interval, mothers' BMI, and type of residence were also not significantly associated with stunting. Households living in areas of higher altitude negatively associated with the height-for-age of children. The robustness of the elevation covariate was consistent throughout the analysis. Similarly, Dang *et al.* (2004) found that children living in mountainous regions have a higher risk of becoming stunted than children brought up in lowlands. Elevation could have a direct effect on height-for-age, but it is more probable that these are more remote areas with higher food insecurity and lower levels of access to health care services. In a comprehensive vulnerability survey conducted in Rwanda in 2015, households at high altitudes were more at risk due to food insecurity, and their children were also found to be more stunted compared to those living in the rest of the country (MINAGRI *et al.*, 2016). On the other hand, in this study we tested the accessibility to health care services, and did not find a significant relationship between distance to health facilities and height-for-age. This is probably because the health care services delivery in Rwanda is well organised with a universal health care system and thus equally accessible to the majority of the population (Binagwaho *et al.*, 2014). We tested other environmental factors such as rainfall, relative humidity and slope. These covariates were not statistically significant. However, this non-significant result might result from the cross-sectional nature of our study. Considering seasonality in future studies might reveal an impact of these factors on the anthropometric status of children. Skoufias and Vinha (2012) analysed the impact of the weather on child height in rural Mexico from 1951 to 1985 and found that after positive rainfall shocks, defined as one or two standard deviations more than the average 1951-1985 rainfall, children were shorter regardless of their location or altitude. Negative temperature shocks, defined as one or two standard deviations less than the average 1951-1985 tempera-

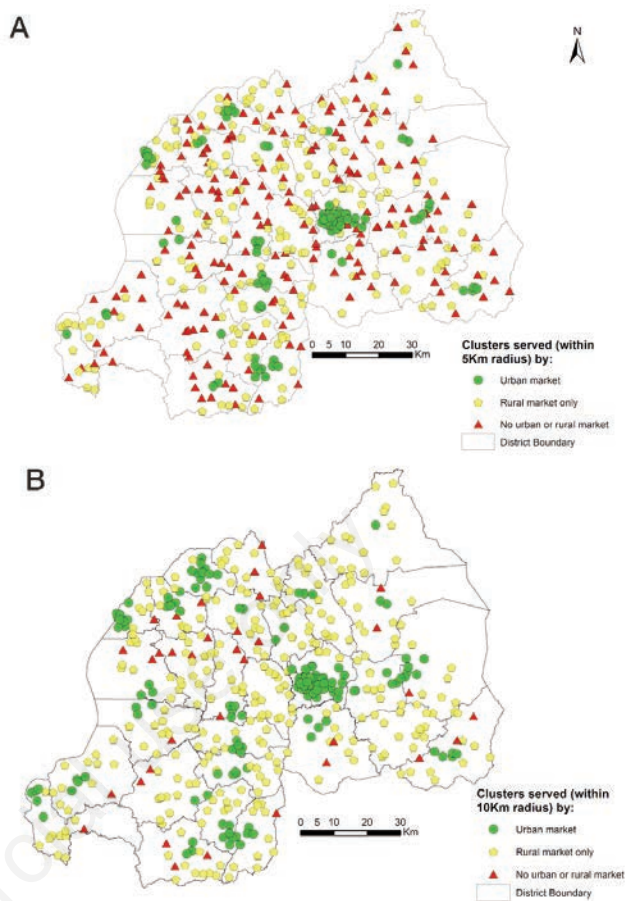


Figure 5. Distribution of household clusters as served by the three categories of markets. A) Within a 5-km distance; and B) a 10-km distance.

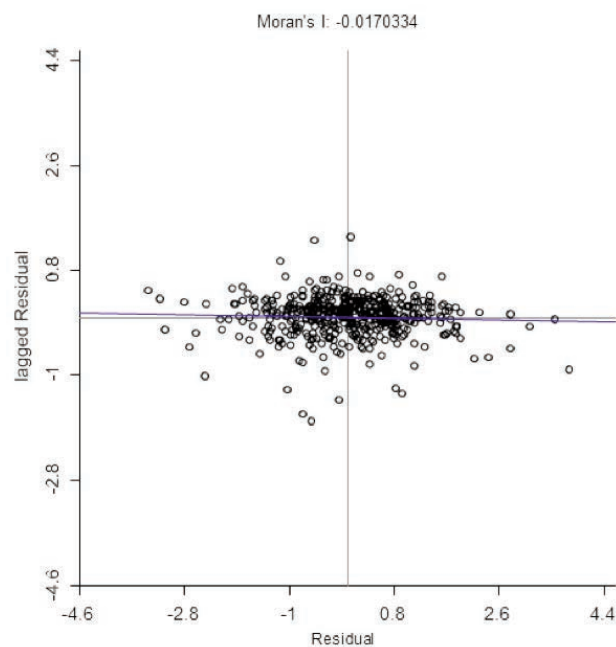


Figure 6. Moran's I for the residuals.

ture, also had a negative impact on child's height but only for high altitude areas (Skoufias and Vinha, 2012).

Household clusters that were served by rural markets had a significant negative association with height-for-age compared to clusters that were served by urban markets. This association had the second highest effect on the height-for-age of children after the children's birth weight. This result supports our hypothesis that households that obtain food supplies from markets at the lower end of the food supply chain have a higher risk of aflatoxin exposure. Given that these findings are based on a proxy only, this finding should be treated with caution. Also, in reality, the dynamics of aflatoxin production along the food supply are complex which means that our hypothesis requires further validation by studying the occurrence of this toxin along the food supply chain and quantifying contamination levels. On the other hand, due to the lack of explicit national spatial data on aflatoxins in foods, which is the case in many developing countries, our approach could be applied in other research settings on mycotoxins. Our study revealed that the identified variability in stunting prevalence at the cluster level is lost when stunting levels are aggregated to the district level. This can have considerable implications for stunting reduction policies

because a district might be classified as having low stunting and thus not be given priority for programme intervention even if high stunting prevalence could exist at the sub-district or cluster level. To enable more geographically targeted policies and programmes in future, it is important to consider cluster-level variations in stunting prevalence.

The use of the Rwanda DHS 2014-15 data had several strengths and the consideration of biophysical factors and a proxy measure of the exposure to aflatoxins in addition to socio-economic factors rendered the analysis more robust, enabling spatially explicit predictions of stunting occurrence. First, we analysed both child and mother characteristics, further increasing the robustness of the analysis. Second, the DHS survey provided a range of explanatory variables of good quality data. Third, the availability of spatial data enabled us to analyse biophysical factors associated with stunting at the household cluster-level which, to the best of our knowledge, has not been done before in Rwanda. Using the household clusters, we could take into account the spatial variability of the covariates, visualise the spatial distribution of height-for-age at a fine-scale resolution, control for spatial autocorrelation, and finally make a spatial prediction map for height-for-age. Our

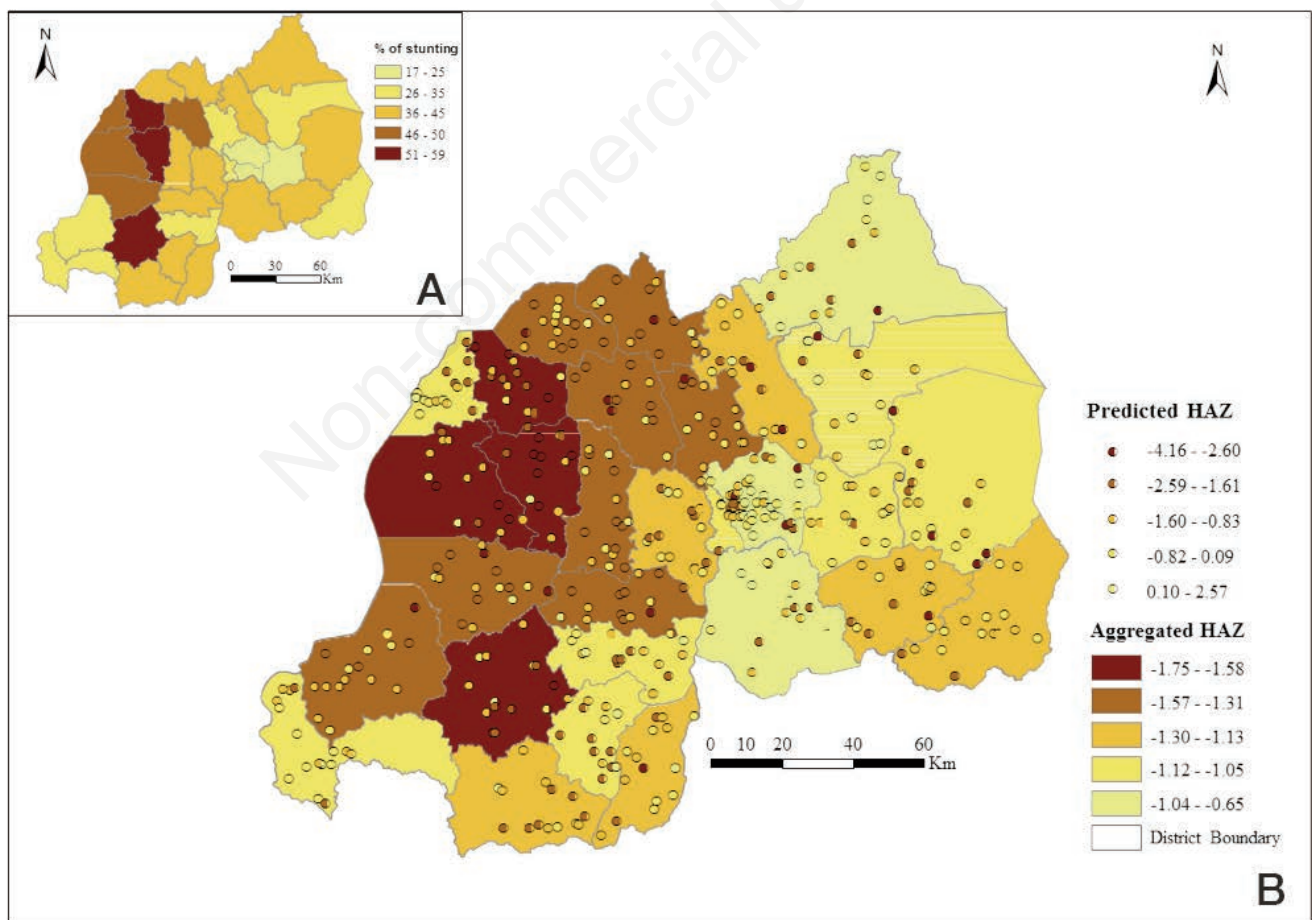


Figure 7. Model-predicted height-for-age z-scores (HAZ) per cluster. Based on Demographic and Health Survey, 2015. A) Per district and B) with the same values shown in the background aggregated at the district level compared to the prevalence of stunting.



study also had limitations. Although for the extraction of environmental factors and the estimation of household exposure to aflatoxins the displacement of the household clusters was taken into account; there will be a margin of error as the true locations of the clusters remain unknown (Burgert *et al.*, 2013). Also, our proxy for aflatoxins exposure via the food supply chain requires further evidence. This is because of the complex interplay of factors leading to aflatoxins produced in food products (Sanchis and Magan, 2004; Sakisaka *et al.*, 2006). Also, our scenario considered only the hierarchy of markets as the source of exposure, which does not take into account the exposure experienced by households that produce and store maize for their own consumption.

Conclusions

Our study confirms not only the usual effect of child and mother factors on height-for-age but also shows the influence of environmental factors in determining the height-of-age of children in Rwanda. Elevation and being supplied by markets at the lower end of the food supply chain were found to be significantly associated with low height-for-age. Thus, an understanding and consideration of the environmental drivers of stunting is crucial in order to produce a holistic approach in addressing low height-for-age in children under five years. Our use of household clusters shows the variability of stunting across the study area. In most published studies, the analysis is generally conducted at the household level with no spatial component considered. Although this approach provides valuable insights into the determinants of stunting on individual and household levels, most governmental interventions are targeted at the regional scale. Future research should focus on studying in depth the clustering observed in the height-for-age measure, to better understand the individual determinants of stunting at a finer scale. Conducting such a research could shed light on overlooked, yet determining correlates of stunting, which would result in better geographically targeted interventions and prioritisation of areas affected. It would also contribute to an examination of the temporal change in hotspots of stunting during the past years, which would lead to a better understanding of the spatial variation in the distribution of stunting. For Africa and Rwanda specifically, there is a need for more interdisciplinary research, incorporating geographical information system applications in understanding the complexity of stunting, to complement the research usually conducted on an individual or household level in the nutrition or social science fields. Finally, there is a tremendous data gap to be filled on the extent of mycotoxin exposure on the national level and how this affects linear growth, not only at the individual level but also at a regional and national scale.

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