

Information Management Network / Experience Sharing Session – 17 August 2021

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Participants – IFPRI, UNICEF, UNDP, UNFPA, WFP, Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), JICA, UNHCR, UN-Habitat, MIMU (37 participants)

1 Experience Sharing Session in use of Phone Surveys

Agencies shared their experience on use of phone surveys focusing on agri-food systems, food security and monitoring of project delivery. The notes below summarise key points from the presentations and discussion:

Advantages of Phone Surveys

- lower cost, less time and safer in the current pandemic situation,
- flexible, and very useful for repeated rapid assessments. Some of the surveys have gone for as many as 10 rounds with the same group of respondents to track trends over time.

Disadvantages/challenges of Phone Surveys

- possible biases in respondents (mainly those with phones and available to answer, meaning likely missing the poorest and most vulnerable households),
- surveys must be adapted to be shorter and are not a substitute for face-to-face information which includes observation for example,
- data volume can be difficult to manage
- phone survey fatigue among respondents (attrition and progressively lower success rates)
- difficulty in gathering information on some subjects which may not seem so urgent to respondents when they are struggling in the current pandemic situation
- collecting and maintaining an updated list of phone contacts is challenging and requires a lot of work (keeping up with people changing SIM cards, confirming with random calls and follow-ups etc)

Biases and some measures to mitigate them

- missing those without phones, especially the poorest and most vulnerable households (for example, female-headed households, larger families and those with smaller farms are less likely to have a phone) – they can also include those in the area with poor network coverage and limited access to power
- attrition (loss of respondents) between rounds – no perfect solution but can use baseline or existing data to estimate the magnitude and bias and adjust the weighting (an [interesting article](#) related to this topic was mentioned)
- finding the right respondent – it may be necessary to ask the initial respondent to speak with someone else in the household, for example when needing gender-related info
- having a large contact list to compensate for high nonresponse rate.
- issue of people with more than one SIM card – considered more in terms of sample frame – can lead to a higher probability of being selected. In some instances, a propensity score was used to compensate based on the different probability of being selected in the sample

- comparability – it may be difficult to compare results when switching between face-to-face and phone surveys – misses the direct observation, differences in sample frame and questionnaires
- Most important measure is to understand the biases and limitations, and be open about the representativeness.

Planning

- Be mindful of the possible challenges, many of the lessons learned from other countries are transferable.
- Consider whether to use in-house capacity or outsourced call centres. This may depend on the scale and type of the survey. In-house can be useful for smaller surveys as it allows more control and flexibility but needs a method of having the phone numbers, space and daily supervision. It is also useful when you have the numbers of key respondents for follow-up. Outsourcing has been used for larger surveys, especially to gather information that is representative of the general population as these companies usually have a database of phone numbers or capacity to do Random Digit Dialling (RDD). Issues with outsourcing are the high turnover of operators so loss of knowledge over rounds and need to retrain operators, less flexibility and control over data collection, and the cost (usually more expensive).
- Consider whether the target group have mobile phones (better success with rice millers for example (close to 70%) than farmers (40%), and ensure piloting to understand who will respond and when to try to call them.
- Consider the frequency and timing to be used for Phone surveys – some were based on a fixed schedule throughout the year for example, while others in the agriculture/food sectors may be based on seasonality - when mills are active for example the rate of response can be as high as 80% but drops to 60% in the season when they are inactive (more likely to reject the survey, less likely to answer the call)
- Reaching rural households can be difficult as they often have their phones off to save power/cost. Persistence helped with repeat calls over an extra week bringing a 17% increase in response
- Have an analysis plan – how you will use the data you are collecting? Gathering information through phone surveys is different than in-person surveys and people can quickly tire of a long call, so need to ensure the questionnaire is short and simple and all gathered data will be useful.
- If collecting phone numbers in-person, use a consent form to make sure that the respondent agrees to be contacted by phone for future surveys, including if the survey is outsourced
- Before starting each phone survey, ask the consent of the respondent as it is also a best practice for in-person surveys. At the end of the survey, ask for consent to continue using the contact for future surveys.

Sampling

- Phone numbers for key respondent approaches may be collected through some in-person contact (project in-person data collection or through partners' work with the target group), and by enumerators visiting the area. For surveys aimed to be representative of the general population, if a list of contacts previously collected is not available, Random Digit Dialling can be used.
- Use quotas/caps to ensure a specific sample composition (e.g. to ensure reach enough respondents from a particular area/background)
- Attrition rate (loss of respondents when using repeated phone surveys with a particular group). One agency noted a consistent reduction between the first and second round (15-20% less respondents in round 2) but samples then tend to stabilise after the second round. Paying attention to the timing of the survey to overcome issues of seasonality, and persistence to continue to try to call have been useful. Another approach is to start with a higher number of respondents recognising there will be attrition over time.
- Reaching respondents – call early and often, be persistent in calling rural households in particular

- there is no minimum rate of response that constitutes success or validity of the survey – agencies found best results through avoiding a cut-off and instead aiming to reach the full listing by persistent efforts – the result is just who you are able to reach, even if not the full planned listing. What is important is to consider the limitations in reach in the analysis and reporting of the results so it is clear.

Questionnaires

- Ensure shorter and simple surveys using simple language and short questions to avoid misinterpretation – this helps to improve data quality and reduce drop-off rates (people who decide not to complete the survey). Avoid long questions which can confuse the respondents. It's better to ask open questions and work with trained enumerators who can probe to come to the answers which are relevant to the questionnaire format. It is also better to translate the questions to local language if possible.
- Take care in choosing questions - aim for not more than 20 mins per interview. This requires being thoughtful about the questions and the likely response length. Short questions and not having long lists of response options or its hard for the respondent – gives less responses over time and lower quality
- Include socio-economic indicators to compare how the sample compares to the general population – especially for baseline surveys, as well as some exploration topics to learn as you go from respondents (for example, asking rice millers about what other products they mill)
- Pre-test questionnaires to ensure they are not too long and recognising that different respondent groups may respond differently to the same question (e.g. rice millers or farmers); Carry out several tests to verify the validity of questions and indicators

Gathering information

- Ensure well trained and experienced enumerators – it is usually best with people who have already done in-person data collection before so they understand how to engage the respondent and maintain their interest to collect information throughout the interview. Be sure to train enumerators thoroughly on the questionnaire and the technique to validate data and probe respondents.
- Ensure male and female enumerators from different backgrounds and languages relevant to the target area (i.e. hire local enumerators who speak ethnic languages to make the calls to people in their native language, include both female and male enumerators). Survey instruments tend not to be translated to all the local languages so it's important to train enumerators on how to translate particular questions accurately when asking them
- Some organisations even translated the questions into major ethnic languages (for nationwide surveys).
- Call respondents according to their preferred time and language
- Explain what the survey is for and who is conducting it to be clear and avoid raising expectations (on whether this survey might actually have immediate effect). It was noted though that keeping people's attention in a time of crisis when they find the questions are not relevant to them is difficult.
- One way to get high quality data and reach more respondents is to let people know a few days in advance about the study (sensitisation)
- Incentives - some provided a small airtime credit incentive e.g. MMK 1500 or 2000 to help improve response rates and as token of appreciation. This is not intended as a compensation for their time and means more to poorer respondents (for example, farmers) than to groups/companies (e.g. rice millers). Reviews in the literature about whether incentives influence results are mixed – so far it has not been tested systematically for Myanmar.

Analysis and reporting

- Consider weighting data according to socio-economic variables – in the case of Myanmar, education was mostly used – there is also literacy bias where only people with certain level of education participated in surveys – it is also found that education correlates with food security
- be sure to present the biases and limitations when analysing and presenting results

Advantages and disadvantages of in-house & outsourced call centers		
	Advantages	Disadvantages
In-House	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Direct control over data collection • Higher degree of flexibility • Easier to incorporate into internal processes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Needs daily management and supervision • Needs dedicated office space and hardware • Less scalable. • Need to collect / have access to phone numbers
Outsourced	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Daily management and supervision outsourced • Data entry tools, call management system, and quality control processes already in place • Usually already have a database of phone numbers or capability to do Random Digit Dialling (RDD) • More scalable 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High turnover of operators • Less flexibility and control over data collection • Usually more expensive