

Mission Impossible: Sampling In Afghanistan

By Dr. Zemarak Mohsini, MD, ASCOR-Survey

In the heart of Asia lies mountainous Afghanistan, with beautiful sights but poor people and very poor infrastructure. The former makes asking questions difficult. The latter makes finding respondents even more challenging.

Afghanistan is a land-locked country with a vast and varied

landscape. It has few paved roads, and internal ground and air travel are extremely limited and dangerous. Data collection by horse-drawn cart or traveling long distances on foot is common. Because of the wide range of temperature conditions found in Afghanistan, there is both a danger of heat exhaustion or even heatstroke in the lower regions during Summer

and wind chill, or frostbite in the mountains during Winter.

The Afghan Center for Socio-Economic and Opinion Research, D3 Systems company, has always made efforts to meet international sampling standards despite the challenges. In Afghanistan, *Shehraw* (municipal administrations) define the urban population as those living



within municipal limits. By default, the rural population comprises those who are living outside the municipal limits. The rural areas are therefore defined neither in terms of population density nor remoteness.

Violence and armed struggle are still a problem in Afghanistan and are threatening to researchers. The violence is particularly found in

the eastern and southern regions adjacent to Pakistan where Osama bin Laden and the remnants of the Taliban's regime are suspected of hiding. Such violence can interrupt sampling when a situation suddenly arises in the midst of fieldwork.

Sometimes waiting a few days is sufficient, but occasionally sampling points must be substituted

if there is a prolonged disruption.

Interviews are completed using multi-stage random sampling. Due to the local cultural traditions, the universe at the outset is divided into male and female sub-samples. Each region, province and further strata is allocated an equal number of male and female respondents per

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Terrain, Development Make Sampling In Afghanistan Nearly Impossible

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sampling points. The two sub-samples are covered by field-force of the respective gender.

Most of Afghanistan does not have street names or addresses, let alone directories of names. The settlements within districts are therefore selected at random by the field director. Each sampling point is assigned a starting point and given direction. The starting points are recognizable locations – like mosques, schools, bazaars etc., within each of the selected settlements for the survey.

To follow the sampling plan of the survey, interviewers often need to travel to far and remote points. Sometimes it may take them 18 hours or more to walk to the targeted respondents. If they're lucky they can make use of traditional means of transportation such as carts, donkeys, etc., which are time consuming and uncomfortable in their own right.

"I was assigned to a sampling point in Paghman, which is a suburb district of the capital Kabul. I went there by bus; but the city center has non-asphalted roads branching into other remote spots in the area. I had little choice but to walk to get to the selected households and conduct

the interviews there. When I called it a day and was heading back home, no means of transportation was available as of that time; but still I was fortunate to run into a loaded truck heading to Kabul city."

Shasullah, Male, 23
ACSOR Interviewer, Kabul

Interviews are gender-restricted, meaning that only women can interview women, and men interview men. Unfortunately, the problems tend to be larger for female versus male interviewers and urban areas versus rural ones. In urban areas some literate respondents exercise caution because they take a dim view of interviewers as spies. Sometimes they are arrested by government or Taliban law enforcement, or worse.

"I was very scared and about to cry. They took me for a spy and ousted me from the settlement. They were throwing stones at me."

Shahnaz, Female, 37
ACSOR Interviewer, Kabul

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Keeping in mind that the majority of Afghan's have five years of education and that 53.8% are illiterate, it is easy to understand why the vast majority of the population has never heard of *research* in general. They have no idea how research can be dynamic and useful in breaking new ground and building a healthy society. This is seen clearly when most respondents stare and are astonished when they hear the word "research" during the conduction of fieldwork. Most Afghans are confused with "survey" and "research." These are however used interchangeable with each other. In the academic circles, particularly at the university level, the word "research" conveys desk study and library search. A recent rise in field research and action-based research is occurring.

Despite the above, Afghans are hospitable and have a rich,

inherited culture. Consistent with the principles of Islam, they receive everyone in a friendly way, ranging from a routine guest to a strange interviewer who comes to visit them. They warm to the idea of interviewing as they see that someone wants to learn about their opinions regarding different issues. They have heaps of untold stories which fuel their interest to take part in interviews. For instance, poppy farmers are open to being interviewed and interviewers can even tape the interview.

High unemployment rates and little value of time in this culture pave the way for easy consent to interviewing. We all know that asking questions effectively and efficiently is always a plus, but one would find it very time-consuming to pose questions to an illiterate respondent who assumes that you talk politics if you pose semi-structured questions. As always, the longer the interview,

the greater the chances of losing interviewees' interest. This is especially true in Afghanistan and other post-conflict countries. Interestingly, the percentage of "don't know/refused" is below 2% in most of surveys in Afghanistan.

The difficulties are all worth it though. ACSOR survey results compliment other data held by institutions such as the Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU) and the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC), etc, demonstrating the reliability of the findings. We are also consistently rewarded by the comments of our clients about the usefulness of the data in developing and implementing suitable strategies for building a better future for Afghanistan. 

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