



Survey Households: an e-conference

November 2009

How best to communicate research findings about “the household” to non-specialist users of household survey data?

Summary

If you are participating in this e-conference, then it is probably because you are a specialist commissioner, producer or user of household survey data. You are likely to have some understanding of how the clearly defined household in a survey does not necessarily capture the realities of peoples' daily lives.

We find that survey professionals – data producers and collectors – have very clear understandings of what a household is. They have a clearly defined “statistical household”, articulated in survey manuals and training materials.

The majority of people who use household surveys – for example, policymakers or programme managers – tend not to be aware of the limitations of a household as defined by a survey. These end-users are also less likely to participate in events such as this e-conference.

Our research shows that many end users of survey data tend to use published reports “off the shelf”, accepting the concepts used as unproblematic because they were defined by the ‘specialists’.

The growing demand for indicators to monitor and evaluate development interventions means that there is an increasing need to communicate research findings to household survey end-users. Our research shows that they could be better equipped to understand the strengths and weaknesses of household survey data.

Questions:

1. How can analysts of household data communicate research findings and provisos more effectively with non-specialist users of household survey data.
2. How can survey professionals highlight the implications of definitions for interpreting results to the user community?

Discussion

Participant A

Addressing non-specialists requires obviously adapted approaches. A discourse that would be too academic would have little scope. We need to bring in "proofs".

A suggestion would be to test an approach on a country, starting with very concrete cases: you probably have within the scope of your research the materials, the data that allows you to show the discrepancies between the results relating to the definition of the household, and what their implications can be in terms of political actions at the level of target populations: "households", "household heads", etc. in diverse areas (education, health...)

Then see how to reproduce the experience elsewhere, in different contexts, and why not getting to the publication of a kind of "critical manual on the use of the concept of the household" for users?

Participant B

I think that here you raise two issues: one is training, the other is sensitization depending on the audience; there is also a transversal issue, time.

Training: with your reflections on the concept of household you raise a quasi epistemological issue; the problem is that in the disciplines where designers and users of surveys are trained there is little if any interest in such considerations (eg demography, economy). In other social science fields such as sociology where there are strong interests in methodology and epistemology, the focus is mainly on qualitative methods and not so much on the concepts of categories used in surveys. Therefore the "non specialists" you are mentioning who nevertheless certainly have some kind of background in one or the other of these disciplines are NOT trained in thinking about the pertinence of the categories used in surveys. Therefore I would personally urge for a book for profs and students dealing with these issues because in doing this you would prepare a next generation of professionals to be more sensitized to these issues.

Sensitization: here I think of the non specialists who are on the labour market in various kinds of institutions and are either "decision makers" or people supposed to inform decision makers. These people usually don't have time to think in depth about the pertinence of the categories/concepts used. In addition they are usually at a distance from the field. So the only way I can see to inform them would first be through the dissemination of short and clear documents such as "fact sheets" focusing on the concrete importance of considering the complexity of the concept of household. Possibly public talks directly addressed to these professionals could also be interesting.

Tiziana Leone

Participant A, I completely agree with you that to give concrete examples would help. In this regard we are currently modelling scenarios according to different definitions (e.g.: sleeping in the same place vs eating or DHS vs census definition) using 52 households interviewed as described in the two papers included on the left column of the intro page. the main changes are in the household size as well as household numbers. the DHS/census definitions reduce the size considerably and duplicate the number of households just to mention one result. however this is not representative of the national picture and would need a national level survey in order to measure the impact on various aspects such as poverty or education. That would be costly. Also it

would require involving specialists and funders that are often sceptical of the actual impact, which adds to the layer of people that need to be sensitised.

Participant B's idea of sensitisation and training does complement it and it would be the long-term possible solution. But what about in the short term? how do we get the message through quickly especially for current policy makers who do not have the time to spend on these issues?

Participant A

As I read Participant B's message, whose ideas I share, I feel that we have different understandings of the expression "non-specialists". My proposition was aimed mostly at the users involved in field work and policy making.

Participant B

I also understand the notion of 'non-specialists' as political actors and field workers/researchers. I think that it is important to distinguish between short/long term possibilities. My idea of simple fact sheets based on concrete evidence is a relatively short term suggestion; it could be disseminated in various organizations who work with political decision makers. Many of us have contacts with various institutions in different countries. Why not "use us" to disseminate your findings based on a standard presentation? Just an idea that comes to my mind now. The other suggestion (within academic training) seems important to me as your very important work must reach those yet to become field workers/researchers.

Participant C

Actually users and potential users should be involved right from the beginning of the household based data collection exercises so that they can point out the kind of data they would need. That means questions to be included in the questionnaires to solicit that kind of information/data have to reflect these needs. If plans for data collection is done in their absence, definitely the results might not suit them.

It is advised that users of any kind of data should be in the forefront in the design for their collection, such that any processing and analysis will be trying to answer their questions. In that manner there would be no problem of communication results to them. Otherwise it would look like they are being forced to take/accept something they don't know how it came around.

Sara Randall

Participants A, B and C all make really valid points and I think Participant B's points about both shorter and longer term approaches to these issues are important. However I think that, although the idea about books / training is good to think about, the problem is that policy makers / decision makers etc come from everywhere: from all different backgrounds, training etc - and it's probably easier to target them once they are in that role rather than years beforehand: hence briefings / fact sheets etc - but would they ever get read?

In terms of surveys and engaging with people beforehand I am sure this happens in many one-off surveys that are purpose designed - possibly like some of the education work that Participant A talks about. However I also think that many of these one-off surveys are also undertaken because the 'standard data sets' - census, DHS, HBS etc etc don't ask the right questions or in the right way - and the researchers doing their own survey are themselves are responding to the problems we have highlighted. Such strategies don't work however for all the secondary analysis done of internationally comparable data sets - and that may be where most of the problems lie.

