

Survey Households: an e-conference

November 2009

Survey definitions of household currently ignore respondents' realities and need to be improved

Summary

The academic literature critiquing the concept of household is rich, has a long history, and is drawn from many disciplines. Relatively little research examines how these critiques could translate into improved household survey data collection and analysis.

Our research identifies two major influences on definitions of households.

1. Comparability and harmonisation over time and across countries
Standardised international household survey series aim to facilitate comparison over space and time. Survey definitions often remain unchanged even if there is evidence that they no longer (or perhaps never did) represent people's realities.

2. The influence of the census
Censuses require individuals to be counted once and once only, and how people are enumerated in a census reflects these constraints. Because of the importance of comparability and harmonisation, census definitions feed into, and largely determine, subsequent survey tools.

These two constraints generate problems for household survey data:

- a. Aiming to compare 'like' with 'like' implies that all populations are structured in similar ways in terms of residence, provisioning and expenditure: but they are not
- b. The assumption that the majority of individuals live in / contribute to / obtain resources from just one 'household' is often false – especially in contexts where migration and complex livelihoods are the norm
- c. There are analytical implications of alternative understandings of the household in surveys. For example, different conceptualisations of the household generate substantial variation in standard indicators such as household size and characteristics of household head.

COMMONLY HEARD ARGUMENT

If the vast majority of people are well represented by surveys then it does not

matter for the minority for whom definitions do not represent well their daily realities.

COUNTER ARGUMENTS

- We need to know the scale of inadequate representation of people's daily realities.
- Poor representation of realities is unlikely to be distributed at random across a population. It is likely to be concentrated in groups such as: ethnic minorities; the poor; migrants; and mobile populations. In many settings these are the groups targeted for poverty reduction interventions and for whom the MDGs will not be met
- Deficient representations of realities are likely to differ geographically. Many interventions are geographically focused and may be dependent on data for specific localities.
- Diverse living arrangements in **urban** sub-Saharan Africa are poorly represented in household surveys.
- In **rural** areas, where traditional patterns of residence and kin support are combined with increasing migration, survey definitions rarely capture interdependencies of production, consumption and support.
- Concepts such as household headship are increasingly contested, especially in settings such as rental accommodation.

We suggest that household surveys might collect better data if they took a more flexible approach to household membership.

Questions

1. In your experience, are the vast majority of people well-represented by the definition of a household as used in surveys where you work?
2. Instead of collecting relationships only in relation to the (survey defined) household head, why not collect a household grid that records all relationships in a household?
3. How can we overcome issues linked to membership of multiple households in a survey?

Discussion

Participant A

Generally in Senegal the household is defined as a regrouping of individuals living under the same roof, sharing the same meals and recognising a single person as the authority. On the basis of this definition many problems are often noted to take into account the dimension of gender. In other words the notion of female household head is often badly understood.

Ernestina Coast

Participant A, yes, the gendered assumptions around "recognising a single person as the authority" emerged as a theme on our work. We see a disconnect between what survey professionals need from the "household head" and what survey respondents ascribe to this individual. For example, survey professionals essentially need a reference person with whom contact can be made, and with whom other household members are listed as having a relationship. However, dependent upon the linguistic meaning associated with the terminology that is used, this household head/reference person can be associated with specific, gendered roles. In our work in Tanzania, for example, interviewers would tend to use the word "mzee" in KiSwahili in order to identify the household head. This term is, however, strongly gendered in this setting, almost always associated with a man.

Participant B

1. In your experience, are the vast majority of people well-represented by the definition of a household as used in surveys where you work?

Yes and no! Yes because, this definition is simple to use. However, in some context mostly in sub-Saharan Africa, some people belong to two or more households. He eats in one and sleeps in another. Sometime, education support is from another household.

2. Instead of collecting relationships only in relation to the (survey defined) household head, why not collect a household grid that records all relationships in a household? This could be a good way to understand the household structure. However, for children of schooling age it will be useful to include a question on the sponsor. Some children are living in household A but their education and health assistance are sponsored by household B.

3. How can we overcome issues linked to membership of multiple households in a survey? There are two possibilities. First, we need to have the category member of multiple households. Second, we should take information on the individual role in each household or his/her relationship to the head of household in the different cases.

Participant C

Household have different meanings across cultures - it can be horizontal as well as vertical and across several generations. For research purposes, the objective should be the basis for definition. Trying to come up with a single definition will create confusion. It will be difficult to examine all the different meanings in one study.

Participant D

The concept of household relates to different dimensions of daily life according to countries:

1. – place of residence,
2. – filiation and partnership,
3. – type of life, in particular the daily meal,

4. – community of income,
5. – community of consumption.

Hence we distinguish between two concepts, the home–household and the dwelling–household. In France the definition of the household, in the sense of the census survey, covers all of the occupants of a single accommodation, without these people having necessarily to be united by family relationships. Nevertheless the needs of the economists wishing to use a relevant unit of decision in order to be able to study the ways in which consumption choices come about, have led INSEE (French National Institute of Statistics and Economic Studies) to introduce a new definition of the household (in the sense of household surveys) since 2005:

It's about all of the people (related or not) who habitually share a single accommodation (whether or not it is their main dwelling) and who have a common budget.

The common budget does not take into account the money spent on the dwelling nor on an occasional participation to common spending, and the shared dwelling is not necessarily the main place of residence. Several of these "households" also named "life units" can occupy the same dwelling. This household definition allows, for example, to take into account children on alternate custody whose main place of residence is another dwelling, but who "habitually" come to their father's whose budget they share. Those are as a matter of fact excluded from the dwelling–household by having their place of residence at their mother's. Nevertheless, those whose dwelling is the main place of residence and who contribute to the rent but have a separate budget (adult children, non related flatmates, etc.) make up distinct "life unit–households".

Here we put ourselves on the side of the producers of the data...

What does the surveyed person understand? Is it obvious to see oneself "classified" in a household that's different from one's parents', where one lives and where one pays a contribution to the rent?

Nothing is simple — everything gets complicated —

Participant E

In Tanzania a household is defined as a group of people sharing a POT, that is they are eating together most of the time without necessarily contributing to the purchase of food. It happens, especially in urban areas, to have many households in one housing unit as long as they do not regularly eat together. It happens that most of the household member are relatives, though this is not a necessary condition to the definition. At times we set up a time limit for one to be classified as a member of a particular household, it can be 3, 6 or 12 months period of association, for unrelated people. For related people, there is no limit as such, such as a couple just married. We have problems in rural areas where practice of extended families exist and it is sometime difficult to draw a boundary of members of a particular household when parents live and eat together with their married children, inlaws, grandchildren, etc. Another complication is for the polygamists men when the wives are living far apart, to which household should he belong.

Tiziana Leone

Participant B, could you expand on the role variable? Do you mean breadwinner, housewife etc. or something else?

Participant F

Managing a new definition of the household, or of any other collective entity which would reach a consensus and would prove to be adequate for all societies is certainly illusory, a challenge.

Shouldn't we reconsider the question in relation to research themes? For example, that of schooling (in Africa). The analyses of schooling factors prove to be deeply limited by the fact that, because of the usual definition of the household, they can only include resident children; we don't know whether for household x, other children of school age of the household head in particular, reside elsewhere (and whether they are, or not provided with schooling). As some surveys have experimented, a way forward already consists – whilst relying on the household – in collecting the characteristics of these "other" children as well (with a specific code for their residence situation).

Which of course can only be done within the context of a survey. The gain is already very noticeable in terms of analyses of practices or family strategies of schooling

Ernestina Coast

Participant F, Your work and points raised around the issue of education are important, not least against a context of rising levels of education participation (reflected in [inter]national policy efforts) in many countries.

It is, of course, important that we acknowledge that the standard statistical definition of the household is relatively unproblematic in some settings - along the lines of those you listed. We argue that, in survey settings, it is relatively straightforward to collect better "membership" data that better capture non-resident members.

Participant F

My example on the schooling seems to me to form an element of answer to the issue relating to belonging to multiple households.

As for finding out what is the % of people who are well represented by the definition of household, it really is very difficult. I have conducted surveys in North Togo, in Lome and in Burkina, where, it seems to me, the household is not too problematic. For Africa in particular, an important point concerns the practical residential details of polygamy; in the event of non co-residence of the co-spouses, it is clear that the usual definition of the household proves to be inadequate (cf. the work of Véronique Hertrich on the Bwa in Mali).

Participant G

Household is a very useful concept, yet it has been taken for granted in most surveys and other literature.

Traditionally, a household is defined as a "socio-economic unit that consists of one or more persons with common living and catering arrangements". Such persons are usually (though not always) related to each other by blood or by marriage. The concept has acquired so many meanings in the modern world to be used for any serious survey without first agreeing on its definition!

In today's world all types of living arrangements are possible and being practiced: what happens if one of the spouses or partners is almost permanent in another geographical area? In the case of Africa, a marriage of one man with multiple wives/partners, where in most cases they do not have

common living and catering arrangements, the above definition would not apply.

The simplest of the households is the "one-person household", i.e. a household where a person lives alone in a whole or part of a housing unit and has an independent consumption.

Membership of a household is another complication. One does not become a member by merely sharing in the consumption of a household. In this case, temporary visitors, or house-helpers may not necessarily become members of the household by their temporary stay or sharing in the consumption of the household; save if they are husband, wife and children.

Head of Household: This is another related problematic concept. Traditionally, head of household has mainly been used as a reference point, i.e. a person recognized as such by the rest of the members of the household to be the head. Often he/she is responsible for the financial support and welfare of the household members.

In the case of Tanzania, and I believe many African country, the head of household is a position preserved for someone with a traditional role in the household, irrespective of their welfare and financial contribution.

My argument therefore is that household is unit of survey needs to be revisited, as seen, it has changed its meaning overtime, and unfortunately the researchers do not attribute to it the same meaning. We all need to be on the same page, if we are to see what we mean and vice versa.

Last point: these concepts and others, their use predate the world embracing gender mainstreaming, including engendering censuses, surveys, etc. as a useful tool to ensure that not only the concepts, but also their use, are not gender-blind! And the challenge here is how do we embrace these new developments, which are very humanistic, on board from conceptualization to practice?

Is it possible to also bring in the UN Statistical Division and others who provide recommendations used to guide surveys and censuses?

Sara Randall

I think Participant G's point about changes in researchers' and other peoples' understanding over time is really important. We have been thinking very much about comparisons across space and time but rather less about the changing use of such an everyday term over time. It would be very difficult to study however: in this project we have reviewed the definitions (of household) used in (Anglophone Africa) censuses and surveys over the last 40 years and we see lots of changes - but our impression is that they reflect less a changing understanding of the notion of household and more a desire by statistical offices / governments to conform to international norms and definitions.