Chapter I
Introduction

Ibrahim S. Yansaneh*
International Civil Service Commission
United Nations, New York

Abstract

The present chapter provides a brief overview of household surveys conducted in developing and transition countries. In addition, it outlines the broad goals of the publication, and the practical importance of those goals.

Key terms: Household surveys, operating characteristics, complex survey design, survey costs, survey errors.

* Former Chief, Methodology and Analysis Unit, DESA/UNSD.

A. Household surveys in developing and transition countries

1. The past few decades have seen an increasing demand for current and detailed demographic and socio-economic data for households and individuals in developing and transition countries. Such data have become indispensable in economic and social policy analysis, development planning, programme management and decision-making at all levels. To meet this demand, policy makers and other stakeholders have frequently turned to household surveys. Consequently, household surveys have become one of the most important mechanisms for collecting information on populations in developing and transition countries. They now constitute a central and strategic component in the organization of national statistical systems and in the formulation of policies. Most countries now have systems of data collection for household surveys but with varying levels of experience and infrastructure. The surveys conducted by national statistical offices are generally multi-purpose or integrated in nature and designed to provide reliable data on a range of demographic and socio-economic characteristics of the various populations. Household surveys are also being used for studying small and medium-sized enterprises and small agricultural holdings in developing and transition countries.

2. In addition to national surveys funded out of regular national budgets, there are a large number of household surveys being conducted in developing and transition countries that are sponsored by international agencies, for the purposes of constructing and monitoring national estimates of characteristics or indicators of interest to the agencies, and also for making international comparisons of these indicators. Most such surveys are conducted on an ad hoc basis, but there is renewed interest in the establishment of ongoing multi-subject, multi-round integrated programmes of surveys, with technical assistance from international organizations, such as the United Nations and the World Bank, in all stages of survey design, implementation, analysis and dissemination. Prominent examples of household surveys conducted by international agencies in developing countries are the Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS), carried out by ORC Macro for the United States Agency for International Development (USAID); the Living Standards Measurement Study (LSMS) surveys, conducted with technical assistance from the World Bank, and the Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS) conducted by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). These programmes of surveys are conducted in various developing countries in Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean, and the Middle East. The DHS and LSMS programmes of surveys are described extensively in the case studies covered in chapters V and VI, respectively. Also, see World Bank (2000) for a detailed discussion of other programmes of surveys conducted by the World Bank in developing countries, including the Priority Surveys and the Core Welfare Indicators Questionnaire (CWIQ) surveys. For details about the MICS, see UNICEF (2000). The DHS programme is an offshoot of an earlier survey programme, namely, the World Fertility Survey (WFS), funded jointly by USAID and the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), with assistance from the Governments of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, the Netherlands and Japan. See Verma and others (1980) for details about the WFS programme.

B. Objectives of the present publication

3. The present publication provides a methodological framework for the conduct of surveys in developing and transition countries. With the large number surveys being conducted in these countries, there is an ever-present need for methodological work at all stages of the survey process, and for the application of current best methods by producers and users of household survey data. Much of this methodological work is carried out under the auspices of international agencies, and DESA/UNSD, through its publications and technical reports. This publication represents the latest of such efforts.

4. Most surveys conducted in developing and transition countries are now based on standard survey methodology and procedures used all over the world. However, many of these surveys are conducted in an environment of stringent budgetary constraints in countries with widely varying levels of survey infrastructure and technical capacity. There is a clear need not only for the continued development and improvement of the underlying survey methodologies, but also for the transmission of such methodologies to developing and transition countries. This is best achieved through technical cooperation and statistical capacity-building. This publication, which has been prepared to serve as a tool in such statistical capacity-building, provides a central source of technical material and other information required for the efficient design and implementation of household surveys, and for making effective use of the data collected.

5. The publication is intended for all those involved in the production and use of survey data, including:

- Staff members of national statistical offices
- International consultants providing technical assistance to countries
- Researchers and other analysts engaged in the analysis of household survey data
- Lecturers and students of survey research methods

6. The publication provides a comprehensive source of data and reference material on important aspects of the design, implementation and analysis of household sample surveys in developing and transition countries. Readers can use the general methodological information and guidelines presented in part one of the publication, along with the case studies in part two, in designing new surveys in such countries. More specifically, the objectives of this publication are to:

(a) Provide a central source of data and reference material covering technical aspects of the design, implementation and analysis of surveys in developing and transition countries;

(b) Assist survey practitioners in designing and implementing household surveys in a more efficient manner;

(c) Provide case studies of various types of surveys that have been or are being conducted in some developing and transition countries, emphasizing generalizable features that can assist survey practitioners in the design and implementation of new surveys in the same or other countries;

(d) Examine more detailed components of three operating characteristics of surveys - design effects, costs and non-sampling errors - and to explore the portability of these characteristics or their components across different surveys and countries;

(e) Provide practical guidelines for the analysis of data obtained from complex sample surveys, and a detailed comparison of the types of available computer software for the analysis of survey data.

C. Practical importance of the objectives

7. Household surveys conducted in developing and transition countries have many features in common. In addition, there are often similarities across countries, especially those in the same regions, with respect to key characteristics of the underlying populations. To the extent that the sample designs for household surveys and the underlying population characteristics are similar across countries, we might expect that some operating characteristics or their components would also be similar, or portable, across countries.

8. The portability of operating characteristics of surveys offers several practical advantages. First, information on the design of a given survey in a particular country can provide practical guidelines for the improvement of the efficiency of the same survey when it is repeated in the same country, or for the improvement of the efficiency of a similar survey conducted in that or a different country. Second, countries with little or no current survey infrastructure can benefit immensely from empirical data on features of sample design and implementation from other countries with better survey infrastructure and general statistical capacity. Third, there is a potential for significant cost savings arising from the fact that costly sample design-related information can be "borrowed" from a previous survey. Furthermore, the practical experience derived from a previous survey can be used to maximize the efficiency of the design of the survey under consideration.

9. This publication, besides addressing the issues of cost and efficiency of survey design and implementation, has an important general goal of promoting the development of high-quality household surveys in developing and transition countries. It builds on previous United Nations initiatives, such as the National Household Survey Capability Programme (NHSCP), which came to an end over a decade ago. The case studies provide important guidelines on the aspects of survey design and implementation that have worked effectively in developing and transition countries, on the pitfalls to avoid, and on the steps that can be taken to improve efficiency in terms of the reliability of survey data, and to reduce overall survey costs. The fact that all the surveys described in this publication have been conducted in developing and transition countries makes it a highly relevant and effective tool for statistical development in these countries.

10. The analysis and dissemination of survey data are among the areas most in need of capacity development in developing and transition countries. Analyses of data from many surveys rarely go beyond basic frequencies and tabulations. Appropriate analyses of survey data, and the timely dissemination of the results of such analyses, ensure that the requisite information

will be readily available for purposes of policy formulation and decision-making about resource allocation. This publication provides practical guidelines on how to conduct more sophisticated analyses of microdata, how to account for the complexities of the design in the analysis of the data generated, how to incorporate the analysis goals at the design stage, and how to use special software packages to analyse complex survey data.

11. In summary, this publication provides a comprehensive source of reference material on all aspects of household surveys conducted in developing and transition countries. It is expected that the technical material presented in part one, coupled with the concrete examples and case studies in part two, will prove useful to survey practitioners around the world in the design, implementation and analysis of new household surveys.

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