Practical Challenges: Conducting Survey Research in Afghanistan

By George Varughese

On November 9, 2006, The Asia Foundation released findings from the single-largest, comprehensive public opinion poll ever conducted in Afghanistan. The poll, Afghanistan in 2006: A Survey of the Afghan People, reflects perceptions of democracy, security, poppy cultivation, and the 2005 parliamentary elections, as well as attitudes toward governing institutions, the role of women and Islam in society, and the impact of media. It was conducted in June 2006 and consists of a random sample of 6,226 in-person interviews with Afghan men and women, eighteen years of age and over, from different social, economic, and ethnic communities. Rural and urban areas in thirty-two of the thirty-four provinces were covered, with Uruzgan and Zabul excluded due to extremely difficult security conditions.

In addition to ever-present security worries and the difficulty of designing surveys to international standards, survey research in Afghanistan involves a number of context-specific, practical challenges that confront researchers at every stage. Widespread illiteracy, hostility to research, severe cultural restrictions on access to households, and especially to women, unfavorable physiographic conditions, and so on have to be confronted. Here we briefly illuminate some of these challenges and how they were met.

Minimal secondary information available

To begin with, the sampling process ran into difficulties with very limited secondary resources available. The last census conducted was in 1979, prior to the Soviet invasion. The decades of conflict since have drastically altered the demographic and economic profile of the country, with millions of Afghan refugees in Iran, Pakistan, and elsewhere. Many villages were razed to the ground, and communities had shifted and settled elsewhere. There aren't any profiles available on the population on any parameter, especially on such things as socioeconomic characteristics. Electoral rolls were not available to randomize the sampling process and ensure proper spread in a survey area.

The survey used historical census data, some updates from the Afghan government's Central Statistics Office, and data from nongovernmental sources to estimate urban and rural populations for all provinces. A multistage, random sampling procedure was used to select geographic sampling points, households, and respondents. The sample was distributed proportionally to geographical and residential characteristics of population per province. Within each province, districts were selected by listing them by size of population in descending order and then executing a step over from this list of districts in each province based on population

size intervals. No more than ten interviews were allowed per sampling point. Interviewers selected households using a random route method, and then selected respondents using a modified Kish grid to achieve a fifty-fifty split for males and females (see below).

Scale of the fieldwork

The survey was the biggest attempted in the country in a single wave, and it meant building significantly on the capacity of the fieldwork agency. A large team was needed to carry out the task effectively.

Many new interviewers were trained and prepared to conduct the interviews. Interviewers had to have at least two years of post-high school education and preferably some exposure to research. Fieldwork supervisors were trained in Kabul in "train-the-trainer" sessions and then sent out to the provinces to train others in turn. Exhaustive training sessions were conducted at several mock locations, where trainees learned how to get to a sampling point, identify target households and respondents, and administer the questionnaires. Mock or pilot interviews were held to equip the trainees with proper questioning skills and help them understand the logic and concept of the questions. In all, 409 interviewers (196 women and 213 men) were trained up for the survey, which instantly doubled the capacity of the Afghan survey firm selected for fieldwork.

Weak infrastructure and harsh weather conditions

The mountainous terrain in the country posed problems of access for the fieldwork teams. Bad roads or even no roads in some places made it quite difficult to reach sampling points even when the weather was favorable. Many areas were inaccessible, and the distances between sampling points were long.

The difficult terrain meant delays in getting the team to reach any location on time. Assuming smooth progress in a standard house-to-house survey mode proved to be difficult. A larger than usual team was used in certain provinces and the number of interviews restricted for each interviewer to minimize fatigue while still allowing the fieldwork to be completed in reasonable time. The fieldwork was deliberately scheduled during the summer months so that the weather was the most favorable for a survey of this kind.

Respondent selection and gender balance

In Afghanistan it is not possible for male interviewers to interview women, and vice versa. The selection of respondents, therefore, had to be suitably modified after a particular household was identified.

Women are under a lot of constraints in the country. In some cases, they are required to be "under the veil" when in public and are not to talk to any member of

the opposite sex who is not a close family member. In the scenario prevailing in certain areas of the country, where women are hardly allowed to leave the four walls of their houses, what kind of responses could be obtained? Further, for the purpose of unbiased research, how was the female voice be represented? Since half of the targeted respondents for the survey were to be women, the number of female field team members had to be proportionate.

Unlike the normal practice of using one interviewer per starting point, then, one male and one female interviewer were deployed at each starting point. The Kish grid used in the selection of the household member to be interviewed was modified. The women interviewers only listed the female members of each household and used the Kish to identify one from the list. The male interviewers did a listing of only the male members of the household.

This ensured that both male and female respondents were covered in each sampling area. Since women could not be seen traveling alone to the different locations, male chaperones, or "Mahrams," who were close family members of the female interviewers, were also recruited to accompany them on assignment. Women were also recruited from as close to the sampling areas as possible to reduce the difficulties in travel.

Ethno-linguistic sensitivities/closed society

Afghanistan is home to over 26 million people of varied ethnic origins—the Pashtuns (38-40 percent of the population), the Tajiks (29-34 percent), the Hazaras (8-10 percent), the Uzbeks (8-10 percent), and others. All these different ethnic groups have their own different cultures and practices. Pashtuns are the largest and traditionally most politically powerful ethnic group. Dari, spoken by over 50 percent of the population, and Pashto, spoken by 35 percent, are the two official languages. Other ethnic groups have often fought for their rights and their representation. The research had to be sensitive in handling questions related to these various groups. The language used for the research was also important, since language is closely linked to ethnic background.

The hostility and suspicion directed at researchers in Afghanistan can be unnerving. Conservatism combined with years of war and strife have caused the society to be insular and closed. Further, a lack of exposure to outside researchers makes it difficult to win trust and get people to open up and discuss their views. Lack of familiarity with survey research on the part of the police or security forces can result in harassment and even imprisonment. This happened in the case of three field staff on the survey, who were subsequently released after the Ministry of Interior intervened.

The field teams ensured that their interviewer teams represented ethnicities of all parts of the country. Each interviewer was assigned to cover an area with a profile similar to his or her own, primarily in terms of ethnicity and familiarity. Women

interviewers were also locally trained for the task at each location. Pashto, Dari, and other questionnaires were used for interviews. Finally, the questionnaire was pilot-tested several times to filter out questions that were sensitive in nature, either to rephrase or to exclude them entirely.

Menace from antigovernment elements, drug lords, and warlords

The southeast regions of Afghanistan witness the highest levels of fighting between internationally backed government troops and antigovernment elements. Groups of Taliban are resurgent and pose credible security threats in certain provinces. Zabul and Uruzgan provinces were left out of the 2006 survey's sampling plan because of continued violence. Although the other thirty-two provinces in the country were all covered, constant adjustments and a few replacements to sampling points had to be made to cope with instability and frequent fighting at some locations.

Many of the provinces in the country are influenced by former military commanders and warlords. It is difficult to carry out any survey in an environment controlled or heavily influenced by militias, as almost all outsiders are considered potential threats. Afghanistan is the source of over 85 percent of the world's heroin, and warlords control poppy cultivation. Many fund their private armies through the drug trade, and any intrusion, whether by government soldiers or survey researchers, is perceived as interference.

To remove doubts about the intentions of the interviewers, formal letters were carried by them to explain to the village headman or other local leader about the nature of the research. Once obtained, the headman's permission helped a lot in building trust in the interviewer and also ensured safety. Official supporting documentation from the Ministry of Interior also facilitated access to these areas.

Quality control

Quality control of the interviews was a concern because of the difficulties involved with callbacks, back-checks, and direct monitoring. The sampling locations were far apart, security was a problem, and supervisors had trouble monitoring every interviewer. However, the rate of unemployment is high in Afghanistan, and with correct choice of the appropriate time of day for interviewing, survey completion on the first attempt is not unusual. Many people are also close to their homes, and families are willing to help summon a needed respondent to complete an interview.

A fair amount of quality checking was managed by the field teams. Actual interviewing was monitored directly by a supervisor for 28 percent of the sample. Another 17 percent of the completed interviews were back-checked by a supervisor in person, and 1 percent were back-checked from the central office. The issues verified during in-person back-checks were proper household and respondent selection, as well as correct recording of answers to five randomly selected questions from the main body of the questionnaire.

In conclusion, survey research to international standard is possible in difficult contexts like Afghanistan, with patience, understanding of local context, and a willingness to make and accept incremental improvement in fieldwork. Building and using Afghan capacity for doing survey research is the key.

Dr. George Varughese is The Asia Foundation's Deputy Country Representative for Afghanistan. A companion volume to the 2006 Afghan survey, State Building, Political Progress, and Human Security in Afghanistan: Reflections on a Survey of the Afghan People, is available on The Asia Foundation's website, http://www.asiafoundation.org.