

Leaders of Africa Live

Conducting Survey Research in the COVID-19 Era

📅 July 6, 2020 | 🌍 By Leaders of Africa



Enumerators Prepare to Field Survey

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Surveys play an important role in gathering the perspectives of citizens concerning pertinent political, economic, and societal matters. Evidence from surveys may not be able to influence policy-makers directly in all cases but results can help spark greater debate and appeal to policy-makers interested in pursuing evidence-based approaches.



During the present COVID-19 global pandemic, understanding citizens' opinions is perhaps even more essential given the need to achieve positive public health outcomes and ensure endangered livelihoods are protected. Moreover, the response to COVID-19 is a critical opportunity for citizens to hold their governments and public officials accountable for their policy approaches, which have ranged from full-scale lockdowns in South Africa to very minimal health interventions in Tanzania. In more authoritarian contexts, timely public data may be the only way to grasp what citizens think about the varied responses.

However, in the era of the COVID-19 pandemic, survey data collection has been hindered in part due to lockdown measures and legitimate fears about putting survey teams and respondents in harm's way. Many university institutions and organizations have placed holds on conducting human subjects research without immediate applications to COVID-19 prevention, such as immunology. Many organizations, most notably Afrobarometer, have paused survey plans in the short-run in order to strategize about how to ensure survey teams comply with local guidelines and maintain the safety of enumerators and the communities surveyed.

Our Leaders of Africa Live conversation featured Professor Boniface Dulani who is the Director of Surveys of Afrobarometer and a Senior Partner for The Institute of Public Opinion and Research (IPOR) and Dr. Bell Ihua who is the Executive Director of Africa Polling Institute in Nigeria. As Dulani suggests in the conversation, the COVID-19 era presents us with a learning process in which survey organizations and partners must adapt and be flexible.

The conversation revealed important insights about some of the ongoing adaptations and techniques survey teams can take to conduct field surveys. We highlight five insights here:

1. Rethink data collection strategies while acknowledging the shortcomings

Face-to-face field research generally yields fairly high response rates, and there is more control over the random selection process. For instance, face-to-face methods make it easier to ensure a random selection of enumeration areas across the country along with the enumerator team starting points for an Afrobarometer-style nationally representative survey. Another advantage is the ability to interact with respondents to maintain engagement throughout what can be a lengthy questionnaire.

But, with the advent of COVID-19, many survey and polling organizations have begun to rely on other data collection methods including telephonic surveys and in some cases SMS polls. One of the major concerns raised by the panelists was that the response rate for telephonic surveys is very low. Another approach that is being explored in its early stages is online panels. For instance, embracing some of these innovations, the Africa Polling Institute is working to create an online panel:



Africa Polling
@AfricaPolling



@AfricaPolling is developing a panel of Nigerian Citizens across the 36 States & FCT, who would be interested in participating in future online or telephone surveys & polls. If you are interested, kindly complete this brief questionnaire. It takes 3 mins: bit.ly/2KP1ZVL



9:11 AM · May 3, 2020



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In the discussion of telephonic and online panel approaches, the panelists discussed how every country has different rates of technological ownership and access. Dulani suggested that ownership of mobile phones varies considerably across the Afrobarometer countries. At the same time, Ihua was generally optimistic about the possibilities of telephonic-based surveys due to the wide ownership of mobile phones in Nigeria specifically.

2. Protect enumerators in face-to-face interactions

Some African countries are easing lockdown restrictions while others never implemented stringent restrictions. This has opened the door for enumerators to commence conducting face-to-face field surveys. The panelists agreed that measures need to be in place to protect enumerators and respondents, including providing masks to enumerators and maintaining some spatial distance. The one concern raised is how respondents would perceive enumerators coming from outside the community. One of the discussions now taking place among survey groups is about modifications to scripts to ensure that respondents feel safe to participate in surveys if selected.

3. Acknowledge the variation of experiences with COVID-19 and what it means for fielding surveys



Ihua explained that the COVID-19 experience has generally proceeded in stages in Nigeria beginning with stringent lockdowns and moving toward opening up. In each stage of the process, the latitude available to field surveys has changed. Dulani reports that even within the Afrobarometer network, there is variation in how comfortable national partners are with fielding surveys in their respective countries. This presents the challenge of developing a broad strategy of returning to field in-person surveys and also raises questions about how survey funders, international partners, and clients should proceed with survey projects.

Many institutions and organizations presently have holds on human subjects research that extend to fielding surveys not immediately related to COVID-19. Dulani's experience in Malawi has been instructive as research oversight bodies in the country have approved survey work in comparison to overseas review boards. One of the suggestions is to acknowledge the competence of research boards in African countries to take the lead, particularly in countries where COVID-19 has been largely in control and local survey organizations have an approach to field surveys with minimal health risks.

4. Understand how fear of COVID-19 is linked to experiences with the virus and other threats to livelihoods

The panel discussed recent survey findings from IPOR-Malawi:

IPOR Malawi
@IPORMalawi

Now that the presidential election is behind us, Malawians want the government to address food shortage followed by management of the economy.

[#MalawiElections2020](#) [#MalawiDecides2020](#)

2:01 PM · Jun 29, 2020

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With studies beginning to capture citizens' views on the COVID-19 threat and the response of their government, it is expected that some of the effects of worsening economic conditions will top the list citizens' most important problems. This does not mean that COVID-19 is not a serious concern or that citizens are not aware of its presence. But, the impact varies and more immediate livelihood concerns may be a priority of citizens.

Ihua shared results from a sub-national survey in Nigeria that revealed interesting findings of a willingness to get tested and the embrace of basic health precautions. We are only at the very beginning of a cross-national discussion about how citizens perceive the effects of COVID-19 and the panelists expected some level of cross-national variation.

5. Broaden some of the themes we include on surveys, particularly those related to COVID-19

The panelists mentioned how surveys can enhance evidence-based discussions of misinformation, local COVID-19 remedies, mental health, and the opinions of young people under the traditional survey baseline age of 18. There was agreement among the panelists that youth's voice needs to be amplified in survey work, including gauging how young people experience stressors associated with COVID-19 and their opinions on pertinent topics, such as the opening of schools.

Ultimately, surveys will play a crucial role in ensuring that a broader set of voices shape public and policy discussion related to COVID-19 and political, economic, and societal matters.

Watch the full conversation here:

Survey Research in the Era of COVID-19: Challenges and Opport...

