The Afrobarometer at 10: Opportunities and challenges of building a network of survey research in Africa

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The AFROBAROMETER

- A comparative series of national public opinion surveys that measure public attitudes toward democracy, governance, the economy and market reform, leadership, identity and other issues

- Three key objectives:
  1) Produce scientifically reliable data on public opinion in Africa
  2) Strengthen institutional capacity for survey research in Africa
  3) Disseminate and apply results (to decision makers, policy advocates, civic educators, journalists, researchers, donors, and ordinary Africans)
Survey Topics

• **Democracy**: Popular understanding of, support for, and satisfaction with democracy, as well as any desire to return to, or experiment with, authoritarian alternatives.

• **Governance**: The demand for, and satisfaction with, effective, accountable and clean government; judgments of overall governance performance and social service delivery.

• **Livelihoods**: How do African families survive? What variety of formal and informal means do they use to gain access to food, shelter, water, health, employment and money?

• **Macro-economics and Markets**: Citizen understandings of market principles and market reforms and their assessments of economic conditions and government performance at economic management.
Survey Topics cont’d

- **Social Capital**: Whom do people trust? To what extent do they rely on informal networks and associations? What are their evaluations of the trustworthiness of various institutions?

- **Conflict and Crime**: How safe do people feel? What has been their experience with crime and violence?

- **Participation**: The extent to which ordinary folks join in development efforts, comply with the laws of the land, vote in elections, contact elected representatives, and engage in protest. The quality of electoral representation.

- **National Identity**: How do people see themselves in relation to ethnic and class identities? Does a shared sense of national identity exist?
Afrobarometer Network

▪ Round 1 to Round 3
  • 3 Core Partners: MSU, CDD (Ghana), Idasa (South Africa)
  • Diverse National Partners in each country
    • University Research Institutes, NGOs, Market Research Companies

▪ Round 4
  • 3 Core Partners: CDD, Idasa, IREEP (Benin)
  • National Partners in each country
  • 2 Support Units: MSU and UCT

▪ Round 4 Core Funding from:
  • CIDA, DFID, RDMFA, SIDA, USAID
Users of Afrobarometer

- **Policy and Democracy Advocates**: e.g., debates on new media law in Botswana; term limits in Nigeria
- **African Governments**: e.g., provide direct input to Ministry of Finance budget planning in Ghana; briefings for new government officials in South Africa after 2009 election
- **African and International Media**: dozens (more than 200) of newspaper articles and radio programs have covered Round 4 releases in Africa
- **International Organizations**: AB data used in World Bank and UNDP democracy/governance indicators
- **Donors**: program planning and evaluation; policy development
Country selection criteria

- 1) Society is politically open enough that people can speak freely, offer their true views on the sometimes politically sensitive issues we ask about
- 2) We must be able to find an adequate, reliable sampling frame
- 3) We must be able to identify a National Partner in the country that we can work with that has the capacity to implement a survey to our methodological standards (with technical support provided by the Network as necessary)
Afrobarometer Methodology

• Nationally representative sample surveys
  o 1200 to 2400 randomly selected respondents per country
  o Over 105,000 interviews by the end of 2009
• Face-to-face interviews in language of respondent’s choice
• Standard survey instrument across all countries
Afrobarometer Coverage

- **Round 1**, 1999-2001, 12 countries
  - Southern Africa: Botswana, Lesotho, Malawi, Namibia, South Africa, Zambia, Zimbabwe
  - West Africa: Ghana, Mali, Nigeria
  - East Africa: Tanzania, Uganda

- **Round 2**, 2002-2003, 16 countries
  - Cape Verde, Kenya, Mozambique, Senegal

- **Round 3**, 2005-2006, 18 countries
  - Benin, Madagascar

- **Round 4**, 2008, 20 countries
  - Burkina Faso, Liberia
Coverage of Afrobarometer Surveys, 1999-2009
Opportunities and challenges of doing collaborative survey research in Africa, 1999-2009
Opportunities

• Building a comparative research network (and capacity) for survey research across the continent
Opportunities

- Many people welcome being asked for their opinions on issues which they have often felt no-one cared about.
- Respondents are far more willing to allow themselves to be interviewed, and to give a significant amount of their time.
Opportunities cont’d

• There is a dearth of data on what the public thinks about numerous issues, so there is a real thirst for this data when it becomes available, especially when it is cross national.

• The data can be a valuable counterpoint or ‘reality check’ on the government’s own performance indicators.

• The data can be used to counter elite claims to ‘speak for the people’ (e.g., the third term debates in Nigeria, Malawi, Zambia, Uganda, etc.)
Operational Challenges

- The sheer scope of conducting field work in and across diverse societies requires **collaborative work** involving varying forms of partnerships between international and national researchers.

- Networking – need to identify a National Partner in the country that we can work with that has the capacity to implement a survey to our methodological standards.
Operational Challenges, cont’d

• Paucity of social science quantitative research capacity. Comparative researchers interested in more than simple data mining have to devote significant time to building basic capacity in survey research and data analysis.

• The ideologies of anti-colonial movements and ensuing post-independence governments have left a range of political legacies that to this day question the role of, and shrink the space for, independent and open intellectual inquiry.
Sampling challenges

- Relative **social heterogeneity** (e.g., ethnic, linguistic and religious diversity) of African societies creates a range of challenges to drawing representative samples. Researchers often need to consider drawing relatively large samples to ensure that all socially and politically significant sub-national groups or regions are represented.
Economic inequalities create yet another cleavage that must be factored into sampling and data analysis.

Mapping these cleavages requires high quality demographic data. But low levels of infrastructure development and high levels of poverty, along with often weak census bureaus may not be able to provide. Thus, we are often confronted with inadequate or outdated sampling frames.
Sampling challenges, cont’d

• Typical methods of random selection of a respondent within a household may not be clearly understandable and create unnecessary suspicions.

• In patriarchal societies, male heads of households might object to being told that the interview has to be done with their wife or daughter.
Questionnaire design

• Low levels of formal education pose special challenges for questionnaire design
  • Lack of familiarity with linear logic means that the numeric scales widely used in the West are often inappropriate
  • We are sometimes asking complicated questions about political attitudes and issues that can be challenging for respondents to answer, and tiring
Questionnaire design

• It is always best to interview people in their home language so we are sure they understand the questions and their answers are clearly understood.

• We also want to minimize the need to exclude respondents because they don’t speak the language of the survey, as this introduces some bias into our sample.

• But the linguistic diversity of many countries makes this very challenging – we sometimes translate into as many as 6 or 8 languages (any language spoken by more than 5% of the population should have a translation).

• Yet it is also critical that we are asking all respondents the same questions and offering the same response options.
Questionnaire design, cont.

• We only use official translations (ad hoc field translations are not allowed, since we cannot ensure that the questions are being asked in the same way in every interview)

• The translation process is probably one of the most difficult, but also most important. We have to ensure not only that each individual translation accurately captures the meaning of the original question (and sometimes there are concepts that do not translate well into certain languages), but we also have to “synchronize” translations across all of the languages within a country to ensure that all respondents are asked the same question in the same way.
Field Work

• Because all respondents should be able to hear the survey in the language of their choice, fieldworkers must be fluent in all the languages likely to be needed to interview any particular sample, as well as conversant with local norms of interaction and dress.
Outside of a handful of countries, low and/or extremely uneven rates of telephone ownership mean that telephone interviews are never an option.

Vague maps and poor signposting make it difficult for interview teams to determine when they have entered (or exited) a sample site (Enumeration Area).

The combination of heterogeneous, relatively rural and dispersed populations with poor road networks means that contacting and conducting personal interviews with a random, nationally representative sample of 1200 or 2400 respondents can be an extremely demanding and expensive proposition.
Infrastructure

• In some places, fieldwork teams have absolutely no roads to use to reach selected sampling areas. In mountainous Lesotho, for example, AB researchers ride horseback to conduct interviews in selected villages. In Zambia, they build their own bridges! Elsewhere, researchers walk long distances.
Field Work Challenges, cont.

• Even after negotiating the difficult roads, lodging or food sources might be unavailable near selected interview areas

• Challenges of monitoring and communicating with teams in the field (better now with improving cell phone service)

• Sometimes we face concerns about security of teams in the field (e.g., cases of civil unrest, banditry) and occasionally teams have been refused permission to work in their areas by local officials
Field Work Challenges, cont.

• Willingness of the public to participate and ability to speak openly and freely (although participation rates have been much higher than originally anticipated)

• It is often difficult to interview a respondent along, without others listening (or occasionally contributing) which may either distract the respondent (especially when children are present) or influence them
Data entry, analysis and release

• Paucity of quantitative research and analysis skills – requires extensive training of field researchers and data analysts, which can slow the process down

• Post-colonial ideologies have bequeathed a great deal of skepticism and suspicion toward the positivist systematic empirical methodology of behavioral social science
Releasing results

• Lack of familiarity with survey research and methodologies can lead to skepticism, especially among those presented with unfavorable results.

• Similarly, those who are faced with unflattering results (e.g., when the government generally gets poor ratings, or MPs get negative reviews, or a certain party appears likely to perform poorly in upcoming elections) often charge that we (the researchers) or our funders have a political agenda, are biased, etc.
While there are an increasing number of survey research projects in Africa, including a few doing political polling, there are very few that meet the same methodological standards. The challenge for us lies in educating the public, the media and other users about what makes for a high quality survey.
Conclusion

• Doing survey research in Africa is an exciting collaborative exercise. This presents numerous opportunities and challenges too. Some of these are not unique to Africa or the developing world alone.

thank you. muito obrigado. gracias. ngiyabonga kakhulu. merci beaucoup. asante sana. imena. zikomo kwambiri. re lebohile....
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