

## Our experiences from measurement tests in developing countries

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# OUR EXPERIENCES FROM MEASUREMENT TESTS IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES

*GUNILLA DAVIDSSON & BIRGIT HENNINGSSON*

We would like to start a discussion with you about statistical assistance in developing countries. What kind of statistical assistance and/or knowledge are international organisations and national statistical offices from western countries offering? We would like to discuss this issue from our point of view: questionnaire design and cognitive measurement testing.

## **Too much data**

The international organisations are almost always conducting their own large-scale surveys in the same way in all countries around the world. These very comprehensive surveys most often mean that the interviewer has to spend more than one day in the same household in order to collect all information wanted. This of course means that the quantity of data or information collected is much too much for the developing country to handle and take care of itself. In fact, the developing countries are only data providers to the international organisations. And at least up till now these organisations have analysed very little of the data or done very little research compared to all the data collected in countries all around the world. What kind of knowledge transference is that?

A colleague complained about all unnecessary data. One comment from another statistician was “We use only 40 % of the data”. Why do we collect so much data if we do not use it? There will be more and more questions in the questionnaire and the fieldwork will be impossible to do in a good way. The respondents do not know all the answers. Or do not remember.

In another country the administrators were really worried about the field workers. Would they really stay so long in the bush to have the data needed?

## **Translation**

The questionnaires used are usually translated from English to the native language (-s) in question by a person with either good or rather good knowledge in the languages but not in the subject matter, or by a person with more knowledge in the subject matter than in the languages. Cultural differences in understanding the questions are very seldom taken care of. The questionnaires are literally translated. However, it doesn't matter which of the two ways the translation has been made, from our point of view the quality is mostly too poor. The questionnaires are never cognitively tested, but a large pilot is usually conducted. But these pilots are dress rehearsals of the data collection organisation and not a proper test of the questionnaire.

In one country with several languages the questionnaire was only in English. All the interviewers had to translate themselves while they were interviewing. At least they should have had a list with the most common words in the questionnaire translated. You do not know what you are measuring if every interviewer translate it in his/her own way. Teachers and participants wrote a paper about the problems. Some interesting examples showed the difficulties. Nothing happened. The problem is too big and costs a lot of money if you take it seriously.

## **Bad questions and low quality of interviewer training**

In the countries where we have been involved with interviewer training, we have seen surveys with numbers of bad questions and low quality of interviewer training. None of the stakeholders or users seem to care about it at all. Actually they often do not have a clue about what has been collected, but still they go on financing and analysing (at least some results) from country to country. These international organisations are partly – I think mostly – financed by tax money from member countries. The question is if this really is the best way to use the money!?

“Victims of crime” is an international survey. I was asked by one country to support their interviewer training. When I got the questionnaire I told them that this would not work for the interviewer. You will end up telling them that they have done a bad job when it actually was a bad questionnaire. So to prove that I was right we had a blind mirror test. A very good interviewer soon got lost in the questionnaire and we all saw very clearly that the questionnaire did not work. But the result was that I had a tough job writing a new questionnaire with better structure, with a foldable flap attached to the form including all sorts of crimes. There were other improvements of the design as well. Preparing the training, which was my actual task, was there no time left for!

## **Build up surveys suitable for the country**

What we would like to see are experienced statisticians with good knowledge not only in statistics but also in the culture of the country they are going to work with. The kind of assistance we think in deed could live up to be called assistance, is to help the country build up running surveys and/or registers that can provide the country with confident annual figures. Figures that are necessary and useful for the country. Today these large-scale surveys are ad hoc surveys focused on international comparability, which gives the developing countries very little knowledge and training in the ability to conduct surveys of their own in the future.

We met someone the other day that knew my colleague. He was there (in the developing country) once a year and took care of the tables in one specific survey. This year he seemed to be happy because he had more data than last year. I wondered what data? After several years still their own staff could not take care of the results.

## **Conclusion**

So, what we are interested in is to discuss how to go on putting these problems on the international agenda. Can we create an interest in changing the policy of statistical assistance in developing countries? We would like to go from large-scale international studies to necessary national surveys with a sample size that is suitable for the specific purpose of the country. The national offices should be trained to handle the surveys themselves having in mind that they have a shortage of staff and practically non-existent own resources.

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