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Using Representative Opinion Surveys in the African Peer Review Mechanism Process

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African perspectives. Global insights.

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ABSTRACT

The opinions of the general public are as important as those of the elite if a country wishes to achieve a comprehensive self-assessment process in terms of the African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM). But gathering and measuring the opinion of ordinary people is not a simple matter.

The author of this paper, Robert Mattes, Professor in the Department of Political Studies at the University of Cape Town, has immense experience in planning and conducting opinion surveys in Africa, notably in his role as co-founder of Afrobarometer. Here he warns against the traps and pitfalls awaiting the unwary.

The first of these traps is the belief that a more representative assessment of public opinion can be obtained by contacting an ever larger number of people. The law of diminishing returns comes into play, and the cost of increasing the sample size can outweigh the benefits. Professor Mattes argues that, while a representative survey is an irreplaceable element of the national self-review process, relatively small random probability samples of ordinary citizens can produce accurate and cost-effective results.

However, other elements must be in place to ensure the survey's credibility. These include freedom to travel for fieldworkers; the availability of accurate census data; and the avoidance of inappropriate mechanisms, like polling heads of households instead of the people who reside in them.

He warns, too, that it is important to establish what can be learnt from ordinary citizens – and what is out of their domain.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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INTRODUCTION

Any national self-review would be incomplete if it included only the assessments of elites (whether government officials, technocratic experts or civil society stakeholders) and excluded the opinions of the mass public. The true state of political and economic governance in a country cannot be assessed simply on the basis of an objective analysis of the rules, resources and behavior of the economy, government institutions and large corporations.

Competent business people would never draw a final conclusion about the quality of their company and product simply by investigating the company charter, its internal processes or the assembly line. They would also need to know whether consumers were actually buying their product and, more importantly, whether they were satisfied with it, and likely to keep on buying it. In much the same way, the actual state of political governance and, especially, democratic politics is at least partially in the eye of the beholder.

But exactly how the values, awareness, evaluations and experiences of ordinary people are to be gathered is not a simple matter. On one hand, a country may wish to instill a sense of public ownership of the project and encourage the participation of as wide a cross-section of ordinary citizens as possible. On the other hand, any self-assessment that aims to provide a true reflection of the state of affairs in the country would want to be as accurate, and therefore as representative as possible. The difficulty is that, for a range of methodological, pragmatic and socio-political reasons, it is rarely possible to maximise both these goals at the same time.

'PARTICIPATORY' CONSULTATIONS OF PUBLIC OPINION

One apparent way to consult public opinion and simultaneously instill a sense of awareness and public ownership is to run as broad a consultative process as possible in which enumerators speak to ordinary citizens in their homes or in public meetings and record their responses, either through structured responses to structured questionnaires, or through transcripts of semi-structured or unstructured discussions and debates.

Public discussions have many advantages. Most importantly, they allow people to set the agenda, name their problems and frame the issues and range of potential solutions in their own words rather than having them structured by the questionnaire designers. Moreover, they are deliberative, meaning that people can persuade each other to change their opinions in the course of discussion.

However, public consultations also have disadvantages. First, people are not political animals. Family life, friends, social activities and the need to earn a living compete with people's attention to public affairs and their willingness to take part in political events. Thus even the most well-funded public consultation exercise may engage the attention of only a small fraction of ordinary citizens, let alone get them to participate – especially if people do not see any real incentive to do so. A recent South African exercise is a classic case. The January–February 2006 South African Afrobarometer survey found that just one in 20 people (6%) said they had even heard about the APRM process, one in 33 (3%) had attended a public meeting, and just one in 50 had filled out a questionnaire.²

Second, virtually any process of public consultation means that citizens have to take

the initiative to make their voices heard. If there is one thing we have learned from 50 years of studying political behaviour, it is that not all people are equally willing to take the time to talk about politics, or have the capacity to do so. Thus, consultative campaigns may not only fail to reach meaningful numbers of ordinary citizens, they may also fail to reach a representative cross-section. Again, we see clear evidence of this in the Afrobarometer examination of the South African APRM process. Not only were the better educated, frequent newspaper readers and active members of civil society organisations and trade unions more likely to have heard about the process, they were also more likely to have attended a meeting and filled out a questionnaire.³ This then is inherently not a representative cross-section. People who have more accesses to education and the mass media, who are more attentive to politics, and who are more actively engaged in civil society, are likely to have significantly different values and opinions from citizens who are not.

Thus the desire to consult a broad cross-section of ordinary citizens, and allow them to participate in these important processes and so gain a sense of national ownership, can easily backfire – failing to reach a significant section of the public and producing a potentially biased view of public opinion.

REPRESENTATIVE AND ACCURATE ASSESSMENTS OF PUBLIC OPINION

Ironically, the problem of obtaining a representative assessment is not solved by contacting ever larger numbers. Rather, the solution is in the method by which citizens are selected, much more than in how many are selected.

In other words, the solution is in sampling citizens, rather than attempting to create a mini census. The representativeness of a sample (the extent to which it produces estimates of public opinion or experience that mirror that of the total population) depends on two criteria. First, the process of selecting individuals must be random, rather than allowing people to participate on their own initiative (which produces the well-known biases outlined above). Second, every citizen must have an equal and known chance (or probability) of being selected.

The accuracy of any estimate taken from a sample does, however, depend to some extent on numbers. A wealth of past experience shows us that even a random probability sample of 300 people can produce estimates that are accurate (95% of the time) to within a margin of sampling error of about five percentage points. However, very few analysts would be satisfied with knowing, for example, that the fact that 45% of respondents say they are satisfied with the performance of the President means that presidential approval in the total population lies somewhere between 40% and 50%.

While we can increase accuracy by spending more money and contacting more people, the law of diminishing returns that lies behind the mathematical basis of sampling means there is no one-to-one return. To reduce the margin of sampling error by one percentage point, we need to double the sample size.

Sample size	Sampling error
300	+/- 5 points
600	+/- 4 points
1,200	+/- 3 points
2,400	+/- 2 points
4,800	+/- 1 point

Thus we soon reach a point where the added costs of massively increasing sample sizes (say by contacting 4,800 respondents rather than 2,400) brings only marginal returns in increased accuracy. This is why the large majority of socio-political surveys use sample sizes somewhere between 1,000 and 2,500. We are generally satisfied with knowing that satisfaction with presidential performance hovers somewhere between 44% and 48%. We do not get too concerned over whether 18% or 22% of all citizens actually contacted their MP in the previous year as long as we can draw a broad inference that approximately one in five people did so. While we would like to be more accurate, it simply costs too much.

In contrast, national statistical agencies often run much larger household-based surveys because they place much greater emphasis on statistical precision for development policy. It really does matter whether the actual rate of unemployment is 40% or 41%. Larger sample sizes also allow more accurate inferences from smaller subgroups. Is there a difference, for example, in job-seeking strategies between young, unmarried urban men and young, unmarried urban women?

There is a bit of a paradox here. The attempt to consult more and more people and allow them to participate in a national self review may ultimately fail to contact a meaningfully large number of people and, more importantly, is almost guaranteed to produce a biased picture of public opinion. In contrast, surveys of relatively small but representative random probability samples of ordinary citizens can produce accurate and cost effective estimates of public opinion.

Thus surveys of random probability samples of ordinary citizens are an essential part of the process of national self-review. It is true, however, that opinion surveys are largely based on structured questionnaires, allowing the designers to set the agenda, name the issues and frame the allowed responses. But even with these drawbacks, they can be defended by the basic principles that seem to necessitate a consultative, participatory process. That is, representative surveys by their nature treat all citizens equally and offer everyone an equal and known chance of being selected to participate and so influence the self-review process (even if participation means simply answering questions).

MECHANICS OF REPRESENTATIVE SURVEYS: ESSENTIALS

Besides saying that representative surveys are an irreplaceable element of the national self-review process, there are essential elements that have to be in place to ensure credibility.

Absence of widespread civil conflict

First, the freedom to travel and visit people virtually anywhere in the country is a prerequisite for fieldworkers seeking a nationally representative sample. This means an absence

of widespread civil conflict, politically hostile “no go” zones, crime or other obstacles such as natural disasters or large tracts of unmapped landmines that could compromise the safety of fieldworkers. But how much is too much? In general, there is no simple statistical answer. The key factor is the degree to which excluding these areas would compromise our ability to generalise from the other responses.

Accurate and recent census data

Another prerequisite for credible surveys based on representative samples is the availability of recent, accurate census data that is sufficiently detailed to allow disaggregation to quite small areas, even to the level of the basic census enumerator area. This is important because we begin the sampling process (a multi-stage approach is discussed below) by disaggregating the census into a list of its smallest geographic units (e.g. enumerator areas) and then picking from this list a sample of these units. Because these units often differ in size, we need to know the actual population size of each to weight its probability of selection. If each unit has an equal probability of selection regardless of population, the sample would no longer be representative. This principle of sampling is what we know as “probability proportionate to size” (PPPS).

However, simply picking a sample of geographic units from one national list may randomly and unintentionally fail to include politically important areas or groups, or fail to reflect important variations across the population. Thus the census data should also be sufficiently detailed to allow us to stratify, or cluster, these units into a larger number of sub-lists that reflect politically relevant lines: rural-urban differences, religious or linguistic differences, districts and provinces. The principle of PPPS also means that the census must tell us the relative population size of each of these strata, or sub-lists, so that we do not select too many or too few from each.

Finally, the census should be detailed enough to enable us to examine demographic data that can be collected only once we interview a respondent (e.g. age, marital status, income, education). This data has to be compared to actual population figures to assess the representativeness of the sample and decide whether it is necessary to weight it to conform to national demographics.

Multi-stage sampling

As mentioned above, the sampling process is a multi-stage one. Few countries – fortunately – have a national list of all citizens, or at least one that they would share with a survey firm. So we have to sample citizens by first sampling the things in which we know they live – households. But we also rarely have a single unified list of all households. Thus:

- Stage 1 consists of the process outlined in the previous section: that is, randomly sampling small geographic units from a national, stratified list of all those units based on the principle of PPPS.⁴
- Stage 2 consists of sampling households within the selected geographic units.
- Stage 3 consists of sampling individuals within the selected households.

A sample of heads of households is not a sample of citizens

The proper implementation of Stage 3 is imperative if we want to say that our survey results are representative. We want a sample of people, not of households. (As explained

above, households are simply a convenient place to find people.)

This means that we should guard against uncritically accepting the standard sampling procedures of national census or statistical institutions. The social issues that generally interest these institutions are traditionally addressed by economists and sociologists through household surveys because they have defined the household as a critical unit of analysis. The head of household is then conventionally selected to act as an informant about the status, activities and experiences of the household, and basic demographic data is collected for all individuals in the household.

Households have properties that are important to economists, sociologists and development planners. But they are simply not a factor for those interested in issues surrounding democratic citizenship. When it comes to democracy and governance, the individual citizen, not the household, is the proper unit of analysis.⁵ The very theory on which democracy is premised stresses that all legal citizens should have as equal influence as possible on the affairs of government, including participating in the national self review.

But this is more than an issue of democratic ideology. As I shall discuss in greater detail below, any survey instrument designed to enable analysts to complete the self-review questionnaire would typically ask about a wide a range of evaluations and preferences, as well as behaviors and knowledge. I can think of only a very small set of questions – usually relating to household finances – about which the head of household might have superior knowledge to others living there. For the vast remainder of questionnaire items, there would be no reason to privilege the experiences, behaviours or opinions of the head over others in the household.

Finally, this is also an issue of representativeness and accuracy. Because heads of household are more likely to be older, employed and male, and because they have more responsibilities that may lead them to look at the world differently, interviewing only heads of household is very likely to provide biased and misleading results.

Thus, the uncritical use of household survey methodologies in the national self-review process may end up wasting huge amounts of money because the results will only be generalisable to heads of households, not all citizens.

Accurate translations

To be representative, and to enable all citizens to have an equal influence on the overall results, it is imperative that all respondents are able to hear and respond in the language in which they feel most comfortable. Any survey instrument used in Africa should be translated – word for word, not just key concepts – into all relevant home languages.

Minimum sample size

For reasons discussed above, any survey claiming to be national in scope should interview at least 1,200 respondents, which would provides estimates of the national public accurate to within plus or minus three percentage points.

MECHANICS OF REPRESENTATIVE SURVEYS: DESIRABLES

There is a range of factors that should ideally be in place to carry out a credible and representative survey, but can be seen as ‘desirables’ rather than ‘essentials’.

Household lists and maps

The ‘international gold standard’ for survey research requires that samples be selected using PPPS at all stages.⁶ Any decent census should enable African survey researchers to select enumerator areas or other geographic units based on probability. But selecting households based on probability requires that we have an up to date list of all households in the selected sampling unit, and if possible, information about the size of each. However, many African censuses cannot provide this detailed information, and if they can it is often hopelessly out of date. In that case, there is the option of having field workers arrive in the sampling unit ahead of time to construct the map themselves. This drives up survey costs.

I do not regard this level of precision as absolutely essential. But survey researchers can and should at least satisfy a ‘silver standard’: that is, as long as all enumerator areas are chosen based on PPPS, it is reasonable to select households and respondents by random methods which are strictly monitored by field supervisors and over which the fieldworker has no control (such as randomised starting points in the EA, randomised walk paths stopping at every *n*th house, and randomly varying this interval each day, and a random rule of selecting among eligible household members).⁷

Substitution

Again, the ‘international gold standard’ holds that survey researchers should not allow any substitutions of selected respondents or households who refuse or are unable to be interviewed; this guards against ending up with a biased sample that under-represents economically active people, or groups who do not feel comfortable talking about their social and political attitudes.⁸

If researchers are worried about large rates of non-response, they can either draw overly large samples ahead of time or, depending on the level of non-response, draw new and separate smaller samples after the fact and interview the entire sample. But the first option presumes fairly sophisticated knowledge about past response rates that is rare because survey research is a recent phenomenon in most African countries. The second option often entails an intolerably large increase in fieldwork costs.

It is not clear whether allowing substitution necessarily results in major biases. Again, survey researchers in Africa may reasonably hold costs under control yet satisfy a ‘silver standard’ if they allow substitution of one household for another (but never substitution within households) and then only after at least two or three attempts to reach the targeted household and respondent. In that case they must keep accurate data that would allow a post hoc comparison of the responses of substituted and non-substituted respondents.⁹

Survey Timing

Finally, it is desirable though not essential that survey designers plan ahead to conduct self-review surveys in as politically neutral a period as possible. Essentially, this means not conducting surveys immediately before or after elections, and trying to avoid any other times in which the national mood might be artificially but predictably optimistic or pessimistic.

QUESTIONNAIRE CONTENT

We need to approach the design of an APRM-related public opinion questionnaire with a sensible theory of governance and democracy and the role of citizens within this. It should begin with an examination of what the principle of fundamental equality and equal influence means for the content of a questionnaire aimed at citizens. Yet this should be balanced by a keen sense of what citizens are and are not able to tell us.

There are a range of political issues about which citizens have a right to express opinions whether or not they are based on real experience or other information – for example, evaluations of elected leaders and most public institutions. In this area, perception is a very large part of the reality that a national self assessment process needs to measure. Regardless of whether a given government department is actually a hotbed of nepotism, the popular perception that it is is probably more important than the actual state of affairs.

It is less clear whether this logic applies to other institutions covered by the APRM questionnaire such as the Reserve Bank, or other areas such as corporate governance. It might be important to measure whether ordinary citizens see the private sector, especially big businesses, as corrupt, and/or more or less corrupt than state agencies and elected officials. Beyond that, however, it is not clear what more citizens can really tell us about corporate governance.

There are also issues where it is important to distinguish those who have had some experience with an institution or have heard of some issue because examining their experiences can tell us about the performance of the institutions (e.g. an experience of victimisation by bureaucrats or elected officials). On the other hand, lack of knowledge or experience may also be important to measure because it tells us how many citizens are being included, or excluded, from key policy debates or access to public institutions.

But there are also issues in the APRM questionnaire where the vast majority of citizens have too little experience to justify allocating scarce survey resources to them. The area of corporate governance springs to mind. Does it make sense to ask people who are shareholders in a large corporation (in all probability, a very small minority themselves) about their experiences in annual general meetings, or their knowledge of the company finances?

The APRM self-assessment questionnaire should certainly provide the guide for designing a public opinion questionnaire to support the APRM process. But it is not necessary to have ordinary people attempt to provide answers to the exact questions in the APRM questionnaire. Quite simply, citizens cannot tell us about everything. We should not overload the questionnaire in an attempt to match the APRM instrument exactly. Rather, we need to decide what people can tell us (in terms of their experiences, awareness, behaviours, values, evaluations or preference) that can help the review process.

NEED FOR CLEAR DEFINITION OF OTHER TARGET GROUPS

Surveys of other representative samples – such as firms, civil society leaders, bureaucrats or technical experts – may be appropriate tools to add to the national self review. However, it is not clear that the APRM process has sufficiently clear definitions of each of these groups. What are the defining characteristics of a firm, a civil society group, or

a government official, let alone more ambiguous terms like ‘role-players’ or ‘experts’ that help us know who qualifies. Only with a working definition can we evaluate the representativeness of any attempt to sample these groups and begin to compare each group with the others, with the citizens, and with their counterparts in other APRM countries.

PLANNING, TIMING AND COSTS

Besides all the components above, conducting credible citizen surveys takes advance planning to avoid rushing the survey instrument and sampling strategy. Last-minute planning is likely to result in adopting existing questionnaires that might not be maximally appropriate. It might also allow survey companies or national statistic offices to impose their own operating procedures, inappropriate or not. Some of the steps presented below can be done in parallel, rather than sequentially. But based on my experience in the Afrobarometer, country teams should allow at least five to six months between deciding on research and receiving usable results.

Questionnaire design	4 weeks
Advertising and awarding bids to research provider	3 weeks
Questionnaire translation	1 week
In-house pilot of questionnaire and redesign	2 weeks
Sample design, sample drawing	2 weeks
Training fieldworkers	2 weeks
Field pilot	1 week
Fieldwork	4 weeks
Data entry, cleaning, presentation of marginal results	4 weeks

Based on my experience, nationally representative surveys in Africa are expensive compared to other continents. Costs may vary widely depending on the size and infrastructure of the country, and whether one selects a for-profit or not-for-profit research firm. In general, national teams should anticipate spending anywhere between US\$85,000 and US\$125,000 for a survey of 1,200 respondents, again depending on the country and the fieldwork provider.

On the other hand, depending on the country and the timing of the exercise, a significant amount of public opinion data may exist, covering a wide range of APRM topics (especially in the areas of socio-economic and political governance). The Afrobarometer has just finished its most recent round of surveys of nationally representative samples of citizens in 18 African countries, the largest survey project ever conducted on the continent. It took place between March 2005 and February 2006. The countries included were:

- West Africa: Benin, Cabo Verde, Ghana, Mali, Nigeria, Senegal
- East Africa: Kenya, Madagascar, Tanzania, Uganda
- Southern Africa: Botswana, Lesotho, Malawi, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa, Zambia, Zimbabwe

In addition, we have now conducted three separate surveys each in 12 countries that provide the first evidence ever collected about trends spanning a six-year period (circa 2000, circa 2003, circa 2005 in Botswana, Ghana, Lesotho, Malawi, Mali, Nigeria, Namibia, South Africa, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia, Zimbabwe).

Finally, Afrobarometer plans to conduct new surveys in these 18 countries (with possible additions) beginning in 2008. Single countries, or a group of countries, which plan on undergoing self review in 2008 and 2009 may be able to obtain survey data far more cheaply than if they did it themselves by contributing to Afrobarometer fieldwork costs, and/or paying for additional questions.

ENDNOTES

- 1 'Public Participation in South Africa's African Peer Review Mechanism: Results from the January–February 2006 Afrobarometer – South Africa', Presented to 'APRM Lessons Learned – A Workshop for Practitioners, Researchers and Civil Society', 12–13 September 2006, Johannesburg, South Africa.
- 2 *Ibid.*
- 3 It should be noted that we may from time to time use disproportionate sampling to provide reliable estimates of small but socially or politically relevant groups, so long as they are subsequently weighted back down to their true proportion of the population.
- 4 Some surveys may insert a prior stage to reduce travel costs. First they create a list of larger geographical units, such as counties or districts, that are not too large, but relatively numerous and which group enumerator areas into fairly homogenous clusters. This list should also be stratified along rural–urban, or provincial lines. Once a small list of these larger clusters is drawn, a sample of enumerator areas can then be drawn.
- 5 Some of the early APRM national surveys (e.g. Kenya) appear to suffer from this problem, as well as apparently all the UNECA household surveys. A simple explanation is that those who designed these surveys had strong backgrounds in socio-economic household surveys and simply copied the sample design without thinking through the consequences.
- 6 Heath A, S Fisher and S Smith, 'The Globalisation of Public Opinion Research', *Annual Review of Political Science* 8 (2005): 297–333.
- 7 Mattes R, 'Public Opinion in Emerging Democracies: Are the Processes Different?' in *Handbook of Public Opinion Research*, Donsbach W & M Traugott (eds), Sage, 2008.
- 8 Heath, Fisher and Smith, 'The Globalisation of Opinion Research', 2005.
- 9 Mattes, 'Public Opinion in Emerging Democracies', 2008.

More information about the project and contact details can be found at www.afrobarometer.org.

OTHER PUBLICATIONS

The African Peer Review Mechanism: Lessons from the Pioneers is the first in-depth study of the APRM, examining its practical, theoretical and diplomatic challenges. Case studies of Ghana, Kenya, Rwanda, Mauritius and South Africa illustrate difficulties faced by civil society in making their voices heard. It offers 80 recommendations to strengthen the APRM.

The *APRM Toolkit* DVD-ROM is an electronic library of resources for academics, diplomats and activists. In English and French, it includes video interviews, guides to participatory accountability mechanisms and surveys, a complete set of the official APRM documents, governance standards and many papers and conference reports. It is included with the *Pioneers* book.

APRM Governance Standards: An Indexed Collection contains all the standards and codes mentioned in the APRM that signatory countries are meant to ratify and implement, in a single 600-page volume. Also available in French.

Planning an Effective Peer Review: A Guidebook for National Focal Points outlines the principles for running a robust, credible national APRM process. It provides practical guidance on forming institutions, conducting research, public involvement, budgeting and the media. Also available in French and Portuguese.

Influencing APRM: A Checklist for Civil Society gives strategic and tactical advice to civil society groups on how to engage with the various players and institutions in order to have policy impact within their national APRM process. Also available in French and Portuguese.

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