



Helpdesk Research Report

Perception surveys in fragile and conflict-affected states

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Question

What recent work has been done on assessing the quality and limitations of using perception surveys in fragile and conflict affected states?

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1. Overview

This report examines recent work to assess the quality and limitations of using perception surveys in fragile and conflict affected states (FCAS).

The evidence base in this area is mixed. Perception surveys are widely used in OECD countries, and are increasingly used in developing countries and in FCAS. Some results of these surveys have been published, and are publically available. However, many perception surveys are not published due to sensitivities around the questions and data collected. Some published surveys reflect on the methodology, quality and limitations of the approach used. Overall, however, there is limited research on the strengths, limitations and quality of perception surveys as a whole. An ODI workshop in 2012 brought together practitioners, policy-makers and researchers and recognised this evidence gap.¹

¹ For details of the SLRC workshop's public session, see: <http://www.odi.org.uk/events/2955-perception-surveys-aid-fragile-states-fcas?id=2955&title=perception-surveys-aid-fragile-states-fcas>; and this blog by ODI's

Perception surveys measure what respondents believe, think or feel and can produce information about: (a) Knowledge (e.g. levels of awareness and understanding of particular issues); (b) Experiences (e.g. in regards to service provision) (c) Beliefs and values (e.g. norms, beliefs and levels of tolerance of certain behaviours) (d) Attitudes and opinions (e.g. views of performance of actors, satisfaction with services); and (e) Expectations (e.g. fears and hopes) (Hilker & Kangas, 2011; SLRC, forthcoming).

There are a number of challenges in the design, interpretation and use of perception survey findings. These are particularly acute in FCAS as these countries typically: do not have accurate national statistics; are dynamic environments that can change rapidly; have limited national research capacity. This paper reviews the strengths and limitations of perception surveys, and methodological approaches to ensure quality and rigour when using them.

The literature reviewed for this research focuses on the following:

- The **key strengths** of using perception surveys in FCAS include: measuring the intangible; a form of citizen-state communication; rebalancing information asymmetries; challenging un-evidenced stereotypes; quick, cost-effective and extensive data gathering method; focussing on citizen opinion, rather than expert opinion; and the monitoring of state-society relations over time.
- The **key limitations** of using perception surveys in FCAS include: the reliability of the data; representativeness (especially in relation to accessibility, gender inequality and representation); interpreting the complexity of findings; different types of biases; understanding that perception surveys measure perceptions only; and accountability.
- The **key methodological issues** to consider to ensure quality of perception surveys in FCAS include: triangulation of data; timing; sequencing and phrasing of questions; in-country analysis; longitudinal analysis; stakeholder views of survey instruments in the design period; pilot tests; and practical quality checks.

2. Strengths of perception surveys

Perception surveys are commonly used in OECD countries (OECD, 2012a). Survey data has been used by donors and international development agencies as a means of data collection since at least the 1980s (Hilker & Kangas, 2011). The demand for perception surveys by the international development community has been increasing over the past decade as the development agenda has increasingly focussed on FCAS and on the results agenda (Parks, 2012).

In FCAS, perception surveys serve a variety of purposes, including:

- To inform local policy debates and decisions;
- To inform programme decisions (national, local government, donors, civil society organisations, etc);
- To measure the impact of programmes;
- To measure the support for policies, programmes or development initiatives;
- To provide evidence for a change agenda;

Richard Mallett: <http://asiafoundation.org/in-asia/2012/06/27/how-far-do-perception-surveys-take-us-in-fragile-and-conflict-affected-situations/>

- Help build local research capacity to provide reliable information;
- Provide information linking perceptions with experience.

Compared to other data gathering tools, and depending on the methodological approach, perception surveys can offer some key strengths in FCAS:

Measuring the intangible. Most authors recognise that perception surveys offer a means of collecting data about issues which are intangible or difficult to measure. For example, citizen views on the legitimacy of the state is a key issue which can support or undermine state building in FCAS (OECD, 2008; SLRC, forthcoming). Through using perception surveys, actors can evaluate and compare individual and group views on state legitimacy and other state-society issues which could not be measured by other data gathering methods (Hilker & Kangas, 2011). Perception surveys can also explore views on politically or culturally sensitive issues.

Citizen-state communication. Perception surveys can be a way to facilitate communication between citizens, the government and the international development community. They can explore citizens' views and knowledge of issues, and can be used to evaluate the effectiveness of communication of government policies (OECD, 2012a). Parks (2012) notes that public perceptions of politics in themselves can be important drivers of fragility.

Rebalancing information asymmetries. Most authors recognise that data about FCAS is limited, as official statistics may be incomplete and national capacity to carry out data gathering activities may be limited. Perception surveys can therefore provide an important source of data where there is limited available, and can be an important source to triangulate other data sources.

Challenging un-evidenced stereotypes. Where the evidence base is weak, perception surveys can be useful to test policy assumptions (Muggah, 2012; Parks, 2012). In some circumstances, this could be an effective tool to deconstruct under-evidenced stereotypes and could help countries perceived as being fragile or violent to attract investment (Parks, 2012; Muggah, 2012).

Quick, cost-effective and extensive. Depending on the methodology, perception surveys can be a relatively quick, cost-effective and extensive data gathering method, for example, compared to focus groups. Short questionnaires with standardised questions and answers can provide a large data set involving large sample groups in a short amount of time. This is particularly important in areas where citizens work long hours and cannot spare a lot of time for interviews (SLRC, forthcoming). If areas are particularly dangerous, surveys can be carried out remotely (Hilker & Kangas, 2011).

Expert opinion versus citizen opinion. Perception surveys provide a useful way of gathering data about citizen views on issues, as opposed to expert or official views. In FCAS, this can help to articulate the concerns of conflict-affected or marginalised populations. It can also bridge gaps between the international community, the national government, national elites, local communities and individuals (Tariq, Haqbeen, & Kakar, 2012).

Monitoring state-society relations over time. Data in FCAS may be out of date quickly as local populations and environments may change rapidly. Perception surveys can be designed as 'snapshot studies' – deploying a cross-sectional research design at one particular moment. This can offer information about the views of something that is happening at a particular moment in time on the ground. Alternatively, surveys can be longitudinal, with research gathered from the same sample over a longer period – this is useful in capturing changes and trends over time. In dynamic and unpredictable

environments, such as many FCAS, longitudinal surveys can be particularly important to ensure that policy makers and/or development agencies understand and effectively tailor projects to the changing needs of the populations (SLRC, forthcoming). Notably, snapshot studies are quicker and less expensive than longitudinal studies.

3. Limitations of perception surveys

Compared to other data gathering tools, and depending on the methodological approach, perception surveys in FCAS demonstrate some important limitations:

Reliability. The SLRC (forthcoming) identifies two main limitations in regards to the reliability of the survey participants' views: (1) false information (including 'social desirability bias', see Box 1); and (2) people's understanding of the state and government. In regards to false information, Call and Cousens (2008: 15-16) identify problems in evaluating state legitimacy to do with the availability and reliability of data on public attitudes towards state performance – particularly in FCAS, people may fear reporting their actual perceptions of the state. Even where reliable data exists, it may be difficult to discern whether perceptions of performance are skewed by deliberate attempts to bolster state legitimacy (Call and Cousens, 2008; Khalil; 2012). Second, in regards to people's understanding of the state and government, it is important to recognise that participants may not distinguish between the levels or departments of the government and the government in power, in a climate of change (SLRC, forthcoming).

Representativeness. Two key issues affect the representativeness of the sample for perception surveys: (1) accessibility of survey participants; and (2) general inequalities which marginalise the participation of certain groups in surveys.

Accessibility. FCAS can be unpredictable and fast changing environments, and this can affect the accessibility of regions. For example, the Asia Foundation's annual perception survey in Afghanistan for 2012 recognised that restrictions on the movement of survey researchers due to security, logistical challenges, transportation problems, villages not located, remoteness, weather, surveyors not being allowed, and natural disasters made it impossible to reach some of the districts identified through the random sampling process. The report notes that in 2007, only 2% of sampling points were replaced due to security problems, however in 2012, an average of 16% of sampling points had to be replaced (in one region it was as high as 35%) (Tariq, et. al., 2012). This trend has had a significant impact on the survey fieldwork since 2009 (Tariq, et. al., 2012).

The Asia Foundation has a rigorous approach to ameliorate the risks to the data associated with changing of sampling points. Where possible, the replacement points are selected within the same district (or province in extreme cases), with the same ethnic composition and an error factor is applied to the data. However, the report notes that respondents living in highly insecure areas are likely to be underrepresented. These views could be expected to be more pessimistic, compared to views from more secure areas (Tariq, et. al., 2012).

Khali (2012) identifies that a ‘convenience sampling’ approach remains common amongst organisations with limited budgets, this can include selecting survey participants based on their proximity to the interviewers. Due to limited data, and to limited survey budgets, some surveys do not (or cannot) analyse samples compared to household data, and so, for example, do not know how many participants share similar characteristics (email correspondence with expert). In recognition of this limitation, the SLRC (forthcoming) is currently designing a longitudinal perception survey which will combine household and perception surveys.²

Gender inequality and representation. In countries and regions with high levels of gender inequality, women are less likely to be captured in data sources, and will be less able to articulate views both publically and privately. Perception survey organisations such as Afghan Center for Socio-Economic and Opinion Research (ACSOR) and the Asia Foundation ensure that women are employed as interviewers, to reduce this problem. ACSOR has a 50% female workforce and a mix of national ethnicities – this ensures gender and ethnic matching of interviewer and respondent.³

However, the Asia Foundation recognise that gender representation limitations are still problematic as, for example, in 2012 female surveyors could not be deployed in the Paktika province due to security problems – as a result, no females were interviewed in this province (Tariq, et. al., 2012). Situations like this can lead to selection bias (see Box 1).

Perception surveys measure perceptions. Organisations must clarify that the type of evidence that perception surveys generates are perceptions, and therefore the data cannot be used in place of facts. Expert input indicated that when surveys are interpreted, substantial

Box 1: Examples of types of bias relevant to perception surveys in FCAS

- Selection Bias - when the sample is not representative of the target population (e.g. when the sample size is too small, non-random sampling, etc)
- Non-response bias, or attrition bias – when participants do not or cannot participate – these may share characteristics or reduce the sample size, leading to selection bias.
- Acquiescence bias - when participants are more likely to agree with the interviewer than disagree.
- Social desirability bias - when participants respond with answers thought to be more socially acceptable or desirable.
- Survivorship bias – when the number of participants is reduced to those that have ‘survived’ following conflict, etc.
- Recall bias – when participants make mistakes in recalling past events.
- Confirmation bias – when interviewers gather data that confirms beliefs or hypotheses already held.
- Interviewer bias – when the interviewer’s process influences the results.
- Funding bias – when the financing of surveys overemphasises or influences the outcomes.
- Status quo bias – when interviewers or participant responses support the dominant way of thinking or being.
- Negativity bias – when surveys focus on problems, instead of solutions. This can limit the data as it does not explore positive factors that could shape policy or program decisions to improve situations

Sources: SLRC, forthcoming; Eck, 2011 in SLRC, forthcoming; Hilker & Kangas, 2011; OECD, 2012a.

² More information here: <http://securelivelihoods.org/content/2261/Global---SLRC-Survey>

³ More information here: <http://www.acsor-surveys.com/services/>

issues with this research methods can be overlooked and the findings can be treated as 'facts'. At the same time, findings can be dismissed due to preconceived notions that surveys are unreliable in such environments. A key question for researchers is how to interpret and understand the data generated through perception surveys (Parks, 2012).

In its study of perception surveys and attitudes towards regulatory performance, the OECD (2012a) recognises that there is frequently a disparity between the perceived value of regulations and the measurable results of regulations, noting that many surveys have revealed negative perceptions of the quality of regulations while more fact-based measurements have shown an improvement.

Complexity of findings. Perceptions are shaped by many complex factors that may not be captured in surveys, for example, in relation to service provision perceptions could be affected by – personal situation and background, belief system, untested expectations, government or media information about the service, etc (OECD, 2012a; SLRC, forthcoming). The more general or ambiguous the question is, the stronger the influence of other factors will be (Van de Walle and Van Ryzin, 2011). While perception surveys can uncover the perception of a service, this evidence may not be enough to determine policy options to improve the provision, experience and perception of the service. This underlines the need to triangulate data using different methodologies.

Accountability. Many perception surveys in FCAS are designed and financed by international development actors, therefore may not be representative of national concerns, accountable to national populations or considered a legitimate source of data to inform national policy decisions (Unknown, 2011). This could lead to 'funding bias' (see Box 1).

4. Methodological approaches to ensure quality in perception surveys

All of the above strengths and limitations are dependent on the methodological approach of the perception surveys, as the OECD (2012a, p8) notes "If pitfalls in survey design are ignored, survey results become unusable for policy makers". In view of this, the OECD (2012b) has produced a useful checklist to commission, design and run a perception survey – see Table 1 below.

Table 1: Checklist to commission, design and run a perception survey

Step 1. Define survey objectives and target group	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Define the objectives ▪ Define the final use of the results ▪ Ensure a perception survey is the adequate tool ▪ Define target group(s)
Step 2. Draft survey questions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Set up discussions with members of a target group to identify key issues ▪ Translate those into questions and answer categories ▪ Draft simple and clear questions ▪ Keep the questionnaire short to maximise response rate and concentration ▪ Ensure respondents have the opportunity to report problems
Step 3. Pilot and re-adjusting the questionnaire	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Test the survey on a smaller-scale target group to identify weaknesses in the survey design ▪ Possibly ask volunteers to think aloud while answering questions and analyse what motivated their answers ▪ Adjust questionnaire if needed
Step 4. Select respondents and the data collection method	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Select a sample either by random sampling or other methods ▪ Ensure that the sample size allows to draw valid conclusions from the results ▪ Choose the data collection method: personal interviews, telephone interviews, internet surveys, email surveys, etc. ▪ Maximise response rate through appropriate data collection method
Step 5. Run the survey	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Ensure high response-rate through follow-up emails otherwise conclusions to the survey could be biased ▪ Use trained interviewers to avoid unintentional influence on responses
Step 6. Analyse the results	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Interpret results as perceptions rather than facts ▪ Take into account the response rate. A low rate means that no general conclusions can be drawn ▪ Take into consideration the number and the way respondents have been selected in the result analysis ▪ Understand how results were reached is essential to draw policy conclusions ▪ Attach documentation regarding Steps 1-6 to results and interpret results in combination with other data sources

Source: OECD, 2012b

The literature reviewed for this report revealed a number of key methodological issues that should be considered in ensuring a rigorous and high quality approach to perception surveys:

Triangulation. The majority of the research reviewed underlined the importance of triangulating data gathered from perception surveys with other non-survey and non-perceptions data (e.g. institutional data, focus group data) (Hilker & Kangas, 2011; Muggah, 2012; SLRC, forthcoming). Sensitive or ambiguous questions should also be triangulated within the survey, for example by asking a number of similar questions to test for reliability (SLRC, forthcoming; OECD, 2012a).

Timing. The timing of a perception survey can have significant impact on data – particularly important factors include: the timing related to political or cultural events (e.g. elections, national holidays); timing related to seasonal changes (e.g. accessibility due to the weather, or busy employment periods around

the harvest period); timing related to work commitments (e.g. if surveys are taken during working hours, or during free time). This is also known as temporal phenomenon.

In a study carried out for the World Bank, Dervisevic, Hasanagic and Milutinovic (2006) recognise that research carried out during a general election campaign led to an increase in participants discussing problems unrelated to the subject of the survey – the municipal level of government and local service provision.

Sequencing and phrasing of questions. The sequencing and phrasing of questions can affect responses and the quality of survey results (Van de Walle & Van Ryzin, 2011; SLRC, forthcoming). A journal article based on a split-ballot experiment of perceptions of local public services by Van de Walle and Van Ryzin (2011) found that modifying the question order led to the identification of a different set of key drivers of satisfaction (so-called ‘question priming’). They note that this could eventually lead to the selection of different policy priorities (Van de Walle & Van Ryzin, 2011).

Word selection will also impact on results – the OECD warns about the use of complex words, jargon and group identification terms (OECD, 2012a; SLRC, forthcoming). Words also carry different cultural connotations to different groups within the same country.

In-country analysis. All 200 staff of the perception survey organisation ACSOR are from Afghanistan. The organisation explains that it runs a continuous recruitment and training scheme to ensure high quality standards of the surveys, and also to develop national research capacity – a key objective of perception surveys for this organisation. ACSOR designs its surveys in Afghanistan to have exact ethnic and gender matching. Due to gender relations, women conducting surveys must be accompanied by a male member of the family – this has various implications for budgeting. Muggah (2012) also underlines the importance of its 35 national staff members in a recent series of perception surveys examining crime and violence in Haiti.

Longitudinal panel surveys. A particular strength of perception surveys is the ability to measure opinions over time, and, for example, to explore how changes in policy or service delivery affect public perceptions. The success of this depends greatly on the quality of the longitudinal analysis. FCAS face particular challenges in this respect, as often populations will change rapidly and unpredictably leading to potentially high levels of attrition.⁴ SLRC (forthcoming) note a particular limitation with non-random attrition, when those that drop out have different characteristics from those that stay in (e.g. this could lead to a bias towards those that survive conflict situations. See Box 1).

Stakeholder views of survey instruments. Various reports identify that survey instruments (e.g. questionnaires, guides for discussion, sampling) are more likely to be representative if they are shared and discussed with local stakeholders during the design process (OECD, 2012a; McNeil, Herzog, Cosic & PRISM Research, 2009). Where perception surveys are developed in-country by in-country agencies, the Asia Foundation (2011) recognise that ‘external knowledgeable actors’ should also vet the survey instruments. This would help to improve the relevance and quality of the instruments, and the subsequent ownership of findings and recommendations.

Pilot tests. The OECD (2012a), the Asia Foundation (2011) and SLRC (forthcoming) identify the use of field testing survey instruments before undertaking the whole survey. This can ensure that questions are

⁴ Attrition is when participants drop out of a sample over time. See: <http://srmo.sagepub.com/view/the-sage-dictionary-of-social-research-methods/n9.xml>

changed if they are unclear, too sensitive or not useful. The OECD (2012a) particularly advises using pilot surveys first to assist in identifying appropriate questions and language.

Practical quality checks. The Asia Foundation implements a series of quality checks on its personnel to ensure that quality standards are met by the individual interviewers. All Asia Foundation survey questionnaires are computer-checked for interviewer bias (see Box 1) – with examination of whether the surveys carried out by particular interviewers reveal similar responses, when compared to the general survey (Pillai, 2012). Other quality control methods included supervisor accompanied interviews (3.5%), back-checks by ACSOR’s central office (5.6%), and back-checks by the Foundation’s staff (6%) (Pillai, 2012).

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Key websites

- Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium (SLRC) – <http://securelivelihoods.org/content/2261/Global-SLRC-Survey>
- The Asia Foundation – <http://asiafoundation.org/index.php>
- Afghan Center for Socio-Economic and Opinion Research - <http://www.acsor-surveys.com/>

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