Social Surveys in Low-Resource Settings: Making Research Work

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Why is social science research critical for improving health in developing countries?
Major Killers in Developing Countries

- HIV/AIDS
- Lower respiratory infection
- Heart disease
- Diarrhoeal diseases
- Cerebrovascular disease
- Childhood diseases
- Malaria
- Tuberculosis
- Maternal mortality (among women)

Source: WHO World Health Report 2002
The role of social science research

- Describe patterns in health outcomes among different populations (helps identify populations most affected)
- Identify behavioral risks and prevention options
- Place health outcomes within the broader social and economic context of individuals’ lives
- Find key points of intervention where medical, social and economic policies can improve health
Using social surveys to gather data

- Population-based surveys
- Longitudinal or retrospective studies
- Inclusion of biomarkers
- Randomized interventions
What are the challenges to conducting high-quality social surveys in developing countries?
What are the challenges to conducting high-quality social surveys in developing countries?

Many
Perhaps the greatest challenge is:

Poor quality data
Why is data quality low?

- Poor data collection procedures
- Translation issues and cultural differences
- Memory and recall errors
- Social desirability bias (particularly with sensitive behaviors)
What can social scientists do to improve data quality?

An illustrative social survey on sexual behaviors and HIV in Kisumu, Kenya
HIV Prevalence in Kisumu, Kenya

Source: Multi-center study by WHO 1997-98
Different interviewing methods

- Face-to-face
- Self-administered questionnaires
- ACASI (audio and computer assisted methods)
- Life History Calendars
Relationship History Calendars

- Asks respondents about major life changes and events over the last 10 years
- Uses personal and public landmarks to help recall and place these events
- Places sexual behaviors within relationships and relationships within lives
Integrating social science research with health measures in low-resource countries is difficult, but the insights gained are potentially tremendous.

By modeling dynamic and complex behaviors, we can better understand risks with respect to particular diseases.

By considering multiple domains of individuals’ lives, we can develop more realistic interventions and improve adherence to treatment programs.

Social science research is an important complement to basic science.