Achieving the Full Potential of Household Surveys in the SDG Era

Prepared by the Inter-Secretariat Working Group on Household Surveys

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Summary

This paper demonstrates the importance of household surveys in measuring progress toward the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), and their potential as flexible, customizable data sources uniquely positioned to meet data needs for evidence-based policy making. The paper discusses the unique advantages, the potential complementarity of household surveys with other data sources to provide valuable information, and also limitations of household surveys. Household surveys will continue to be an essential component of a well-functioning statistical system even with increased access to and use of other data sources. Various considerations, such as the design of sampling frames, the need for adequate administrative sources, continued development of standards, interoperability, and coordination mechanisms are discussed as critical ingredients for household surveys to achieve their full potential. However, this potential also indicates that other data sources and critical statistical infrastructure must also develop in tandem with household surveys. The paper concludes by presenting proposed actions, including coordinated actions at multiple levels, methodological development and implementation of standards, innovative methods for dissemination of data, and advocacy for increased use of data, to achieve the full potential of household surveys.

1. Introduction

Household surveys are a crucial part of the national statistical system in most countries. Household surveys, together with censuses, are carried out with the main purpose of producing statistics. The topics cover many socio-economic areas including poverty, health, education, employment, gender equality, food security and access to services. A mapping exercise (described in section 2) conducted recently shows that household surveys are the main data source for around one third of all SDG indicators (80 out of 232 indicators). These indicators are spread across 13 different SDGs. Household surveys allow for continuity through standard questions and approaches over time, creating stability alongside flexibility and adaptability. These elements are key advantages of surveys over data from other sources, which usually are collected for other purposes which may change the focus and scope of the data, and susceptible to noise from changes in the conditions governing the source (for examples changes in age limits for access to benefits).

In all countries, including those with well-developed administrative data systems, surveys will be needed to gather information on certain indicators and particular population groups or areas of interest, or to ensure that the information generated is truly aligned with the desired concepts and thus fit for the purpose they are required.

Household surveys' unique adaptability to meet ever-increasing demands for diverse, nuanced and joined-up information will result in their assuming even greater importance in the future data landscape. As there are cost and quality implications to the size of a household survey, however, it is clearly acknowledged that countries need to prioritize between different interests and needs when designing surveys.

Household surveys have not been static or unreactive in their design. Substantial progress has been made in data collection methods. New tools and technologies have been adopted for data collection allowing for more efficient collection processes. Advanced sampling methods are being used for a greater variety of disaggregation to meet particular information needs in a country. Analytical methods such as small area estimation and triangulation of household survey data with other data sources have also allowed more in-depth analyses on particular areas or population groups.

Countries conduct household surveys following national specifications, and/or as part of programs coordinated and supported by international and bilateral organizations (ILO, UNICEF, World Bank, WHO, USAID, etc.). Examples of latter are the Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS), the Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS), the Living Standards Measurement Study (LSMS) surveys and the Labour Force Surveys (LFS). These surveys are usually carried out regularly and follow specified quality standards for data collection, processing and analysis, which allows comparisons over time and across countries within each survey program. However, challenges remain in the comparability of and coherence across programs due to varying standards and methodologies. For all household surveys, the quality criteria of the

Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics[1] should be met. For this, international standard setting and collaboration are needed, including capacity development.

To foster coordination and harmonization of household survey activities, the Inter-Secretariat Working Group on Household Surveys (ISWGHS) was established by the Statistical Commission at its forty-sixth session in 2015, under the aegis of the United Nations Statistics Division of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs. The mandate given to the ISWGHS by the Commission is to foster improvement in the scope and quality of social statistics as delivered through national, regional and international household survey programs. The group collaborates both at the managerial level and at the technical working level. At the technical working level, the group comprises of technical experts from member agencies represented in the management group as well as experts appointed by the management group[2] and works on cross-cutting issues through established taskforces.[3]

This paper provides information on the various dimensions of household surveys and actions that need to be taken to achieve their full potential. Section 2 describes the relevance and use of household surveys in context of measuring progress toward the Sustainable Development Goals. Section 3 discusses the complementarity of household surveys with other sources of data, comparative advantages, their usability for meeting global and national information needs, as well as some of their limitations. The last section proposes key activities that can help achieve the full potential of household surveys.

2. Household surveys in the context of the SDGs

The Inter-Secretariat Working Group on Household Surveys (ISWGHS) initiated an exercise in 2017 to map the SDG indicators for which data could be derived from household surveys. The goal of the mapping exercise was to develop a shared vision of how household survey-based data for SDG indicators can be efficiently delivered by countries.

Information was collected from member agencies of the ISWGHS on the use of household surveys as a data source for the different SDG indicators. In total, the agencies, with help from metadata for the SDG indicators, identified 80 indicators for which household surveys are considered a primary/common source.

The findings of the exercise underscore the key role of household surveys in measuring progress toward the SDGs, while also identifying existing gaps in guidance and standards for household survey design. Key findings are presented hereunder:

- **About one-third of the SDG indicators were identified to be sourced (either currently or proposed) from household surveys.** Out of a total of 232 SDG indicators, 80 indicators were identified as

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[1] United Nations. 2014. "Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics." UN General Assembly resolution A/RES/68/261. New York: United Nations. https://unstats.un.org/unsd/dnss/gp/FP-New-E.pdf
[2] The ISWGHS currently has nine members at management group level: Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), International Labour Organization (ILO), UN Development Programme (UNDP), UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization Institute for Statistics (UIS), UN Children's Fund (UNICEF), UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), UN Statistics Division (UNSD), UN Women, World Bank, and World Health Organization (WHO).
[3] More information on the working group's mandate, members, and taskforces can be found on: https://unstats.un.org/iswghs/

obtainable from household surveys. Out of these, a total of 71 indicators can be fully or partially sourced from household surveys. For the remaining 9 indicators, preparatory work to collect data through household surveys is either underway or proposed to be carried out.

- **Approximately 90 percent of the indicators are classified as Tier I or Tier 2 indicators.** 72 out of 80 indicators fall under Tier 1 or Tier 2 classification of SDG indicators.[4] This indicates that most of the indicators collected through household surveys have well-established methodologies.

- **Indicators calculated through household surveys are spread across 13 SDGs.** The abovementioned 80 indicators are spread across a variety of goals, including health (19), peace and justice (10), gender equality (9), decent work (9), education (7), hunger (7) and poverty (6), inequality (4), cities and communities (3), water and sanitation (2), energy (2), industry, innovation, and infrastructure (1), and partnerships (1), highlighting the range of topics covered by household surveys.

- **Approximately 70 percent of the SDG indicators generated through household surveys have both established standards and questionnaires to measure the indicators.** 55 out of 80 indicators have both existing standards for measurement and standard questionnaire modules to collect the data needed to estimate the indicators, which could form the basis for countries seeking guidance/technical assistance to enhance their existing surveys in line with global standards.

- **About 80 percent of the indicators sourced through household surveys have full national coverage of households as a sampling requirement.** Agencies were asked to indicate whether there was any special sampling requirement for the indicators, such as at the institution or the collective household level. It was noted that 65 out of 80 SDG indicators have full national coverage of households as a special sampling requirement. Household surveys meet this sampling requirement as more often than not the data collected is representative at the national level. In addition, all agencies reported varying population coverage needs, such as coverage of all adults, and children or women of different age groups, to provide more meaningful information.

- **More than 70 percent of the indicators sourced through household surveys require a proposed periodicity of 3 to 5 years.** 58 out of 80 indicators have a proposed periodicity of 3 to 5 years. This is useful in assessing how the timeline of surveys can be established to meet the SDG reporting requirements. More discussion on the need for a well-established and coordinated system among national household survey programs to yield high value information at regular intervals is presented in section 3.

- **Around 70 percent of the indicators calculated from household survey data have a requirement of at least one level of disaggregation, supporting the overall goal of "Leaving No One Behind".** 37 out of 80 indicators have age as a minimum disaggregation dimension, followed by sex (32), disability (14), and income (8). Household surveys offer the potential to help achieve the minimum disaggregation requirements of the Global SDG Indicator framework since they cover a wide range of topics by design.

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[4] Tier classification as of 13 February 2019. Tier 1 indicators are "conceptually clear, [have] an internationally established methodology and standards are available, and data are regularly produced by countries for at least 50 per cent of countries and of the population in every region where the indicator is relevant." Tier 2 Indicators are "conceptually clear, [have] an internationally established methodology and standards are available, but data are not regularly produced by countries." (https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/iaeg-sdgs/tier-classification/).

The abovementioned points highlight how indispensable household surveys are to monitor commitments for the 2030 agenda and the overall goal of "Leaving No One Behind." It also shows that there is potential to further enhance the relevance of household surveys, many of which are discussed in the following section.

3. Key considerations in household surveys

The findings of the mapping exercise highlight some of the strengths of household surveys in relation to the SDGs. This section discusses key strengths of household surveys, including the capacity and limitations to perform different functions, that can be built upon and overcome to contribute to a) improved measurement of progress in SDGs, and b) evidence-based policymaking.

Targeted data collection allows for flexibility and, therefore, meets varying data needs for evidence-based policymaking. While household surveys are usually part of the routine data collection system, they are carried out exclusively for statistical purposes. This allows them to be flexible and adaptable in various ways, including the possibility to respond swiftly to emerging data needs. This is a key advantage of a household survey over other data sources, such as birth registers and school enrolment records that are important sources of data but are primarily maintained to meet administrative needs and management functions, and not necessarily for statistical purposes. A survey's sample size and capacity in terms of topics that can be covered is not unlimited, however, so one needs to prioritize between different interests in terms of content, scope and size when designing surveys.

A key aspect of household surveys is their ability to collect various type of data, such as quantitative data on household spending, and other behavioural and attitudinal data, all high-quality and representative, and with a wide range of disaggregates or stratifiers. These include a range of issues such as self-reported data on individual perceptions and behaviours, such as breastfeeding practices and indicators on household well-being or feeling safe. With such properties, household surveys naturally respond well to the needs of SDG monitoring, as well as to the data needs for evidence-based policy making which encompass a wide range of development indicators.

Household surveys are a key and trusted source of information in most countries. While household surveys have been able to produce a constant stream of data on low-, middle- and some high-income countries over the past few decades, questions remain on how well-developed other data collection systems are and what their future is. Administrative systems have the potential to generate some indicators that are now collected only in household surveys and serve as an important comparator for household surveys allowing for triangulation of results. However, in some cases, household surveys are the only possible source to produce data, such as data on poverty or the prevalence of violence against women.

Many countries still face challenges in ensuring that their registers and new data sources have sufficient quality. Many registers are incomplete and may have a skewed and incomplete coverage of certain population groups over others. For those who are registered, information may be incomplete or incorrect. Although this is improving, many systems do not have proper quality assessment and control mechanisms in place. The challenges faced with delivering good quality data from these sources on several SDG indicators also put additional pressure on household surveys on indicators that they are not best equipped

to collect. This results in missed opportunities for the collection of data that are uniquely produced by only household surveys, as well as leading to the overloading the contents of surveys, jeopardizing overall data quality of surveys.

Customizable sampling techniques and survey design allow inclusion of specific sub-groups of the population to help ensure that no one is left behind. Policymakers and development experts require information covering a wide range of population groups, including older persons, adults, women and children of different age groups. Customizable sampling techniques ensure that household surveys can include and engage specific target populations to meet these demands. Such a property is reflected in the broad range of populations that household surveys cover, such as the working-age population of men and women in the LFS, women of reproductive age in the DHS and children under five in the MICS surveys. Household surveys may not cover populations and groups that are difficult to enumerate, such as nomads, slum populations and refugees, unless special efforts are made. Even though such populations are not of a magnitude to systematically bias the statistical estimates produced by household surveys, efforts need to be taken to cover all population groups in data collection to ensure that no one is left behind. Additionally, household surveys exclude populations that are not living in households, such as children in residential care or street children, for whom alternative robust methods need to be developed to collect data.

Household surveys from around the world employ various survey design approaches to enhance the coverage of specific sub-groups or indicators of interest. These include the continuous DHS surveys in Peru and Senegal, and the integrated household (panel) surveys in many countries, such as Brazil, Malawi and Dominican Republic, which operate on a modular basis, integrating different topics at different periods of time but with a common set of core topics and based on consistent sample frames. Many of these survey design approaches not only allow for better disaggregation, and therefore better data to measure that ´No one is left behind´, but also the release of survey findings on a wider range of topics, and on a more frequent basis.

Questionnaire approaches such as filters and skip patterns in household surveys also ensure that sub-groups of populations can be asked varying sets of questions, improving the efficiency of the tool. Consequently, the number of observations for specific subsamples of the population and specific questions has increased dramatically over the past few decades. For example, the median sample size of a national MICS survey in the first and second rounds of MICS during the late 1990s and early 2000s was about 6,000 households and increased to over 10,000 households in the fifth round between 2013 and 2016. Apart from the increases in sample sizes, the overall techniques needed to capture smaller sub-populations have also changed. In the same household survey program, due to the need to capture larger numbers of children under five per sampled household, oversampling of households with children of this age is becoming a normal sampling strategy in surveys in low-fertility settings such as Latin America and the Caribbean and Eastern Europe and Central Asia[5] (MICS methodological paper 7, 2018).

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[5] Megill D., Khan SM., and Hancioglu A. (2018). Oversampling of children under-five in low fertility settings. MICS Methodological Papers, No. 7, Data and Analytics Section, Division of Data, Research and Policy, UNICEF New York (http://mics.unicef.org/publications/reports-and-methodological-papers)

Household surveys are also making increasing use of geospatial data and mapping techniques to better capture the target populations in the sample frames, thereby increasing the likelihood of inclusion of the most marginalized population groups in their samples. These changes in sample size and new sampling techniques have implications for cost, human resource and implementation. Due to the need for more specialized technical assistance from survey programs and national implementing partners to develop suitable sampling designs and quality field implementation, surveys are comparatively costlier than in previous years, although cost estimates of household surveys vary, and depend on a very large number of factors.

Household survey data provide numerous disaggregation possibilities, of which many are not yet fully exploited. As discussed above, household surveys offer flexibility in the range of disaggregation dimensions that are covered through sampling approaches and the questions asked. In the preparation phase of a survey, national statisticians, decision makers and, where relevant, international agencies, need to agree on which indicators and disaggregation dimensions are most important to cover. This will allow for the most important aspects to be included. Although household surveys are not well suited to generate spatial disaggregates at lower administrative levels, basic disaggregates such as place of residence, sex, wealth status, and age are usually available. However, innovative approaches such as combinations of these (e.g. urban-poor, young women) or the ability to generate indicators for specific subgroups across many dimensions (e.g. multidimensional poverty) lend more analytical power to the data. Apart from basic disaggregates, household survey data provide numerous other disaggregates and outcomes that other data systems do not have: household surveys can expand the breadth of indicators covered with ease, compared to administrative systems, which collect small numbers of indicators. Despite this, countries and survey programs do not typically exploit the full potential of microdata. Future work must ensure that adequate further analysis frameworks and tools are developed in conjunction with national partners and international agencies to better understand the data collected.

The use of technology in data collection gives more timely data. Household surveys have increased efficiency through better data collection tools. For the most part, household surveys have moved away from collecting data using Pen-and-Paper Interviewing (PAPI) to collecting data on mobile computing devices, often handheld tablets (i.e. Computer Assisted Personal Interviewing, CAPI) [6]. CAPI automates many interviewer decisions related to administration, and filters for questionnaire modules and questions, saving data locally and sending to the cloud when appropriate. This reduces the burden on interviewers and eliminates the need for a separate data entry from paper to computer, which allows data to be delivered timelier and with greater accuracy. CAPI also prevents certain errors in data collection, such as missing data, and unlikely values, through in-built consistency checks in the software While the advantages of CAPI are appreciated, there has not been sufficient structured methodological work on how CAPI affects data quality and cost comparisons of CAPI versus the PAPI approach.

New technologies are also increasingly being used to integrate the collection of subjective response data with objective measures through sensors and other electronic devices (e.g. for land area measurement,

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[6] For an example of a CAPI system, see http://surveys.worldbank.org/capi

physical activity, water quality, biomarkers). This is providing cost-effective ways to improve data quality by improving accuracy and reducing subjective response biases.

Indicators are calculated from the same data source. An important advantage of household surveys is the collection of both numerators and denominators of indicators at the same time from the same sample. While many other data sources collect information on only the numerators or denominators of indicators of interest, and rely on other data sources for the construction of indicators, household surveys generate data on both numerators and denominators and avoid the potential problems of using data from sources of unequal coverage and quality.

Household surveys have varying levels of comparability and coherence across programs and agencies due to different standards and methodologies. Despite recent advances and technical feasibility of household surveys to produce robust data on a range of themes, fundamental differences in approaches to survey design, field implementation and reporting of results are common across countries and household survey programs. These differences are expected as each survey and supporting organization has specific technical and methodological requirements to produce the needed data. However, even when countries initiate surveys to measure the same set of indicators, methodological differences can create data which are not fully harmonized. For example, despite the fact that the DHS and MICS programmes maintain a good practice of harmonization of definitions of indicators and questions used in both survey programs, differences in the analysis of data in terms of using *de facto* (DHS) versus *de jure* (MICS) household members for tabulations may need to be taken into account when comparing across surveys, even if the effect of this difference may be minor on indicators.

To improve comparability and high quality of collected data it is necessary to agree on and apply international standards regarding data collection, processing, indicator calculation and dissemination, to the extent possible. The role of international standard setting agencies, and regional and global survey programs play an integral part in this process and can create basic documentation on how to collect high quality data in surveys and recommend standardized approaches to collecting certain indicators or coverage of certain populations.

Coordination and planning of household surveys can promote system efficiencies that reduce effort, time, and human and financial resources needed to generate robust population-based data. A set of rotating surveys can capture on a routine basis the majority of household-based SDG indicators. A pre-defined survey schedule with a survey every 3-5 years can greatly assist countries in statistical planning to produce national indicator priorities and allow international agencies an opportunity to plan technical and financial support. Collecting the needed information through the conduct of integrated (panel) household surveys, replacing some of the existing surveys or complementing them, can further enrich the pool and frequency of data collected. Such plans foster country ownership and create further onus on countries and development partners to be more proactive in statistical planning activities. Alternating surveys with similar content and coverage can reduce redundancies in data collection, especially on indicators that do not change rapidly. For instance, in several countries, such as Nigeria and Ghana, MICS and DHS surveys are alternated, creating a steady set of trend data on comparable indicators, thus broadening the overall data landscape. MICS surveys can omit certain indicators common in DHS if these have been recently covered and if these are not a priority for national governments.

Household surveys depend on other elements of the data ecosystem. Delivering high-quality data from a household survey is dependent on many factors; critical among them is the dependence on other elements in the data ecosystem. Household surveys require a sampling frame - a population to draw the sample from. Most countries rely on censuses as sample frames, but population registers are also increasingly used for this purpose in countries with strong registration systems. In the absence of recent population counts, there is a risk of undermining development of a high-quality, representative household survey. Innovations in household surveys such as the collection of GIS data and analysis to produce estimation of small areas hold great potential, but require linking to outside sources of data, including high-quality GIS data from censuses. Administrative data systems also have a role to play in ensuring that household surveys can deliver and become more innovative by improving data inter-operability. Individuals captured in household surveys can be linked to administrative sources if the two systems are interoperable. For efficient linkage, household surveys and administrative systems must share unique respondent identifiers and be digital. This implies an inclusion of identifiers for household surveys and that the data are in digital format, have individual or household level-data and be shareable: these are conditions which are currently not common. An important consideration is to have provisions in the national legal frameworks to share information, primarily linked to ensuring confidentiality of respondents. This is important to protect citizens, but also to ensure continued trust among respondents that data will be used solely for statistical purposes. If the trust is lacking, the probability of incorrect answers may increase which influences the quality of data collected.

Innovations in household surveys and the ability of data systems to rely on each other is also dependent on other factors. These include the documentation, dissemination and usability of data from different household surveys. Metadata that defines and describes the data fosters understanding of the context in which statistical data is collected and processed. This in turn provides users the right information to use the data according to their needs. Of course, this broad and well-documented use of data also requires that key users have access to data through increased cooperation and coordination among various agencies of National Statistical System. Good practices in bringing together metadata from surveys exist, such as the International Household Survey Network's central survey catalogue, as well as good practices of some survey programs in producing and making publicly available metadata on their surveys – however, there is still scope for improvements in this area.

Infrastructure for a well-functioning and coordinated national statistical system. One of the main criticisms of household surveys is high cost. Arguments typically state that surveys are "one-off" exercises where per-unit costs are unjustifiably high and as a corollary, governments should invest in more "sustainable" systems, such as administrative data systems. The position of the ISWGHS is that a well-functioning national statistical system has household surveys also as routine data collection exercises, where per-unit costs of any data collection exercise is kept manageable. This includes adequate investment in establishing core infrastructure for routine data systems, household surveys and other innovative data collection work. Developing capacities and ownership of household survey implementation at national level is also important in this context. With increased expertise at national level, the investments of international agencies to provide technical support can be more efficient and less costly. Further, by linking data sources, surveys can focus on those topics that they are most suited to collect, reduce questionnaire and sample sizes, and thus reduce costs and the time spent in the field.

4. Conclusion and Way Forward

More than one third of the 232 SDG indicators and most of the disaggregation dimensions for which data are indispensable in order to fulfil the ambition of leaving no one behind, are sourced through household surveys. This makes household surveys a central pillar of the entire architecture to inform implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and review progress. Moreover, household surveys remain a critical source of high-quality data to formulate evidence-based responses to emerging policy issues. Household surveys are a vital source for social and economic statistics in all countries, regardless of the level of maturity of the administrative systems or the use of new data sources, and can - in fact - also play a critical role in validating data generated by these sources.

Quality and comprehensiveness of data derived from household surveys require high standards of operational and methodological expertise by data producers (especially when principles of official statistics are to be met) and need considerable financial resources. However, financial investment in high technical and methodological costs are matched by the extensive value that household surveys add to a country's data landscape. Several actions can be implemented to further promote household surveys while maintaining their sustainability and quality. Countries and international agencies need to work together to reduce costs while still ensuring sufficient quality and timeliness of surveys. The ISWGHS can contribute to efforts of the international community by conducting a series of activities to promote the implementation of household surveys and improve their quality and sustainability. If properly resourced, the ISWGHS can trigger a renewed international framework for household surveys.

Coordinated actions at multiple levels (national, regional and global), and by multiple partners. Multiple survey programs are implemented at international and regional level and concerted efforts are required to ensure their coordination. The ISWGHS can be the forum to build a strategic vision and direction for the development of international household survey programs. By coordinating international and regional initiatives, the ISWGHS can be a tool to further promote also the coordination between national and international household survey programs. For example, the ISWGHS can produce information on future needs to produce data for SDG indicators and thus orient efforts by the international community and donors. The further production and implementation of standardized survey modules across different survey initiatives can also be a tool to increase data standardization and reduce costs.

Methodological development and implementation of standards. The ISWGHS will contribute to on-going methodological development by addressing cross-cutting issues and by producing on-line and other tools to support national household programs and promote the production of high-quality survey data. Existing survey implementation tools need to be reviewed, with recommendation for improvements and standardization. Further work is required to develop and implement minimum standards, and harmonize best practices at the national, regional and internal household survey programs. The ISWGHS has initiated several work streams to produce adequate scientific guidance for countries on broad but essential areas of survey methodology.

Promote innovation of methods to use and disseminate data/metadata: Survey methods continue to evolve as well as possibilities to make innovative use of survey data. For example, surveys can gather a wealth of information by linking various data sources together. The ISWGHS will promote research and

dissemination of good practices such as the inclusion of unique identifiers, common to multiple data sources, and digitization of data to improve data interoperability. This will be done, while also taking into consideration privacy and confidentiality concerns. The ISWGHS intends also to promote better use of survey data by a broad range of users by developing standards on survey data documentation and on contents and presentation of metadata.

Advocacy for use of survey data for research and policy. Household surveys cover a wide range of topics including health, education, employment, and food security. The adaptability of surveys to address emerging policy issues will remain a key advantage. However, data is not useful if decision-makers do not utilize the information to meet the needs of the population. The use of these surveys needs to be advocated to encourage statistical responses to emerging policy issues. The ISWGHS will develop a series of advocacy activities and events to promote household surveys at various levels, both with national authorities, international agencies and the donor community. Material will be produced to show the added value of household surveys to produce high quality information for policy making and the need to maintain a sustained effort in such regard.