

### **Erin's Tips on Field Research**

(What you probably already know, but it won't hurt to hear again!)

#### **Preparation before you go**

- Think about what you will be testing before you go. Specify your econometric model if you can. Then make sure those variables can be calculated from data that you collect in your survey instrument.
- Get as much feedback as possible on your survey instrument before you go.
- Budget your time in anticipation of logistical problems, (ie. lots of space cushions and time to correct mistakes).
- Learn as much possible about the area before you go (history, politics, etc.)
- Get local researchers and institutions on board before you go and during your first weeks. Before you go establish as many contacts among these institutions as possible. If you have one contact, ask them to organize a seminar at which you can present your research plan. Get feedback from the local experts. Ask them about what you should expect? What kind of obstacles might you encounter? Ask them to review your survey to make sure it is well adapted to local conditions. People who have something to gain from your research will definitely want to assist. Make sure they know how you are going to help them back. These relationships will last a lifetime, and your collaborative relationship will continue when you return (you might need their help on wrapping up loose ends and unanswered questions after you're back home.) As you do here at ARE, make sure your professional relationships are a collaborative partnership – not a one-way relationship. You never want colleagues to feel used and abused. Offer your services in any way possible, even if it means helping to translate a few documents. Your assistance will be appreciated.
- Make contacts with village leaders right away. Explain your research and (hopefully) how it is relevant to the village. Allow the village leader to be your liaisons to the community. If they don't offer (which they usually do) ask them to give you a tour and to introduce you to the other community members.
- Prepare yourself physically for the worst kind of circumstances – atypical weather patterns, aggressive insects, unanticipated health problems. Bring the gear and the meds if you can.

#### **Strategies for informal interviews**

- Importance of establishing rapport with community. Never cut to the chase. Take time to get to know people. Visit them again and again. Talk about everything. Stories will emerge that would not have, had you pursued just one line of questioning.
- If possible have a community meeting to introduce yourself, what you are doing, and what you plan to do. If enumerators are coming, include them in this.

#### **Strategies for staying on track while you are conducting preliminary research**

- Document as much as you can in your notebooks. Stories from the field will inform all of your analysis, your future analysis, and your critical eye of other research. You will lean on this experience for years to come, so it is important to document as much as you can.
- Maintain a clear field research notebook, with dates for each days notes, and names and locations of interviewees, you will refer back to this notebook again and again when you are in the field and even more when you return.
- Each day debrief after you return from your interviews. If possible discuss your notes with someone, fill in the blanks that you didn't get to write while rushing, think of follow up questions for the next day. Ask yourself constantly, what am I seeing here that it is different than what I would expect? Why is it happening? Get to the bottom of the question. Don't stop half way. If you can't debrief with another economist or researcher, get on email as much as possible and communicate over the internet with your advisors or your colleagues. Keep the dialogue going if you can.

#### **Strategies for developing / revising questionnaire**

- If possible, do fieldwork (informal interviews) for at least one month or as long as possible before you start pre-testing. This is so you can revise the questionnaire to accommodate whatever interesting side-issues you discover during that time.
- First, have enumerators do pre-tests with each other (as part of training.)
- Next, go to the field and have each enumerator conduct one interview per day. Go along with one of the most experienced enumerators. Pick his/her brain afterwards.
- Debrief with all of the enumerators every day after you conduct the test. Give them a chance to raise concerns and voice doubts.
- Revise it and re-test it – as many iterations as possible, and in as many different ends of the spectrum as possible (rich, poor, educated, non, etc.)

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**Strategies for working with enumerators**

- Enumerators are a great source for information. Never underestimate their ability to be perceptive and to do research for you. They often conduct mini-informal interviews before they get into the questionnaire. They see many different cases so bounce ideas off of them all of the time, especially to get an idea of whether a story that you saw is a total anomaly or occurs with some frequency.
- Review the enumerator's work as much as possible. (I did this on a nightly basis.) Give them ongoing feedback on their work. Ask them for feedback as well.
- If your survey is long, make sure you have one or two enumerators who act as managers and do your job. (Choose the drill sergeants of the bunch.) They will "filter" the questionnaires and send them back out, before the final questionnaire gets back to you. Hold them to very high standards. Otherwise, the workload is infeasible for you as a reader.

**Strategies for learning as much as possible**

- Bring development reader or papers to review the theory and have it in your head when you are in the field seeing reality. Constantly compare the two. What do you see that is the same? What do you see that is different?
- Always keep an open mind -- think about alternative hypotheses in case your first option doesn't work! Often the story that you wanted to see is not there in reality. Go to work finding other stories. Write out these stories as much as possible so that you make sure to collect all of the missing information while you are there. Send it out to get feedback while you are there. Try to have at least two other back up plans by the time you depart.