

# Conducting phone-based surveys during Covid-19: Some lessons

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, the face-to-face interview was the most popular approach to collecting high-quality data. As the social distancing measures have severely limited the use of face-to-face interviews, the researchers in many developing countries are using high-frequency phone surveys to track responses to and socio-economic impacts of COVID-19.

In this ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, MOMODa Foundation has conducted telephonic interview for 7 projects and reached nearly 15,000 respondents, half of them are women. For collecting data from women, MOMODa Foundation has also employed local women as surveyors/enumerators which constitutes more than half of the total enumerators employed by the Foundation. Table-1 highlights MOMODa's recent experience in telephonic surveys.

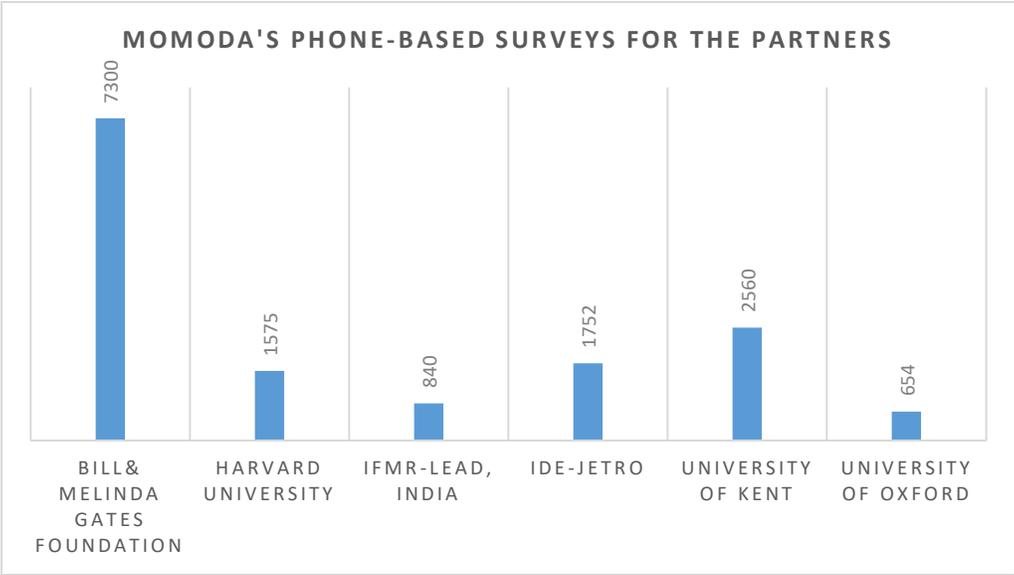
**Table 1:**

**Telephonic Survey Experience of MOMODa FOUNDATION**

SN	Project Name	Sample Size	Survey Area	Affiliated Partner	Project Period
1	G2P COVID-19 Rapid Phone Survey	7300	All over Bangladesh	Bill& Melinda Gates Foundation	May-Jul 2020
2	Telephonic survey on Spillover Effects of Hand Washing Behaviors in Children - Phase 1 & 2	1575	Gaibandha	Harvard University	Jul- Aug. 2020 & Mar-Apr 2021
3	Micro-Entrepreneurs Survey in Bangladesh	840	Dhaka, Khulna, Rajshahi, Mymensing	IFMR-LEAD, India	Aug-Sept 2020
4	Phone-based Household Survey on the Impact of COVID-19 and Lockdown in Gaibandha District in Bangladesh	1752	Gaibandha	IDE-JETRO	Sept- Oct 2020
5	Collaborative Research Activities on the Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic in Bangladesh	2560	Gaibandha	University of Kent	Sept- Oct 2020

6	Micro-equity and Mentorship for Online Freelancing Based Micro-entrepreneurs in Bangladesh-COVID-19 Follow-up	654	Gaibandha	University of Oxford	Oct-Nov 2020
<b>Total</b>		<b>14681</b>			

Table-1 shows that the MOMODa Foundation has carried out high-frequency phone surveys on a range of areas including Hand Washing Behaviors, Micro-Entrepreneurs, Skill training, and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. For these surveys, MOMODa made phone calls all over the country especially for ‘G2P COVID-19 Rapid Phone Survey’ and in terms of coverage, this project alone constitutes half of the participants who have been interviewed by the MOMODa. However, in terms of projects, the majority of them have been conducted in the Gaibandha district in the Northern part of Bangladesh to understand the socio-economic impacts of COVID-19 on different groups.



During the coronavirus pandemic, MOMODa research team has played an important role in shaping the response to the crisis by collecting high-quality data through phone surveys instead of relying on enumerators traveling to hear first-hand accounts from communities. This note provides some insights from the MOMODa’s experience with phone surveys in Bangladesh that research organizations may consider when deciding whether to adopt such an approach:

1. The MOMODa research team found that phone surveys are extremely effective because they do not require traveling, the method is quick to administer, and they are well-suited for high-frequency data collection campaigns designed to monitor variables in a population over a given time period.

2. Phone surveys can reach a much larger sample than can be achieved by sending enumerators to respondents' houses, and at a much lower cost. Additionally, the total number of mobile phone subscribers in Bangladesh has reached 170.1 million at the end of December 2020. We found that despite Gaibandha being a remote and rural area, almost every household has a phone set which is a remarkable achievement in the way of digitalization of Bangladesh. This has been advantageous for us to collect high-quality data through phone surveys.

3. We also found that there is a lack of access to a phone in rural areas, compared to urban areas. Vulnerable populations, such as those with a disability, lower incomes and/or lower educational attainment, are also less likely to have access to a phone. Male respondents are more likely to own phones than female respondents. So we felt that surveying by phone can introduce a gender bias. Therefore, researchers must be cautious in case of using a phone survey as a tool for collecting data, especially for gender-sensitive studies.

4. We found that building rapport with the respondent and developing a relationship of trust in case of a phone interview requires extra effort because when enumerators phone the respondent and introduce themselves, it may make challenging to build a relationship of mutual trust.

5. Though we can collect open-ended responses from the participant, the telephonic interview does not have the opportunity to understand the non-verbal cues of the participants. We also noticed that poor network connectivity, voice breaks, and call drops may disrupt the interview. In this case, to maximize the chances of the respondent staying on the line to complete the survey, phone surveys must be short and sharp, ideally around 10-20 minutes in length.

6. Phone surveys offer the possibility of high-frequency data collection because carrying out repeated face-to-face surveys of the same population is a complex and expensive exercise. In this case, high-frequency phone surveys allow for the collection of regular, real-time insights on the same population over a period of time. Hence, phone surveys can be a good choice for studying how people are faring in a dynamic situation such as the Covid-19 pandemic.

7. As phone surveys are short, many researchers might wrongly perceive that ethical and research approvals are optional to conduct a phone interview. But to ensure that survey protocols are ethically sound and referral procedures are in place, it is as important as ever to obtain consent from participants, but this must be done verbally rather than in person.

8. We found that explaining the project to a household and collecting their consent in writing before the survey takes place is easier in the case of face-to-face surveys in comparison to phone surveys. Therefore, it is important to invest extra effort in ensuring that participants understand the research objectives before they agree to participate.

9. We found that there may also be issues with privacy, as the enumerator cannot be sure that no one is listening to the call on the other side. This means it is not appropriate to discuss very sensitive subjects in phone surveys.

10. Choosing an appropriate length of phone surveys is very important for quality data collection. However, the literature is somewhat mixed on this but reaches a consensus that phone surveys should be shorter than in-person surveys. Phone calls duration could be maximum 20-25 minutes, but in-person surveys could last for hours.

From the MOMODa's experience, it can be concluded that collecting data through mobile phones has been very beneficial during the time of the Covid-19 pandemic as conducting face-to-face surveys was not possible due to lockdown and social distancing. But face-to-face surveys cannot be perfectly substituted by mobile phone surveys. As mentioned above, mobile phone surveys have a number of limitations and are suitable only for some types of surveys and under certain conditions. These need to be carefully considered when deciding which method to choose.