

## Embracing the Messiness: Doing Social Surveys in Ecuador



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# Abstract

Household surveys are regarded as useful instruments to organise eligible households, select recipients, and audit delivered benefits. Because of these features, many schemes for social protection rely on this sort of data for the purposes of targeting. This article looks at a case of targeting based on household surveys, namely *Bono de Desarrollo Humano*, the largest programme for non-contributory social protection in Ecuador. It relies on household surveys to identify, categorise and monitor the target population: mothers with dependent children, elderly, and disabled people. It is also used to poverty profiles, necessary to establish who is in need of state's support. All considered *Bono de Desarrollo Humano* is an interesting case to contribute to the discussion on the prospects and limitations of quantitative methods in social policy. Household surveys are limited in scope. When used to construct households' official records, it is plausible to find significant gaps in data collection, missing values and serious inconsistencies. In fact, it has been largely discussed that the complexity of households makes of statistical investigation a very difficult task. Households might appear disorderly and often, unintelligible. But in an attempt to make them understandable and legible for social researchers and state's intervention, data collectors have to rely on simplification. Such simplification might however misrecognise households' dynamics and end up harming the effectiveness of targeted modes of social protection. This motivated me to implement my own surveys in southern Ecuador as a way to contrast household data used for *Bono de Desarrollo Humano* and understand the challenges of fielding a social survey. Drawing on such survey data in tandem with qualitative data obtained through interviews, this article aims at deconstructing some of the assumptions required in quantitative research on households. To achieve this, the article explores the implications of researching households and considering them as fixed units for the purposes of locating informants, fielding survey questionnaires, and informing policy design. Issues of real life course trajectories, purposive misreporting and administrative errors are explored as plausible sources for the partial perspectives identified in the state's view of household dynamics. The final part of this article introduces the idea of households as planning units different from households as living units. Although for the purposes of policy design it might be required to see households as planning units, being these fixed and bounded, what I learned from the field was that households are marked by diversity and change. This article thus argues that it is necessary to understand households as *living and fluid* units, with their members constantly renewing in a very complex context. By doing so, the articles move to reconnecting the process of fielding household surveys with the purposes of targeting for social policy. From my field experience, I noted that targeting frames ideas of social citizenship, defining a script to increase the chances to be deemed eligible to the programme. Such script has been learned by a population that knows how a 'deserving poor' has to be made visible to the state, enumerated and accounted for in some sort of official record. Many examples from the field support this argument via selective reporting of household conditions. With such awareness, I attempt to contribute to the debate on how quantitative research, when used to target in social protection provision, standardises and frames social citizenship.

## Keywords

survey, household, social protection, targeting, cash transfers

## 1. Introduction

Collection of household data is hardly a new phenomenon. Early investigations on households conditions can be traced back to the eighteen-century, aiming at draw attention on the living situation of poor households in England (Deaton 1997). More contemporary accounts of research methodology define a survey as a method to produce a structured set of data about people and/or social phenomenon, on the basis of a systematic measurement across a specified range of cases (Ballou 2008; Byrne 2002; Vaus 2004; Vogt 2005). There has been a significant change in surveys purpose and practice, increasingly becoming a source of 'political intelligence' used by the state for program design, assessment of needs, allocation of funds, among others (Brehm 1993). This is particularly relevant in the field of social policy, as surveys can serve to organise households, select recipients, and audit delivered social benefits. Survey data is thus, used for generating official statistics to inform and improve the policy process.

Together with the impressive proliferation of household surveys it is possible to identify a shift towards targeted modalities of social protection. Arguably, it is this shift towards targeting as an institutional modality for social protection (Fischer 2012), what has driven much of the expansion and (almost blind) reliance on household survey data. More and more surveys are concerned with the calculation of poverty profiles, socio-economic strata and compilation of data on social welfare. Used to keep records of applicant and recipient households, surveys become particularly important for policy design, in as much as they is seen as reliable sources of information on actual program implementation.

Yet, the benefits of using household surveys need to be balanced by several practical and conceptual difficulties. I begin with practical issues discussing, if not the most common problem in any social survey at least the most documented, that of nonresponse. In a survey, nonrespondents can be categorised as those sample members missing from actual collected data, either because they were not contacted or because they refused to participate (Singer 2006). Already in the 1930s, several methodologists had identified this to be a regular feature in social research. Since then, numerous strategies have been advanced in order to adjust for the bias introduced by nonresponse in the process of data analysis. Increasing attention has also been given to a more conceptual discussion on this topic, aiming at understanding and reducing nonresponse itself (Ibid, as found in the seminal work of Goyder's *The Silent Minority* and Brehm's *The Phantom Respondents* (1993), which ignited conceptual debates followed by a myriad of empirical studies (see Singer for a more comprehensive account on nonresponse and its implications for survey research). From the compilation of studies on the topic, both conceptual and empirical, it is worth noting that non-contact seems to account for the largest proportion of nonresponse in household surveys. This issue

will be discussed in further detail in section 4, but to anticipate my argument, I shall indicate that there are important implications in missing out people from the process of survey enumeration, especially if data is later used for resources allocation e.g. cash transfers. What is more, this paper argues that the problem of non-contact goes beyond methodological concerns, and takes the debate to a more normative ground: who is missing from the data and why does it matter for policy design?

Related to missing data, attrition is another common caveat of household surveys. Attrition refers to the difficulties of tracing respondents (Lavrakas 2008; Vogt 2005). This is a particular relevant problem when constructing longitudinal data. In the context of targeted social protection, longitudinal data is used to check both, compliance with the program requirements and to evaluate the effectiveness of the program as such. Yet, there are very important difficulties in following-up original respondent households. For example, let us consider how often individuals change of address or how household composition varies over time. Yet again, the problem of attrition transcends the methodological realm and points out at the substantial difficulties of researching households.

From the outset, this article does recognise the usefulness of surveys as a research method helping to organise households, select recipients, and audit delivered benefits. But it does also recognise that surveys, as any other measurement, capture imperfectly and incompletely complexity—or the world as it is (Byrne 2002). In order to contribute to the discussion on more empirical grounds, this article, by means of deconstructing the process of fielding a survey, aims at downsizing some of the assumptions behind this sort of statistical investigation. To do so, it considers a case in which social surveys are used for both, compiling official household records (providing information on living conditions) and targeting social benefits. A word of caution is then deemed necessary: I am aware that the purposes of a survey are not similar to those of keeping official records. More importantly, it is clear to me that the information collected in administrative registers is recorded quite differently from that obtained through surveys. Basically, the information recorded in official administrative data is not yielded by observation—like it happens in a conventional survey—but by the registration of events. Yet, as pointed out by Byrne (2002), all statistics are the product of social surveys.

The official records used in this paper are indeed constructed from large-scale household surveys. These registers are distinctive in the sense that they are based on direct recording of households' conditions with the explicit intention of knowing the population and targeting resources to them, including factual information on access to public programs as well as respondents' perception on their own situation. To be specific, the data contains information on social benefit applicant and/or recipient households, reason why the dataset has been named Social Register—in

Spanish *Registro Social*. The Social Register consists of a comprehensive enumeration of households deemed eligible to participate in the cash transfer program *Bono de Desarrollo Humano*, largest income support program put in place in Ecuador. Following Mortelmans et al (2013), I used these official records as my sampling frame in the process of implementing my research. The author mentions the significant gains of using official records: data on targeted population is quickly available, structured, and comprehensive and without missing values. What is more, the official nature of the data serves social research, both by saving time—as information has been already collected by public agencies, and bearing out any further analysis on formal institutional grounds—after all, the data has been collected by the bureaucratic apparatus of the state. The listings provided useful information on recipient households: full names, address, contact phone number, household composition, data on livestock, access to public services, sources of income, exposure to risks and other factors used to calculate the program's poverty line and determine households eligibility.

Yet, when exploring the household listings in detail, I noticed that the data was neither accurate nor up-to-date. As I fielded the survey and started looking for the households selected in the sample, I became aware of the problems of relying on official records for conducting social research. For instance, I noticed that certain groups, such as informal workers, were extremely difficult to find and remain misrepresented in the official listings. What is more, I found that the sample unit, that is the household, could not be neatly defined once in the field. In light of these vents, I had to opt to interview individuals only, since the nuclear family as it appeared in *Registro Social* listings, did not necessarily match the group of persons I found sleeping under a single roof—as argued by Martinotti (in Byrne 2002) not the most important aspect of their lives. In the midst of my survey data collection, updated listings started to circulate and corroborated the rapidly changing nature of households that I had alleged was not captured fully in the official records.

Although I could have smoothed out this complexity and focussed on building a representative sample of households solely—various methods have been advanced to reduce the bias introduced by nonresponse and attrition (see Deaton 1997; or a supplementary discussion in Lavrakas 2004), I decided to explicitly incorporate the untidy and complex context I encountered and flag some of the assumptions behind surveys for the purposes of social research. In the main, I am interested in exploring to what extent it is possible to capture the rapid changes in household(ing) and organise them sufficiently and truthfully to inform policy design. The article outlines three connected contentions that can be held accountable for the fickleness found in official household records: real life course trajectories, purposive misreporting of household data, and administrative flaws.

Altogether, this article aims at reconciling theoretical perspectives with empirical exercises, relying on merely statistical comparison and moving to more conceptual grounds. It suggests that it might be useful to distinguish households as planning units, as perceived and required for state's purposes, from households as living units, category that I am using to bring to the fore their ever-shifting nature. It concludes with a call for a more empathetic approach to data collection, in which we leave behind reductionist accounts on household dynamics and move towards a more critical stance in data analysis, been honest about what we aim to represent, who we end up representing and quite probably missing out, and for which purpose(s).

## **2. Procedural issues**

This article was motivated by my experience of doing a social survey in southern Ecuador. By means of fielding my own survey I set out to gain experience in the process of collecting data. In the process, and due to the various challenges of this sort of quantitative research discussed above, I started to gain interest in understanding how the state uses household surveys and re-asses how truthfully this sort of data can inform policy design. The next section provides a narrative of the process as it occurred in the field.

### 2.1. Entering the field

Drawing on field economics (Harriss-White, 2002) I aimed at conducting an analysis of national social policy in tandem with local research. To advance this idea, I selected two cities, Loja and Machala, located in southern Ecuador. Highly incorporated into the national economy by means of commerce, both cities exhibited a quite assorted array of economic activities. As agricultural activities have declined in rural areas, many households have opted to migrate to both urban centres looking for salaried employment. Unfortunately, most of them have found no other option than working in the informal sector. Many have continued to be engaged in agricultural activities to supplement their fluctuating incomes. Income support provided by the cash transfer programme *Bono de Desarrollo Humano* has been argued to help those unprotected workers and their families. In this context, with my quantitative research I aimed at (1) understanding how does accessing social protection i.e. cash transfers, affect employment status (especially among informal workers), and (2) which employment structures persist despite accessing social protection. Considering the focus of this paper, I will discuss only the process of implementing a survey and not the content of the data and other specific findings per se e.g. actual impact of social protection on informal employment.

Yet, before moving to the practicalities of survey data collection, I shall briefly explain the cash transfer program operating in the selected research location. The idea of *Bono de Desarrollo*

*Humano*, BDH, is not unusual. It builds on already existing conditional cash transfers, popular schemes throughout Latin America. Based on ideas of human capital within targeted modes of social protection, BDH provides a stipend equivalent to \$50 per month to poor mothers with school-age children, conditional on school attendance and health check-ups (Gonzalez-Rozada and Llerena-Pinto, 2011). It also includes a pension component, targeted to adults above the age of 65 and disabled people without need of fulfilment of any condition (Ibid). Technical criteria are used to select the target public. As of 2012, BDH benefited 1,882,542 households and reached more than 9.5 million persons<sup>2</sup>, presenting the largest CCTs coverage rate in the region—44 per cent of the population (Cecchini and Madariaga, 2011).

### **3. Practical issues: implementing the methods**

The research on which this paper is based combined quantitative and qualitative methods. It comprised interviews and surveys. Interviews consisted of open-ended questions and conversations, whilst surveys involved about 700 observations. Interviews took place in few homes but mostly in public spaces, like health centres and open markets. Surveys were conducted mainly at homes, open markets, and streets, with the help of research assistants. The selection of informants followed a range of sampling methods, which are explained in more detail elsewhere. Aside from these specific activities, I also engaged in everyday conversations, informal observation of routine activities, and took notes of all the tacit information as it emerged from the field. Aside from data I collected, this paper also makes use of the official records of *Registro Social* as available for 2008 and 2013. Lastly, the paper relies also on census data, as a means of triangulating survey data and official records.

#### **3.1. Gaining rapport (interviews)**

The time scheduled for the field research in southern Ecuador included some weeks simply talking to people in order to reflect on the realm of the problem before trying to construct any survey questionnaire. In fact, this preliminary immersion in the field allowed me to get a better understanding of the most pressing themes regarding employment and social protection, as identified by the informants themselves. The interviews pointed at a complexity that later quantitative choices e.g. surveys, failed to capture.

These preliminary interviews alerted me of the very complex and dynamic interactions affecting not only the experience of social protection but also the very own structure of households. In my survey design, I tried to incorporate the most significant subjects that came about in the interviews. Later, and well advanced in the survey data collection, I conducted a final wave of interviews. I purposively selected informants from the pool of households enumerated in the survey,

guided by the cases that could provide me of a deeper understanding of the themes under enquiry. By doing so, I tried to further reflect on the elements that could not be addressed by means of applying a fixed survey questionnaire solely.

### 3.2. Preparing the survey: recruiting research assistants

In order to implement the survey I required the help of research assistants, who could help me to enumerate and interview respondent households. Knowing from the interviews that most of the respondents would be women and the interviewer's gender did matter, I preferred to hire women from the community. The enumerators had previous experience doing surveys, either from their undergraduate studies or from participation in community projects; and, a couple of them had actually worked for the Social Cabinet (*Ministerio de Inclusión Económica y Social, MIES*) collecting household data for the cash transfer program. I provided them training on some basic interview techniques: how to show open and respectful attitude towards respondents and how to explain the questions in a simple and friendly way. We also discussed the meaning and purpose of each survey question; and, I explained the goals of the research, for them to convey these to the respondents.

The research assistants played a key role in determining the quality of survey data. I joined them during the first days of data collection, and then I continued on monitoring them systematically. They developed a deep commitment with the research and showed great empathy for respondents' life stories. For instance, they made plenty of side notes in the questionnaires, explaining further the specific problems faced by lone mothers, or breaking down fixed categories that they considered failed to fully capture the realities encountered in the field. All considered, by hiring women from the local community not only I managed to enter otherwise secluded spaces, but I got a rich account of how different it is fielding social research in a familiar context.

Following various concerns I had regarding interviewing people, I designed credentials for the research assistants and myself. The most pressing concern had to do with expectations. I wanted to avoid delusory expectations by indicating in advance that we did not work for the government and therefore, we did not have the power to secure their acceptance in the program or favourable treatment for anyone. Also, I tried to avoid response bias, assuming that if people knew that no direct benefits will result from their participation in the survey, they would be less prompt to shape their answers to the questionnaire. Yet, the above scenarios occurred anyway: people asked whether we could help them; often underreported information on their economic situation; or simply refused to participate afraid of risking their participation in the program.



### 3.3. Sampling

As stated above, at first, my original sampling design had as primary concern achieving representativeness through random selection of informants. To attain this, I used the administrative listings of *Registro Social* as my sampling frame. I sorted the data and produced a systematic sample of households. However, as we fielded the survey, we faced countless problems to locate the households in the sample, since the listings were not accurate, important contact information was missing, addresses were obsolete and household composition data was out-dated. Apart from this, we had to deal with the changes that had occurred in the cities due to urban renewal, which made of the very few valid addresses to be obsolete. To tackle the abovementioned issues, a mix of sample designs was advanced, trusting that the combination of methods would benefit the research, as the weakness of one may be compensated by the others. With these ad hoc strategies, we managed to conduct 359 surveys in Loja, from which 210 matched the individuals listed in original official records. In Machala, we collected 365 surveys, from which 228 matched the records.

Getting into the details of the various methods devised for sampling once in the field, at first, a location-based strategy was implemented. In each city, a quota of potential informants was identified following census area demarcations. Formerly, we tried to allocate a number of households to be surveyed in each area based on their original proportions in the sampling frame. We managed to survey quite a few households with this strategy. Yet, this implied great amounts of time and effort looking for households, and did not address the issue of out-dated listings. In fact, it deepened the problem of not knowing in advance the changes in households' composition and modifications to urban topography, as discussed elsewhere.

In light of these obstacles, we had to rely on respondent-assisted sampling. That is, asking people in the neighbourhood to help us outreach other cash transfer recipients and/or applicants living in the surroundings. Although this was proven to be effective for sampling hard-to-reach households, it might have led to include similar elements in the sample, at the cost of reducing variability. In addition, by focussing on the households that are applying or getting cash transfers, let alone, could have introduced bias in the survey. In search for variation, we started looking for cases of informal employment regardless of access to social protection and contacted new seeds for respondent-assisted sampling, now among informal workers.

Availability-based sampling was also employed to enrol informal workers. Qualitative interviews and field observation have helped to identify the most common places for informal work, including—but not exclusively: open markets, streets, construction work recruitment venues (central square), waste disposal units, laundry facilities, and other outdoor spaces. Enumerators were assigned to visit the listed locations on different days of the week, looking for the appropriate timing

for informants to be surveyed e.g. they visited street vendors during Saturday mornings or waste pickers and recyclers during evening hours.

Selected informants were approached by the surveyor team and asked if interested in participating in the survey. Again, the respondents helped us to locate and gain participation of others. Yet, it is worth noting that the way in which we approached informal workers might have oversampled already visible groups, like street vendors, at the expense of others, consider indoor workers. In addition to this issue, the time allocated for answering the questionnaire among informal workers interviewed at their work place was much reduced, as they wanted to continue with activities. Refusal rates tended to be higher among this group. Few of them were tactical in showing themselves as informal workers. They were totally aware that the lack of formal employment is actually a good strategy to access social benefits. Knowing that the cash transfer program in Ecuador is specifically targeted to workers lacking social security, they were quite reluctant to talk about any benefit at work and some seemed to have misreported this information.

### 3.4. Eligibility criteria: whom did we ask to participate in the survey?

Eligibility for actual survey participation, considering the methodological challenges explained elsewhere, followed somewhat relaxed guidelines: participants had to be 10 years of age or older, report having (had) registered in the listings of *Registro Social*, or be engaged in informal work. Recall that many informal workers remain 'invisible' to official survey data collection and therefore do not appear in any listing. We preferred interviewing the household head or his/her partner. We failed to obtain information about all the household members, as we mostly found for participants at their workplaces, and they were not willing to share such information in such context or simply were not willing to spend much time in the survey.

## **4. Researching households in a changing context**

This section deepens in the experience of researching households in a rapidly changing context. I should start by making a distinction between what I consider to be inherent problems of method from the rather concrete challenges of conducting research in a very dynamic context, unable to utterly track households' life course trajectories. I also would like to account for purposive misreporting driven by the very nature of targeted schemes for social protection and its impact on the way in which people engage in statistical investigations.

From preliminary explorations of the research area, I had some hints about the constant movement of households—and individuals within the households, especially among informal workers. People in informal employment tend to move regularly. Either if they work in the

construction sector or as domestic workers, they change place of residence as often as they change employer. But even if for those informal workers who are not changing their place of residence so often, the realm of work played an important role in determining where and when to find them for the purposes of social research. It is also worth noting that regulatory agencies e.g. municipality, police, tax department; have associated informality with illegal activities. Consequently, informal workers have learned to be resourceful and shift working places, in response to stricter government control. As a consequence, they often move between working locations—either because they have to look for a more strategic location for their economic activities, or because they have been directly or indirectly relocated. Lastly, for a great number of informal workers, home and the workplace are the same space—think about an artisanal worker or door-to-door sales women. This last group was easier to locate.

In this regard, I noted important differences between the two cities. In Loja, it was best to reach informants at their work place. Informal employment tends to be very intensive, with people working long hours outside their homes. From the interviews in Loja, I learned that women who work as street vendors wake up very early in the morning to buy their products from large retailers in the local fair, or to prepare food for sale at schools. So, these women leave their homes before 6 am and do not get back until very late at night. In Machala, we found a totally different work routine. A great number of women were found working at home, due to the predominance of door-to-door sales. Also, women were found employed by their neighbours, as domestic workers or laundress. It seemed that domestic service was less stratified in Machala than in Loja. Consequently, data collection was fairly easier in Machala, as we were able to find most of the people at their homes and willing to spend more time answering the survey questionnaire.

Yet, we still had to deal with the changes in urban landscape. In Loja, major social housing projects, developed by the municipality, had clustered the poor population in the city outskirts, making segregation quite evident. Besides, urban renewals in both cities had added layer over layer of street names, new enumeration of properties, and transformed the arrangement of the urban landscape in general. No matter if these changes came from a purposive attempt to improve the organisation of urban activities, or were rather the outcome of improvised responses to mitigate the impact of natural disasters, they entailed very tangible consequences for the research. Basically, the addresses I had from the listings were no longer useful. We lost plenty of time trying to locate the households in the original sample or those referred by other informants. Not even people in the Statistics Department (*Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Censos, INEC*) were able to guide us in some circumstances. For instance, when in Machala, we were advised by INEC staff to drop the idea of visiting a whole neighbourhood, since it was associated to illicit activities: drug trafficking mainly;

and high crime rates. We were told that not even when fielding the national census they entered these areas—note how even census data has voids in data collection. Considering this, I am conscious not only of the great omissions in my survey data, but have started wondering about the misreporting that is likely to be occurring in administrative registers and census records.

Aside from this, the interaction between those who collect data and household members has its deficiencies. It was mentioned in the interviews—and later corroborated by institutional reports of MIES—that surveyors did not visit homes in remote areas. Instead, a registration desk was made available at the main square for people to put their names down. Unfortunately, such scheme for data collection did not consider people working hours, which tend to extend until very late at night for most of the informal workers. And it led to self-selection, as many decided not going for registration. As a result, a large number of households were missing from the listings. All considered, there are serious lacunae in the coverage of the *Registro Social*, which seem to be rooted in problems of a rather administrative nature.

Lastly, it is worth noting that the way in which people participate in statistical investigations has also changed. As a consequence of a stronger presence of the state in the last years, people got used to see social workers approaching their children at school, or enumerators visiting their homes and checking their living conditions. What is more, they were aware that, the more information they would share, more visible they would be to the state and more likely they would gain access to welfare. This interest in participating in social surveys led me to think about the implications of organising people in official listings and by these means possibly codifying their social citizenship. I will deepen on this last observation elsewhere in this article.

## **5. Nuptiality and household surveys: interpreting reported data**

In this section, I explore marital status as an issue that brings together the abovementioned issues of real-life course changes, purposive misreporting in household data, and possible administrative errors in social research. Both in interviews and surveys, we found that reporting marital status was a highly sensitive issue. Cultural factors are often accountable for the wariness around indicating if the informant was the spouse or cohabitee of the head of household, or to indicate that although still married the partner had left the family behind. This section juxtaposes quantitative and qualitative data pertaining to the same households in order to advance a more nuanced explanation for the otherwise inconsistent reporting of marital status in household surveys.

To explore the changes in marital status I matched a number of households in the administrative registers available for Loja and Machala—this was possible for the years 2008 and 2013 only, due to the time span with which household information is registered in the official

listings. From the analysis of both cities matched data it could be seen that approximately 25 per cent of the individuals have changed their marital status from 2008 to 2013—both cities considered. In Loja, 18.02 per cent of the individuals reported a change their marital status. In Machala, the proportion of households that changed their marital status was larger: 34.52 per cent. Most of the difference, when compared to Loja, lies on the large number of people who reported getting back to singleness.

What is behind these variations in marital status? Households change. Children grow up, girls get married, boys start working, girls get back to their parents home after the marriage has ended, and boys ask for support if they have lost their jobs. Women get pregnant, while school age children opt for studying in the capital and leave their homes behind. Couples split, get back together, bring new partners, or decide to remain single. Mothers have babies, children get sick, and grandparents die. People have widowed, migrated, returned, or had even gone to jail. These are some of the real life trajectories, paths that happen rapidly in people's lives and change dramatically their context. Yet, how are these trajectories accounted for in administrative registers? From interviews and surveys conducted, many types of households were identified. For instance, we had a great number of households with one person only—especially among the elderly, two or more unrelated adults, married couples, a lone parent, and many cohabiting couples, with or without dependent children. However, what we saw and heard from them did not match what listed in the registers.

The first move to understand these 'inconsistencies' lead us to ask what does it imply for people—in particular, women—to report their marital status. Would they be perceived differently if they report to be cohabiting with someone? It was only after the 2008 Ecuadorian Constitution that domestic partnerships were recognised as entitling the same rights as those provided by marriage. Arguably, constitutional reforms have led to an increased awareness of women rights within the household, providing them of security and guarantees as partners, mothers and income contributors, despite nuptiality. Going back to the registers and comparing longitudinal data on households between 2008 and 2013, it can be seen that more and more people declared to be living together in the latest wave of household surveys carried out by the government, after constitutional changes took place.

Misreporting marital status might have negative impact on the access to social benefits. Many women that had reported to be married in the administrative registers later mentioned in the interviews to be separated but not divorced. This case, of being legally married but not living together with the husband, is the worst-case scenario for women otherwise eligible for income support. If a woman remains as married, it will be assumed by the government agency that her

husband is sharing his income and contributing with resources to support the family. If the husband is formally employed—accessing social security and perceiving a permanent income—it is quite likely that when evaluating the household economic situation, they would not be considered eligible for the cash transfer programme. Yet, as often mentioned in the interviews, once the husband had left the household, the wife would get no financial support at all. So, women are left without their partners support and remain unprotected in what social assistance is concerned with.

Another example of misreporting has to do with early marriage. Girls tend to get married very young in Ecuador. Thus, for the state, every married girl constitutes a distinct statistic household, a planning unit on its own, whether living in a separate house or not. Still, most of the young girls remain at their parents' house, and contribute to the family income or rather, benefit from their parents' support. We had the chance to visit houses in which up to three mothers and their children shared the same compound and pooled financial resources, cash transfers included.

At this point, there is a remark that should be made about citizenship and identification documents. People need to provide a valid identity number in order to be registered in the programme. Yet, from last census data (2010) it can be noted that 19 per cent and 18 per cent of the population do not have an identification document, in Loja and Machala respectively. In addition to this, elderly and disabled people are asked to present an additional document indicated that they are either older than 65 years old ( *carnet de adulto mayor*) or that they have a certain level of disability (as certificated by the  *Consejo Nacional de Igualdad de Discapacidades*, CONADIS). Possibly, by lacking these documents many people remain invisible to the realm of social protection in Ecuador.

Lastly, the lengthy application period of household surveys reduces the immediate usability of the data and fails to capture rapid changes occurring within households. The Social Cabinet (MIES) has fielded three waves of household surveys for the purposes of cash transfer programmes: 2003, 2008 and 2013. The problem with the paucity of information is that it is plausible that many households remain excluded from state provided social protection, as intra-household changes are not recorded, as noted by Ponce (2013).

## **6. Social citizenship: keeping a register of recipient households**

What does it mean for a household or an individual to be listed in the  *Registro Social*? The use of statistical investigations for social benefits allocation affects the way in which people respond (or not) to them. Conducting the interviews and surveys allowed me to categorise two main groups of respondents were faced to questions on targeted social protection. A first group, with those who were willing to share information about their living conditions and working status because they

knew it was the way to make themselves visible to the state; and a second group of people who did not want to share any information, and even felt offended when approached by the surveyors.

The first group is mainly conformed by cash transfer recipients or those who ought to be part of the program. People in this group know that the state relies on social surveys to target cash transfers. They have joined the long queues in order to register themselves and their families, or they have contacted MIES call centre and asked for a surveyor to visit their home and register their household. They know that their social personhood is visible in as much as they are registered in a database. The access to social benefits depends on this. When we fielded our surveys, we made clear that we were not working for the state, but they would still invite us to survey them. They even asked us to enter their homes to verify the conditions in which they lived. People already know that the poverty line used for the program is very sensitive to housing related variables.

The second group of respondents, those not interested in providing any information, seem as if they did not depend on state-provided social protection. Many argued that they have a proper job and therefore, did not need to report anything to the government or any social researcher. It seemed that being formally employed provided them of a higher social status, or at least, this is what they conveyed to the surveyors. Of course, the dichotomy here presented oversimplifies the diverse dynamics observed in the field. In fact, few people who were cash transfer recipients did not want to share any information. It might be also that they were afraid of telling the 'wrong story' and appearing as solvent enough, not deserving state's support. These issues escaped the methodological advice given to the enumerators to be cautious in announcing the goal of the survey, as it can influence the type of responses elicited. At the end, people made assumptions about the objective of the research and the 'ideal' type of answers that they should provide.

In general, I find this willingness to share strategic information quite striking. When I prepared my research design, I was afraid of a high rate of refusal. But instead, I found people with a high degree of expertise in providing information for household surveys. Beyond their disposition to collaborate, they clearly knew what to mention or not. They were very strategic with the type of information they shared. Certainly, this might increasing the problem of representativeness in the sample collected, but it does speak of the implications of organising people in a social register.

## **7. Simplification: households as planning units, households as living units**

### 7.1. Households as planning units

If we were to see like a state, how shall we define a household? For most of social policy design, households are perceived as planning units. Within the household, decisions are being made.

And it is often assumed that altruism dictates behaviour within this unit: members seek to maximise a joint-utility function, and respond to other members needs. The household is thus, treated as a bounded and fixed planning unit. It is assumed then, that it constitutes a social unit where partners divide labour and pool their incomes in order to raise and educate their children (Huijsmans, 2012). This is an important assumption for allocating cash transfers. If targeted to the mothers, cash transfers would increase parental expenditures in benefit of the children. It is then reasoned that mothers will give priority to their children education and health. In such scheme, cash transfers are built upon an implicit inter-generational contract, which guarantees the fulfilment of children needs first. All considered, a very sound argument, which was indeed validated in the field.

Yet, there seems to be many problems with the definition of a household as a fixed unit. Where are its boundaries set? As mentioned elsewhere, the household is seen as matching the concept of nuclear family: married couple, dependent children. Nuclear families can then be thought as *paterfamilias* (Deaton, 1997) and are often treated as monolithic entities. In the *Registro Social*, each newly married person was assumed to constitute a household on his/her own. Women with children on their own, despite their marital status, also did. But from conversations with household members, we got to experience a messy array of men, women, and children living (or not) under the same compound and not necessarily related to each other. It was very difficult to find the nuclear family in its ideal form.

Household data, as collected in the *Registro Social*, is cross-checked with the *Registro Civil* registers (that is the civil or population registry), organisation in charge of recording vital events of citizens, such as births, deaths, marriages, divorces, and others. The problem lies on the late (or even lack) of registration of the occurrence of such vital events. Many new-borns are not registered, leading to an underestimation of the size of the household and the need of state support. Along these lines, what happens if a new baby is born? Two trajectories shall be exposed. Usually, the notion of nuclear family for the program eligibility criteria considers parents (or a lone parent) and dependent children as a separate unit. No matter if they live under the same roof, for every woman with children, a new nuclear family is recorded, and therefore, if eligible, they would get a monthly payment—recall that the cash transfer assignation is per mother, no per child. For this to happen, cash transfer recipients would have had to update the household's information on the website, indicating that a new baby was born under someone's name. However, this process takes for granted that families have been informed about the process to follow in order to update information, but more decisively, that they have access to a computer and know how to browse the web. This is quite an unrealistic scenario. Subsequently, if births and deaths are hardly ever



reported, the perception on households might look much distorted for the state's perspective and many mothers remain excluded from social benefits.

## 7.2. Households as living units

The most significant impression I got from the field is that households evolve and move. In general, one could argue that although the household as planning unit needs to be fixed for state's purposes, in real-life trajectories its members are constantly renewing. I observed that households were marked by diversity and change. Their social role was constantly transformed by changing arrangements, which include unmarried parents, stepfamilies and multigenerational households. In Loja, multigenerational households were quite common, being these based in cross-generational solidarity, as that seen in the support provided to teenage single mothers raising infants (as often mentioned in the interviews). In both cities, marital dissolution and the unmaking of joint parenting challenged the understanding of households as fixed units.

Is there any way in which this fluid and dynamic nature of households can be accounted for in administrative registers? No doubt that simplification is a precondition for survey data collection. Yet, there must be a way of updating household data in a swiftly way in order to have a clearer and reliable perspective on household dynamics. And most importantly, we could identify that some of the rigidities for registration could be relaxed in order to allow for atypical family arrangements to be considered and their specific needs accounted for in social protection programs. In the main, understanding the various trajectories of households might contribute to a more comprehensive and transformative role of social policy.

## **8. Closing remarks**

Like any other quantitative method, surveys have being strongly criticised for paying inadequate attention to the different meanings that respondents attribute to their actions, and the rather superficial treatment of complex areas of research. For these reasons, it has been largely discussed that social surveys involve many complications and biases. Even though it is perfectly clear that the main purpose of household surveys is not to provide comprehensive information on each of the units of information, social researchers and policy makers are invited to downsize the expectations on quantitative research for policy design. I consider that the existence of complexity, very difficult to capture in statistical investigations, does not mean that there is no discernible household structure legible to social research. However, it does suggest that the conventional conceptualisation of what a household is might oversimplify its inherent fluid features and misrepresent it.

Little about the story of data collection here presented is unique. But I have told it in detail because I think it brings up many of the issues not only affecting my research, but research on household surveys in general. If I would not have conducted my own survey I might have not got acquainted with the many elements that scape quantitative enumeration of households. Yet, this work does not attempt to dismiss social surveys. Instead, it conveys a message that, even when the goals advanced through social surveys seek to understand and improve people's lives, the implementation of rigid schemes can fail to recognise complex details that do matter, greatly. Certainly, the emphasis on this sort of instruments leaves much space for debate on what social policy standardises and homogenises, in particular when targeting has restricted the visibility of very real and fluid family arrangements.

In this article, I juxtaposed quantitative and qualitative data, moving back and forth in time and triangulating from different sources, as means to enrich the perspective on the (un)making of households for social research. In a context characterised by diversity and change, emphasising the 'living' nature of households seems necessary to contrast the fixed demarcation often used in quantitative analysis. The detailed account of the process of fielding a survey attempted to bring the reader to the intricacies of doing social research and invites to extrapolate this to larger data collection processes e.g. national household surveys. Of course, the magnitude of the venture and resources available are not comparable to those advanced by government agencies. Yet, the difficulties to define, access, enumerate and describe households can be fairly similar. This has motivated my attempt to engage with the methodological puzzle of how to capture truthfully social reality and use it to better inform social policy design. With this, I join the pledge to humble quantitative research, hoping that we move away from simplicity (and the exercise of simplifying) towards capturing the essential instead.

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## Resources

INEC census data available at <http://redatam.inec.gob.ec>