

Authors

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Global Lens: Exhaustive & Exhausting Surveying Worth the Rich Data it Provides

Sarah Custer, a Project Associate for the [Saving for Change](#) project in Mali, had the winning entry from the inaugural J-PAL/IPA Photo Contest. Her blog post provides context for the photograph:

The Sahelian sun is uncharacteristically hot this November morning, even for Mali's central Segou region. Taking in my surroundings, I am compelled to reflect on the miracles of generational ingenuity and backbreaking labor that were required to temporarily transform this endless expanse of gray-brown sand and caked mud into life-bearing soil. Apart from the too-blue sky, everything is brown, from the mud brick homes to the occasional baobab's meandering branches.

Except, of course, for Daphne's* brilliantly colored wax fabric that she uses to keep small David propped up behind her. For the past two weeks, Daphne and thirty other women from her village have been working together on the peanut harvest, each woman's tasks judiciously assigned according to age and ability. She has stepped away from the group, and we sit in the comfortable shade of an acacia tree.

Daphne is one of more than 500 participants that since June 2010 have been kind enough to make time for us in their busy days to be interviewed up to once every two weeks. We ask her to tell us how many tomatoes her family ate in the past seven days; whether anyone is sick and what they came down with; how much her food processing business's revenues and profits amounted to; how much was spent on phone credit; when she expects her friend to pay back the 500 FCFA loan she gave her yesterday; who precisely was the relative that sent her some new shoes (because in Mali your uncle is really anyone older than you); how the family reacted to the loss of their sheep; exactly how big the calabash she is talking about to describe the amount of millet bought at the market is, etc... After hundreds of interviews, I am still amazed that yet another respondent has not dropped out.

The high-frequency surveys that IPA is conducting in Mali are a cornerstone of the

evaluation of Saving for Change, a microsavings program pioneered by Oxfam America and Freedom from Hunger. The richness of the data that is being collected provides a dynamic picture of the households studied – one that is impossible to obtain with a baseline and endline evaluation alone. We're also learning a great deal about the value of growing trust between surveyors and respondents over time; a few visits in, a participant may admit to keeping secret savings somewhere, or open up about a sensitive health issue they were previously reticent to mention.

By summer 2012, when the high-frequency surveys will be completed and the endline conducted, we will have data from 6000 households in 500 villages to help us understand the impact of Saving for Change, and more broadly, how households in rural Mali manage their resources to try to make ends meet. In the meantime, I'll continue my seemingly effective prayers of low attrition induced by survey fatigue. [Author's note: "induced by survey fatigue" refers to both prayers and attrition...]

*Name has been changed to maintain confidentiality

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