

A critical review of the UN75 Global surveys presented to the 2020 UN General Assembly

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Introduction

To mark its 75th anniversary in 2020, the United Nations launched ‘the biggest-ever global conversation on the role of global cooperation’ on January 2nd. Importantly this UN75 conversation, ‘will undertake global opinion polling, media and internet analysis to collate robust, representative and comparative data that can inform future communications and policymaking’. (UN75 Home Page). Additionally the ‘views and ideas that are generated will be presented, by the Secretary-General, to world leaders and senior UN officials on September 21, 2020... to mark the 75th anniversary’. (UN75 2 Jan 2020).

In the context of achieving the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) this is both a very significant and timely event. However we were then told that this global polling would only be undertaken in 50 countries, with analysis of traditional and social media in 70 countries. Additionally we were also told that anyone can take their online ‘One-minute Survey’ which was available in the six UN languages of Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Russian and Spanish at the time of its launch. Clearly this polling strategy was neither truly global nor fully representative (UN75 Survey).

However, significant improvements over the coming months brought the number of available languages for the online self-selecting survey up to 65, while representative samples were collected by PEW in 14 of the G20 countries, and by Edelman Polling in 24 countries plus a further 12 non-representative online country samples for a total of 50 UN states surveyed. Firstly then we will review this sample and suggest alternative global samples for future surveys that could be both cost effective and accurate for global monitoring and tacking purposes.

Secondly, we will review the questions asked in the UN75 survey. The UN questionnaire emphasised global priorities requiring UN attention with the inclusion of an additional section on COVID-19 when this disease became a global pandemic. It is suggested that a ‘peace polls’ strategy of testing ‘solutions’ to ‘problems’ could be employed to not only measure the global publics priorities going forward, but also to identify what policies and reforms would be most acceptable to which demographics, in dealing with the most critical threats the world and UN must confront identified in the UN SDGs (Irwin, 2020).

UN75 Global Surveys: Critical Review and Evaluation from a ‘Tactical Perspective’

We have done our best to pierce through the rather complicated description of the 5 streams of opinion gathering outlined in the preliminary assessment of the UN75 Survey and Dialogues dated April 2020. (Edelman Polling however relates to the period June 16 – July 20, 2020; which is a bit puzzling). For the five streams of opinion gathering, the Report quotes a figure of over 13 million contacts in nearly all UN Members. The stream of public opinion polling, one of the five streams, quotes a figure of around 40,000 respondents in the survey. However in the section analysing the results of the poll it says that the age and gender specific analysis of the sample is restricted to around 35,000 respondents, because for the remaining respondents, the demographic information was not available, as those responses were collected through a mobile phone technology which did

not permit the collection of demographic data. Furthermore the analysis excludes the over 14,000 respondents interviewed by the PEW Foundation in 14 donor countries, listed by PEW as advanced economies. Consequently while the regional analysis of the world lists Europe as one of 6 global regions, the sampled countries from Europe includes only six countries comprising two from Western Europe (Norway and Portugal) and four from Eastern Europe (Russia, Ukraine, Poland and Hungary).

Clearly the sample of UN75 global survey will not pass a FITNESS TEST on any reasonable ground of critical evaluation. A harsh examiner might refuse to even short list it for going through the examination process. The shortcomings of the exercise on criteria beyond the quality of the sample are equally glaring. Those relate to the design of the Questions, Field work methodology and Tabulation cum analysis of the data. And yet, as authors of this paper we would give at least a B+ grade to the enterprise in its totality. The argument for that evaluation is the significance and the value of the exercise from the perspective of its strategic rather than tactical contribution. We will explain this in the next slide

Analysis from a 'Strategic Perspective'

While the UN public opinion gathering exercise does not pass a fitness test from a tactical perspective, we are inclined to give it a very good grade of performance on its strategic contribution to the field of measuring global as opposed to multi-country or cross-country comparative opinion. From 2011-17 the WAPOR Annual Congress has included 7 panels, one in each successive year, on the subject of global opinion polling, as a sub-field of comparative public opinion studies. Each of those panels ended on the note: global opinion gathering beyond the simple pooling up of national opinion polls, is needed as a specialized field, but (and it has always been a prominent BUT) it has no clientele. The existing clients (or stakeholders) are over-whelmingly state centred clients or stakeholders. Governments as well as other corporate entities view themselves as 'national' institutions operating on the basis of their 'agency' in a national space. Consequently despite its academic recognition as a legitimate and desirable tool in the tool-kit of opinion polling, global – centric polling, distinguished from state-centric, design of measuring international public opinion, has not gained much currency. Its recognition has remained restricted within the annual panels at WAPOR, and in its professional appreciation by some of the leading researchers in the field.

Given that background, the office of the Secretary General of the United Nations has taken a bold and creative step to recognize 'global public opinion' in its own right. It is for the creativity of recognizing every human adult on the globe as a quasi 'citizen of the world', whose opinion matters, we give the UN75 opinion gathering an excellent grade. Emerging from that is its bold display of reporting the opinion of the 'youth of the world' as a cross-national entity; the 'women of the world' as an entity, entities whose opinions have been compared in the Report with their counterpart global entities. The UN75 global survey reports on the opinions of six regions of the world as the opinion of those region rather than being an average of the opinion of a few sampled countries from that region. The demographic segments of gender and age which the study reports on cut across standard boundaries of states.

Thus while at a tactical level the demographic reporting and regional reporting of the samples of UN75 opinion polling exercise does not pass a quality fitness test, the implicit strategic recognition of the need for such a segmentation is notable. Furthermore the survey assumes a universe in which every adult is counted as part of a common 'global universe' in a strictly statistical sampling sense. This is a leap forward in the recognition of global public opinion . For that creative recognition of global public opinion as an entity, we duly appreciate the contribution of the UN75 global surveys.

UN75 Questionnaires vis Critical Policy Development Questionnaires

Methodologically the UN75 initiative very wisely took a triangulation approach that focused on five different data streams as follows:

1. UN75 One-Minute survey
2. UN75 Dialogues
3. Scientifically sampled survey through Edelman Intelligence and the PEW Research Center
4. Traditional and Social Media Analysis of 70 Countries
5. Research Mapping in Six Languages (academic papers and reports)

The qualitative research that included dialogues and reviews of scholarly academic reports in the six UN languages is beyond the scope of this limited conference paper. A brief reading of the UN75 Report suggests these qualitative data have produced many valuable insights but the focus of our study is on the views of the global population on the issues addressed in the UN75 Conversation, in terms of public opinion as tested in the UN75 Surveys.

So firstly then what questions were asked? The questions for the online survey were available online and published in the UN75 Report, the limited PEW survey (14 countries) is available on their website (Pew, 2020) but the more extensive Edelman questionnaire and data was not fully reported at the time of writing this review, hopefully it will be published in future UN reports, so we will focus on the UN75 Survey results here, as follows:

Table 1. Question 1. What should the international community prioritize to recover better from the pandemic? Select up to THREE. *[Arranged here in the rank order of the result]*

1. Prioritize universal access to healthcare
2. Increase support to the hardest hit countries and communities
3. Strengthen solidarity between people and nations
4. Invest more in education and youth programmes
5. Achieve universal access to safe water and sanitation
6. Address inequalities that have deepened as a result of Covid-19
7. Rethink the global economy
8. Tackle the climate crisis with greater urgency
9. Increase efforts to prevent and reduce conflict and violence
10. Make human rights central to recovery plans
11. Achieve universal and affordable access to digital technologies
12. Modernize international organizations to deliver better results

In the context of COVID-19 better health care was the number one priority, followed by 'increase support to hardest hit places' and 'global solidarity', particularly in underdeveloped countries (Table 1). A third priority identified in the report focused on 'inequalities' and 'rethink the global economy' and so on. Interestingly 'prevent and reduce conflict violence' came in at the ninth position on this 'shopping list' but in the 70 country media analysis 'conflict and violence' came in as the number one concern with 87M mentions which says something about the local effects of violence and how it is reported globally. Although violence may not be everyone's number one problem it does have a profound impact on world affairs. To suggest that other forms of premature deaths, such as those produced by traffic accidents, are more significant because they are more frequent than violent conflict deaths in most countries, misses the point. Violent conflict and the associated costs of state security have a profound impact beyond the simple number of persons killed.

Table 2. Edelman analysis of media in 70 countries expressed as ‘number of mentions’
[Arranged here in the rank order of the result]

| | |
|-----------------------------------|------|
| 1. Conflict and violence | 87M |
| 2. Tech opportunities and threats | 44M |
| 3. Health | 29M |
| 4. Climate and environment | 23M |
| 5. Inequalities | 18M |
| 6. Shifting demographics | 815K |

Table 3. Question 2. Taking a longer view, if you picture the world you want in 25 years, what three things would you most want to see? *[Arranged here in the rank order of the result]*

1. More environmental protection
2. Better access to healthcare
3. More respect for human rights
4. Better access to education
5. Less conflict
6. More sustainable consumption and production
7. More employment opportunities
8. Greater equality between countries
9. Greater equality within countries
10. Greater equality between men and women
11. Better management of international migration

The response to the second question in the online survey (Table 3) ranked ‘environmental protection’ first, followed by ‘better health care’ second, ‘respect for human rights’ third, ‘better education access’ fourth, and ‘less conflict’ fifth. The results for question three in the online survey (Table 4) produced similar results with the exception of ‘abuse of human rights’, which could have been included for consistency, but was left out of this question.

Table 4. Question 3. Which of these global trends do you think will most affect our future? Select up to THREE *[Arranged here in the rank order of the result]*

1. Climate change and environmental issues
2. Risks related to health
3. Armed conflict and politically motivated violence
4. Risks arising from new technologies
5. Nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction
6. Rapid changes in our populations
7. Breakdown in relations between countries
8. Cyber warfare and new forms of weapons
9. Forced migration and displacement
10. Risk of terrorism
11. Organised crime

Taking a long view 'climate change and environmental issues' came in as the number one concern followed by 'risks related to health' then 'armed conflict and political violence'. This 'shopping list' clearly sets the priorities for the UN going forward. But at this point in a 'peace poll' the style of questions would normally shift from 'problems' to 'solutions,' and the global public in this survey has not been offered any solutions on which to register their opinions. Instead the UN75 survey simply moves on to ask how important is it for countries to work together, has COVID-19 changed their views, and does the informant think things will get worse or better? (Questions 4, 5 and 6 below). The Pew survey does a good job of analysing the importance of countries working together and the significance of the UN, but only in 14 developed countries, and much else is left unaddressed. The mistake here is 'dumbing down' the survey and/or not asking important questions to all respondents to get a global view that can be analysed by all relevant global demographics.

Question 4. How important – or not – is it for countries to work together to manage the above trends?

Essential, Very important, Fairly important, Not very important, Not important at all

Question 5. Has COVID-19 changed your views on cooperation between countries?

No- it has not changed my views

Yes – now favour LESS cooperation

Yes – now favour MORE cooperation

Question 6. Overall, do you think that people in 2045 will be better off, worse off, the same as you are today?

Better, Worse, Same

Question 7. What would you advise the UN Secretary-General to do to address these global trends? (OPTIONAL – 140 characters)

These questions were followed with demographics relating to gender, age, education, urban/rural, country of residence and disability. The UN75 Report is well worth reading. There were more analyses than those reviewed here including some questions 'cherry picked' from the Edelman survey as well as gender, age and regional breakdowns, including an analysis by regions in relation to the Human Development Index (HDI). For example at a global level, women are more inclined than men to want countries to work together to deal with the world's problems and although 'environmental protection' was at the top in most regions of the world it was third in North Africa and Western Asia after 'respect for human rights' and 'less conflict'.

These analysis and results are welcome but if effective implementation of the UN SDGs is considered to be the remedy for all these problems then all the SDGs need to be explored in this way. For example if we just take a look at one of the 17 SDGs, 'Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions' then it in turn it has 17 'Targets', and if we then take a look at the first of these targets 'Significantly reduce all forms of violence and related death rates everywhere' it has four 'Indicators'. One of these indicators is sometimes run as a perception based question by Gallup in their World Poll, asking the informant if they 'feel safe walking alone around the area they live' in. But the issue of violent conflict can be explored with sociometric questions in the same way that Transparency International explore corruption. Here is a question on violent conflict used in Syria (Irwin, 2020):

Question 2.4 And as a result of the violent conflict please indicate if you or any member of your family has been the victim of:

2.4.1 Violent riots/protests... Yes/No

2.4.2 Violent attack... Yes/No

2.4.3 Damage and/or loss of property... Yes/No

2.4.4 Physical harm... Yes/No

2.4.5 Arrest... Yes/No

2.4.6 Imprisonment... Yes/No

2.4.7 Torture... Yes/No

2.4.8 Death... Yes/No

The point to be made here is that all the indicators of the 17 UN SDGs can be tracked and monitored in this way. Additionally, policy options to deal with these problems can also be tested for public acceptability. However, if running, tracking and monitoring all these critical issues central to the well being of the planet and its inhabitants is to be effective then this must be done to the highest professional standards. In our experience, when interested third parties do not like the policies that public opinion surveys suggest are most acceptable to their constituencies, in this case the peoples of the world, then they will resort to critiquing the messenger and the messenger's methodology. To overcome this problem accurate global samples are required.

Proposal for Looking Ahead: The Option to Choose a Global-Centric Polling Approach

The global-centric approach treats the world as one unit; it then stratifies it into a series of strata, primarily geographic. It aims to choose randomly (statistically) identified respondents through a single or multi-stage stratified process. The sample of respondents thus selected are weighted to correspond with the distribution of the population in the (global) universe, and its strata. It verifies the representativeness of the sample on demographic profile, based on the census distribution of those demographic segments at a global level, such information emerging from census data, or its close equivalents. Any deviations from the ideally described objective are transparently recorded, with the aim of minimizing them. The industry experts would recognize that these are quality standards prescribed for typical national surveys.

Thus the global centric polling approach is based on the accumulated knowledge on opinion polling acquired over nearly one century. The only major disruption we are introducing in it is the way and how we define the 'universe' of population. All countries of the world, small and large, accessible or remote, are hard to poll while maintaining scientific accuracy and remaining within permissible budgetary resources. Furthermore treating each country or state as an equal unit for gathering samples is not the way and how we treat the sub-units of a state in national polls. The most widely used standard industry practice is to choose sub-samples, through the principle of population proportionate to size. This brings us to the need for stratifying the global universe into its sub-units defined as global geographical strata, as opposed to a simple listing of states.

Now, the above discussion might sound a bit pedantic to the users of polling data, the UN being one. However that is where we have expressed appreciation for the intuitively chosen demographic and geographic categories in the UN75 opinion report. Irrespective of the scientific quality of its data, the UN75 global survey reports its findings for age, gender and regional segments. All of these cut across national boundaries or the states, whose individual findings have not been reported so far.

For a world body such as the UN, which is designed to address global problems, the opinion of every adult must be given an equal or known chance of being solicited. That seemingly innocent principle has enormous implications. The simplicity of this potentially revolutionary idea has become

common sense in state-centric polling and thus gets often overlooked. But the idea of adding up all citizens of the world, each as a single and equal unit with equal or known probabilities of being selected in a worldwide poll, is quite different from adding up states of the world, each as a unit even if the number of states were raised to be 150 or more, as long as they were as a design short of all units in the universe of the world.

The fact is that prevailing state-centric polling is not designed to give an equal or known chance of being selected to every person on earth, nor to construct regional or demographic segments of the world in a statistically valid manner. The demand and the need for such polls has been quite insignificant. Quite simply the prevailing practice is not designed for the requirement to monitor or track statistical samples of the entire population of the world nor of its sub-units, be they geographic or demographic. The needs of the UN as a truly global organisation and the approach adopted by its current Secretary General could however create a new need for measuring a statistically sound approach towards measuring global opinion and its regular monitoring and tracking. This new approach would also permit statistically valid reporting of opinions by global regions and global demographic segments. Should that happen it would give a welcome impetus to an academic interest we have been pursuing from the platform of WAPOR for nearly a decade since 2012.

At present, and unsurprisingly, it is somewhat rare to find global sampling frames which could be used as a universe of world population or global census distribution of relevant demographic segments which could be helpful in weighting samples to census distributions. Typically the state-centric method has only one building bloc which is 'the state' along with its sub-units whether geographic or demographic. That provides the basis for selecting their samples as well as for their reporting, monitoring and tracking.

There is a remarkable gap in the field of polling statistically valid global opinion. The most respectable of any of the existing multi-country studies with longitudinal data spanning over 3 decades, the World Value Survey, would perhaps shy away from reporting on a statistically valid global average of world opinion, nor of any of its constituent demographic segments. This would be true for any of its single waves. The reluctance to do so would be even more so, if one was seeking to monitor or track trends of global averages over time. True to their concern for scientific rigour, both the World Values Survey and PEW global polling have generally avoided to compute 'global' averages much less monitoring or tracking such averages over time. In its most recent reporting PEW global polling reports median values of country averages were used, rather than giving a Mean/average of the opinion of the total population residing in the polled states. In fact, for the objectives of some polling it may not be required to analyse multi-country studies beyond the state as a unit. And when it comes to the analysis of demographic segments of the total population of the polled countries, a less than statistically valid average may be deemed to serve the purpose.

Apparently, the objectives of polling for UN75 global opinion, are different from monitoring strictly state-centric opinions; for one because that is already done by the relevant national actors. At least we wish that UN centred polling would break fresh ground. Our conversation at this panel is in that spirit. One would like the Secretary General's office of the UN to measure global opinion as a unit of analysis in its own right and to monitor and track it. Would this be over stretching the scope of activities for an institution which was chartered to be an association of states? Can the UN reach out to the residents of the world for seeking opinions, cutting through the formal tiers of institutional bureaucracies and sovereignties of its member states? This could be a legitimate point of discussion and an operational constraint. But it is conceivable that such constraints have been overtaken by the realities of a globalized world and the widespread practice to invoke individual

human rights to express an opinion. We would consider the recognition of these new realities by UN75 Report, as a leap forward.

In theory a global opinion poll should ensure that every person on the globe (say 18+adult) should have a statistical chance to be selected for giving his or her opinion and none should be systematically excluded. This should be ensured even if in a world of 5 billion adults the statistical chance of being selected is only one in 50,00. This is by the way the approximate chance allocated to each member of the sample in the WAPOR paper presented by Ijaz Gilani and Bilal Gilani at the Boston Annual Congress of WAPOR in 2013. The panel was chaired by Tom Smith, an eminent expert in comparative opinion polling and past president of WAPOR. The revised version of that paper has recommended a sample of approximately 100,000 respondents for a global poll. A sample of that size would be affordable and within reach of major global opinion measurement aspirants. By way of reference, the budget allocated for the 5 streams of gathering global opinion under UN75 was in the range of 7 million USD (see Appendix to the Report). This was in addition to some contributions in kind. The Gilani and Gilani paper has recommended an annual global poll of 100,000 men and women set up as a combination of four quarterly staggered sub-samples of 25,000 respondents in each quarter. The paper has recommended an omnibus approach with regard to Questionnaires so that short versions of subjects, such as SDGs, could be accommodated. The quarterly staggered annual samples approach was designed to accommodate the possibility of regular monitoring and tracking (Gilani, 2017; Gilani and Gilani, 2013).

In summary the global-centric polling tool has been designed as a flexible and affordable tool for a wide range of applications. It could for example be used for peace polls where action and measurement are blended (as practiced by Colin Irwin) or for others where the two activities are de-coupled from each other (as practiced by Ijaz and Bilal Gilani); these being matters of choice. The method proposed in this paper is valid for a multi-purpose poll designed to report on global demographic as well as regional segments. In addition it has the capability to be tailored for on-going monitoring and tracking. Above all for the purposes of quality standards the approach builds upon rather than depart from the wisdom and expertise accumulated by our industry over more than 70 years, since the founding of WAPOR.

Conclusion

At 75 the UN is confronted with the task of monitoring, tracking and developing policies that will guide the world through its greatest challenge. The most recent report of the Institute for Economics and Peace (IEP, 2020) projects a dangerous world in which population growth and competition for limited resources on a planet threatened by climate change will lead to greater migration and conflict. The UN75 Conversation seems to have been successful in identifying these facts as being concerns of the world's population. But what is going to be done about it and what do the people of the world want done, and will accept to be done, to mitigate this threat to humanity?

Critically the failure of the UN75 surveys to collect a representative global sample with all the relevant demographics does not provide us with an opportunity to carry this research forward as a tracking exercise. Most importantly the peoples of the world have not been asked their views on the difficult choices that now have to be taken and identify clearly those for, or opposed, to the reforms and policies needed to remedy the dangerous place the world finds itself in at this point in our history. These choices are suggested in the dialogues and scholarly reports and articles cited in the different data streams of the UN75 Conversation. But the peoples of the world have not been tested for their opinions on these issues.

In terms of both sample and questions asked the UN75 surveys have made a good start, but, quite frankly, given the responsibility of the UN to guide world policy on these issues the standard of research is less than adequate. The UN can and must do better. The UNs Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) provide us with a detailed agenda of policy options going forward. At the very, very, least ALL the SDG policy options should be tested for compliance and acceptability with regular global samples that can be analysed and tracked for all relevant demographics, to World Values survey standards. Arguably, nothing less will do!

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