Methods note: fieldwork

What should a survey do about places field teams cannot safely reach?

Every recent national survey in Nigeria has lost areas to insecurity. How the surveys handled it, what their headline figures then describe, and the rules we follow.

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In short

- The 2024 Nigeria DHS could not complete 20 of its 1,400 clusters because of insecurity, half of them in Zamfara. Losses are no longer concentrated in the north-east.
- Surveys handle this differently: the DHS drops the areas, while the 2018/19 Living Standards Survey and the 2018/19 GHS-Panel wave replaced them, and the national poverty estimate for 2018/19 leaves out Borno. The same state can mean different things in different surveys.
- A high response rate does not show coverage, because it is calculated only where teams went. What matters is saying plainly which population an estimate describes.

What recent surveys lost

Insecurity or inaccessibility removed areas from every major Nigerian household survey we reviewed.

Areas not reached in Nigeria's main household surveys

Survey	Selected	Not reached	Where, and how it was handled
Nigeria DHS 2024	1,400 clusters	20, for insecurity	Zamfara 10, Borno 3, Benue 2, Imo 2, Katsina, Kaduna and Niger 1 each. Excluded, not replaced [1]
Nigeria Mini-DHS 2025–26	876 clusters	5, for insecurity	Zamfara, Borno, Bauchi, Niger and Kwara, 1 each. Excluded [2]
Nigeria DHS 2018	1,400 clusters	11, for 'law-and-order situations'	Zamfara 4, Sokoto 3, Katsina 2, Lagos 1, Borno 1. Dropped [3]
MICS 2021	1,850 survey and 337 immunisation-survey areas	128 'inaccessible' areas	Borno sampled only from 7 of its 27 local government areas; Borno results labelled '7 LGAs' [4,5]
Living Standards Survey 2018/19	60 areas per state	139 areas, about 6%, could not be listed	Replaced from the same state and sector. Borno sampled from the 359 of 788 areas judged accessible; 7 of its 60 then not reached and not replaced [6]
GHS-Panel, Wave 5	518 areas	8, for conflict	Zamfara, Katsina, Kebbi and Sokoto. Not visited [7]

- In the 2024 DHS and the 2023 GHS-Panel visit, the north-west accounted for most losses: 10 of the 20 clusters lost in the 2024 DHS were in Zamfara [1], and all 8 areas the GHS-Panel could not visit were in four north-western states [7]. The 2025–26 Mini-DHS lost one cluster in each of five states across three zones [2].

- Borno is handled differently in each survey. The 2024 DHS lost three Borno clusters [1]. The 2021 MICS drew Borno's sample from seven local government areas holding an estimated 29% of the state's population, an estimate that the report says does not account for people displaced into them [4]. The national poverty figure for 2018/19 leaves Borno out altogether [8].

Why a 99% response rate does not mean full coverage

Response rates are calculated among the households in areas that teams reached. The 2024 DHS interviewed 99% of the occupied households in its sample [9], but the 20 clusters it could not reach do not enter that rate [1]. Coverage and response are different measures, and a report needs both.

Drop or replace?

The DHS sampling manual says that where areas may have to be excluded for 'extreme inaccessibility, violence or instability', the issue needs to be considered 'at the very beginning of the survey, before the sample is drawn', and that excluded areas 'should constitute a coherent domain', because a survey with scattered exclusions 'is difficult to interpret and to use'. For households, it says 'no changes or replacements are allowed in the field' [10].

The Living Standards Survey and the GHS-Panel in 2018/19 replaced inaccessible areas with others from the same state, sector or zone, and then said plainly what the result means: the sample is 'representative of areas of Nigeria that were accessible' and 'will not reflect conditions in areas that were undergoing conflict' [6,11]. Replacement keeps the sample size. It does not bring back the people who live where teams could not go.

Elsewhere in the region the losses have been larger. Burkina Faso's 2021 DHS completed 514 of 600 clusters, and its report says results for the Sahel and Est regions must be interpreted with caution and not compared directly with other regions [12]. Mali's 2018 DHS completed 345 of 379 clusters and surveyed only the urban part of Kidal [13]. Cameroon's 2018 DHS completed 432 of 470 and attached the same caution to its South-West region [14].

What remote methods can and cannot add

Where teams cannot go, humanitarian monitoring relies on key informants. REACH's hard-to-reach assessments in north-east Nigeria interview people who have recently left, or been in contact with, an inaccessible settlement, and combine their answers at settlement level; REACH states that the findings 'are not statistically generalisable' [15]. IOM's Displacement Tracking Matrix counts displaced people through key informants at local government, ward and site level [16]. Both are valuable for knowing who is where. Neither is a sample survey, and neither yields a margin of error.

Phone interviews do not automatically reach these areas either. REACH's 2020 needs assessment in the north-east could not cover five Borno local government areas, 'due to insecurity and a lack of phone signal' [17].

Third-party monitors can go where an agency's own staff cannot. A study of their use in Afghanistan, Somalia and Syria found frequent irregularities in their data and a transfer of risk to the monitors, and concluded that third-party monitoring is 'most useful as a last resort measure or as a complement' to an agency's own checks [18].

The field team's safety

The people at risk include the field team. The Aid Worker Security Database records 31 major security incidents affecting aid workers in Nigeria in 2024 and 10 in 2025 [19]. It does not measure risk to survey teams specifically, and we found no Nigerian data that does. Guidance from fragile settings includes keeping interviews short where travel is dangerous (a 60-minute limit was advised in Somalia) and relying on locally resident interviewers whom the community trusts [20].

Our practice

These are the rules every Probatio Africa study follows. Read them as commitments you can hold us to.

- [x] We assess the security of every selected area before fieldwork, and decide any exclusion before the sample is drawn, not in the field.
- [x] We do not replace a sampled area in the field. If an area becomes unreachable, we record it, report it by state, and state the population the estimates then describe.
- [x] We report coverage and response separately: how many selected areas were reached, and the response rate within them.
- [x] Where key-informant or remote data fill a gap, we label them as indicative and keep them out of any estimate that carries a margin of error.
- [x] A team can stop work in its area without penalty if it judges the situation unsafe, and resumes only when the field lead signs off.

What the evidence cannot settle

- How much bias excluded or replaced areas introduce into national figures. None of the Nigerian survey reports we read estimates it.
- How closely key-informant estimates match household-survey estimates for the same settlements. We found no validation study.
- How great the risk to survey field staff is. There are data on aid workers, but we found none on survey teams.

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