A Proposal for an International Subud Survey

By Sahlan Diver

When I joined Subud in 1972, I thought Subud members all shared a common purpose. Well, actually, not quite. Bapak was starting to encourage the idea of enterprise, and it was obvious there were members very much in favour, and others very much against. But, apart from enterprise, I believed we all shared the same aspirations for the progress of Subud. Nowadays, if the variety of opinions on bulletin boards and in the Subud press are to be given credence, it seems less and less clear that Subud members have any common aim whatsoever, outside of doing the latihan.

A Subud member's aspirations for Subud will be determined by a number of factors including not only their interpretation of Bapak's advice and guidance, but also their personal experiences. Here again, there is wide variation, from those who have had no problem receiving in the latihan to those who haven't received much, and from those who enjoy participating in Subud events to those who have been badly treated by their fellow members.

Which leads me to the question: how much do we really know about the aims and experiences of our fellow Subud members, outside of our immediate personal ambit? More importantly, how much is known by organisations such as WSA, who make important decisions and formulate policy on our behalf?

I venture the answer: "Next to nothing." For example, I am willing to bet that the majority of members have had such bad experiences testing with their local helpers that they now mainly test on their own, or over the telephone with a friend. I don't know this, it is only surmise, but suppose I am right? This would be important news that should cause the helpers to thoroughly review the way they relate to members during testing.

The time seems ripe for a survey, wide-ranging in the topics covered, that seeks to find out how members have experienced Subud and what their aspirations for Subud are.

However, before we all rush off to carry out surveys, a few cautionary words must be added.

To be effective a survey must exhibit at least the following qualities:

- Relevance
- Legitimacy
- Methodology

Relevance I have listed first, because it is the most important. It could be said that in Subud there are many members who hold to an idea of 'harmony' that tends to suppress legitimate difference in favour of a shallow unity. One could imagine a survey designed by such people asking questions like, "How often do you test with your group helpers?" but shying away from more revealing questions like, "Do you mainly test on your own rather than with your group helpers?" or "If you no longer test with your group helpers, then please state why not." The Kinsey Reports in the 1940's caused a sensation at the time because they asked a large number of questions that had never been asked before. If you don't ask the questions, you are not going to get the answers, and you are not going to find out the truth.

Legitimacy is important because members must have sufficient confidence in a survey both to want to take part and also to be convinced the results are valid. Here an interesting dichotomy of opinion arises. When I suggested to some Subud members that unless a survey were officially sponsored by WSA it would not enjoy the general support of the membership, they immediately retorted that precisely because of being sponsored by WSA, a survey would be regarded by many with suspicion!

Methodology covers many, often very technical considerations. For example, questions must be phrased so as not to bias the result. Also we must ensure that the people questioned are a sufficiently representative sample of the membership. For example, a survey could be very conveniently carried out via an Internet questionnaire, but this might bias the results towards the views of the younger members, due to many older, less computer-literate members not taking part.

So how do we go about ensuring relevance, legitimacy and good methodology?

Relevance would be greatly aided by a pre-survey consultation and discussion process, seeking ideas for survey topics from the wider membership.

Legitimacy is probably best provided by a compromise on the issue of official sponsorship. Ideally, the survey should have the official endorsement of WSA, but it should not be managed by WSA. The team appointed to devise and carry out the survey should be seen to be fully independent.

Methodology will be ensured through a survey management team that consists of people with professional qualifications or experience in survey design.

There is no doubt that an effective survey of Subud members will be costly in terms of time, effort and perhaps also, money. Language translation is an issue we have not mentioned yet. A truly representative survey would not be restricted to English speakers! Questions, answers and results will all need multiple language translation. With such a great effort involved it would probably be years before another survey is carried out. Therefore we need to get it right the first time.

To this end, I propose an interactive "Design a Subud Survey" experiment. A web site should be set up to ask Subud members: "What would be the *most useful* multiple-choice questions posed by a Subud survey?" Members would be asked, if there was an aspect of Subud that they cared about, for which they felt information about other members' thoughts and experiences would be important, to formulate and send a multiple-choice question to cover it. The web page would display the multiple-choice questions suggested by members under topic headings such as "Helpers", "Testing", "New members" and so on. The more members who participated by making suggestions, the more likely we would be to come up with subject matter that meets the membership's real concerns and needs.

I am not proposing that a Subud survey should necessarily consist of multiple-choice questions. That decision is best left to experts. The "Design a Subud Survey" experiment would merely be a consultation process aimed at providing a rich source of material for an eventual independent, expertly-designed survey.

Here's an example multiple-choice question:

Tick one or more boxes below that best describe the testing arrangements you use when you test something very important to you:

- θ   I never test
- θ   Test on my own
- θ   Test over the telephone with a friend
- θ   Test over the telephone with a helper or helpers from another group
- θ   Test privately with a preferred helper or helpers from my own group
- θ   Test with the helpers at group latihan times
- θ   Save up tests for regional, national or international events
- θ   Save up tests for group *kejiwaan* days
- θ   Other, please state:

Before anyone writes in to say, "I can see this and that flaw in the example question," that's good; the question is only an example. The interactive process of people proposing questions and others criticising and refining them is just what will be required by the "Design a Subud Survey" experiment. If we really do only have one chance for the foreseeable future to get it right, let's together make sure we maximise the consultation process, so that the eventual survey fully covers our concerns, our needs and our hopes for the future.