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# **Population and Housing Censuses Towards Funding Stability**

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## **Towards Funding Stability for Population and Housing Censuses**

Population and Housing Censuses are essential for national policy and planning. Censuses provide a foundation for good governance. They should be held every 10 years as part of a country's strategy for sequenced information. Funding constraints are seriously affecting the 2000 census round, especially in poor countries. This paper makes the case for ensuring adequate and timely support for censuses, under the PARIS 21 umbrella, in developing and transition countries lacking sufficient technical and financial resources.

For the past three decades UNFPA, working in multiple-partnerships, has played a leadership role in supporting censuses in developing countries. Many countries across all continents would have been unable to conduct censuses without technical assistance provided by the Fund. This ranges from support for entire censuses in the poorest countries, to highly technical elements of capacity building in cartography, data collection, processing and data dissemination in other countries. In many countries these censuses have provided the only stocktaking of the population and its characteristics. Without census information, evidence-based population and development planning would not have been possible.

### **Introduction**

Population-based data and indicators are crucial for national policies and plans, for development frameworks, such as the United Nations' Common Country Assessment (CCAs) and the WB/IMF's Poverty Reduction Strategies Papers (PRSPs), for results based management, as well as for monitoring purposes in tracking progress towards international development goals. Censuses provide a unique data source for meeting a good proportion of these needs. If combined with sample surveys they can provide for most of them.

A lack of relevant and current data is seriously hampering policy-making in many countries, and the measurement of progress towards international development

goals. Countries are at differing levels of statistical development and this is reflected in the quantity and quality of data they produce. Several lack financial resources and cannot even afford basic computer-equipment and software. Limited human resource capacities, especially technical and managerial, compound institutional weaknesses.

### **Value of Censuses**

A census is the primary source of information about the number and characteristics of the population. Its strengths and distinctiveness arise from completeness of coverage; continuity of statistics from census to census, possibilities of inter-relating various characteristics of the population and households, and the details it provides about individuals in local areas and sub-groups. No other data source meets these needs. And no other data source allows for such a comprehensive gender analysis of population based indicators. A census also provides the baseline for population and related functional projections that are crucial for sectoral planning. Censuses also provides for the comparability of basic development indicators between countries, providing international definitions and classifications are used.

Data gaps are inevitable without a recent census. Surveys will be using outdated sampling frames with a likelihood that they will produce seriously biased estimates. National and sectoral planning and related decision making will be based on outdated and unreliable statistics. Even basic information on population size and age composition will be unavailable or unreliable. And the lack of basic population data can lead to serious policy and resource allocation distortions.

### **2000 Round of Censuses**

At the request of the United Nations Statistical Commission, ECOSOC, in resolution 1995/7, recommended that all Member States carry out population censuses during the period 1995-2004. Mid-way through this decade it is apparent that the 2000 round of censuses is comparing less favourably than the 1990 round - see for example the minutes of the six-monthly meetings of the Interagency Census Coordinating Committee (ICCC) for Sub-Saharan Africa attended by representatives from UNFPA, UNSD, USAID, the

US Census Bureau, CIDA (Canada), and the World Bank. Several countries have postponed their censuses thereby increasing the interval of time since the previous census to more than 10 years.

The high cost of censuses coupled with shrinking public sector budgets in many developing countries has put a serious question mark over their future. Cut-backs in funding for international development assistance which, in the past, has been a major source of funding for censuses has exacerbated the situation.

The recommendations of the 1999 United Nations' Special Session of the General Assembly on the 5 year review and appraisal of the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) called for the United Nations and donors to strengthen the capacity of developing countries, particularly the least developed countries, and those with economies in transition, to undertake censuses and surveys on a regular basis.

Most developing countries have had some experience in census-taking during the past several decades. But the long length of time between censuses often means that planning for a forthcoming census is not based on previous experiences. It also results in a turnover of experienced staff. In addition, new developments and accumulated experiences in census operations and state-of-the-art microcomputer technology must be exploited to minimise cost and maximise the utility of the information.

The United Nations Statistical Division (UNSD) has created a strong normative basis for census-taking through its manuals, handbooks and, with the US Census Bureau, census software. For example, publication of the Principles and Recommendations for Population and Housing Censuses, Revision 1, 1998, provide countries with guidance on the use of new developments and techniques, as well as accumulated knowledge and experiences of census operations - Box 1 details a successfully census organised with well-coordinated international collaboration.

## Rising Costs of Censuses

Censuses are the largest, most elaborate and costly data collection activity that Statistical Offices undertake - few countries conduct a census more frequently than once every 10 years. In many countries it covers around 10-15 per cent of the budget of Statistical Offices over an entire decade

### **Box 1 Ingredients of Cambodia's Successful 1998 Population Census**

In 1998 Cambodia held its first population census since 1962. Despite the difficult political conditions prevailing at that time, the relatively weak state of communications, infrastructure and the need to mobilise and train a field force of some 25,000 enumerators and 8,000 supervisors from a low-skill base, the census was a remarkable success. Key contributing factors were:

- Strong commitment at all levels of government;
- Strong collaboration and coordination between the government, donors and United Nations organisations, led by UNFPA in partnership with UNSD, in the provision of technical, financial and logistical support;
- A well targeted census advocacy campaign that increased awareness and gained widespread support for the census at all leadership levels, and
- Dissemination of positive messages about the census to the Cambodian people through mass media campaigns.

The census results provide important population, social and economic data for the preparation of the national development plan and serve as a baseline for monitoring the international development goals. The census experience also helped to build capacity of the national census and statistical office in, *inter alia*, technical and managerial skills and with the provision of data processing equipment.

Rising costs of censuses, coupled with a lack of detailed data about census costs, led the United Nations in its Recommendation for Population and Housing Censuses, to emphasise the need for data on the cost of each census activity. Summary cost indicators, such as total census cost *per capita*, are subject to limitations which make it difficult to say that one census is more or less expensive than another. They do not take account of variations in the quality and quantity of census statistics. Nor do they tell about timeliness of data release. And they fail to account for differences in census methods, organisation or funding.

Censuses need to be more cost-effective. But they will remain costly despite the use of modern relatively low-cost computer technology. There is a fine balance between keeping census costs to a minimum and preserving the unique advantages of a census - as a complete stocktaking of the size and characteristics of a country's population. UNFPA has found that unless sufficient resources are available at each stage of the census the quality of the entire census can be jeopardized. Three activities take-up the bulk of census operation costs.

First, census maps. Accurate maps provide the basis for a variety of census operations, including setting enumerator assignments, ensuring completeness of coverage, estimating travel time and costs, and establishing field offices. The use of GIS/GPS, with ground-truthing, can lead to significant cost savings in the determination of enumeration areas.

Second, population enumeration. This is the most expensive census operation. Each individual, and living quarter, in a country must be enumerated within a short period of time. Enumeration costs depend upon factors such as method of enumeration; the source of supply of enumerators and the number of questions asked in the census questionnaire.

Third, data capture, processing, analysis, and dissemination. Microcomputers are now used in practically every phase of the census. Continued advances in computer systems technology have greatly increased the speed and reliability in producing and disseminating tabulations, making automation the standard method of processing. However, modern information technology and the skills to handle it are frequently not available in developing countries. Analysis of census data, including evaluation of its quality, is crucial and often more time consuming than allowed for in census plans.

### **Cost Saving Strategies**

Sampling can reduce census enumeration and processing costs, and improve the quality of information. Sampling at enumeration reduces field, training and processing costs in

the main census, and enhances data quality of the additional information collected from a sub-sample of households. However, considerable care needs to be taken in sample selection and implementation to avoid biases in the results.

The time is ripe to consider cost-saving strategies beyond census sampling. Coordinating international census data requirements. Sharing of experiences between countries. Sharing of selected census activities among groups of neighbouring countries with similar data needs. This might include common census year, absolute minimum core questionnaires, sharing of questionnaires, manuals, training, data processing, analysis and dissemination activities. UNFPA has supported the adoption of these strategies for countries in the Pacific region, Central Asian countries, and parts of Africa since 1999 through the Southern Africa Development Community (SADC). Its success requires strong political commitment from countries. It also requires considerable technical support from the international donor community. UNFPA in collaboration with other partners, has supported a number of workshops to promote this strategy.

### **International Support for Censuses**

Technical co-operation and assistance from multi-lateral agencies, led by UNFPA, and from bilateral donors, have played a major role in the success of past censuses. Given the limited budgets available to many Statistical Offices and their limited capacity, there is a continuing need for such cooperation and assistance, particularly in the poorest countries in sub-Saharan Africa. New sources of funding will need to be tapped, including greater involvement of the private sector. Yet both from a supply and demand perspective, census data are largely a public good. So for the foreseeable future international technical, and to a limited extent financial, assistance for census-taking will be required to complement national inputs.

For the past three decades UNFPA, often in partnership with UNSD, has played a leadership role in supporting censuses in developing and transition countries. The Fund has also been prominent in helping to mobilise support for censuses in post-conflict situations where previous census data may no longer be relevant – as for example in

Kosovo. Many countries would have been unable to conduct censuses without such assistance. However, with competing demands on its limited resources coupled with a decline in core income over the past 5 years, supporting countries census-taking activities has become ever-more difficult. The Fund's policy has been to try to limit support to countries taking their first or second census. But this is insufficient in many developing and transition countries where there is lack of resources and capacity. A particular problem facing transition countries is the lack of familiarity with international standards. UNFPA continues to play a pivotal role in helping mobilise resources for censuses in these countries, in conjunction with multiple donors and technical assistance organizations, such as the European Union, USAID, the World Bank and others.

Sometimes governments tend to allocate unrealistic amounts for censuses with the expectation that international assistance will provide the balance. Many countries organise donors' meetings for this purpose, and the outcome is not always successful. Meanwhile the census time-schedule continues to move forward. Experience shows that governments and donor agencies often allocate funds just prior to the actual enumeration. This can lead to compromises in the decision making process and impact on the quality of census operations. Allocations of the necessary resources for censuses should be made well in advance of the census moment.

Technical co-operation and assistance from international agencies and the donor community have played a major role in the success of past censuses. There will be a continuing need by many countries, particularly the poorest countries, for such assistance in future censuses. Pooling of international agency and donor resources could be a cost-effective strategy for meeting the diverse demands expected in these censuses.

### **A Way Forward**

It is proposed to establish a Working Group of interested parties, under the PARIS 21 umbrella, to consider what to do to improve the funding and management of censuses. It could:

- Assess problems that have arisen in the current census round, from the perspectives of developing countries and donors, and
- Research into census costs, what practical measures could be taken to reduce costs, and how to maximise the timely dissemination and use of census results;

Initially the Working Group could meet and discuss key issues virtually. A finalisation meeting could then be held to agree a full-fledged proposal to determine a suitable modality to:

- Assist countries in advocating the need for conducting regular censuses and securing the necessary funding. Advocacy papers could focus on countries' needs for census data in relation to national planning, CCAs/UNDAFs and PRSPs/CDFs; and donors' needs to monitor global conference goals;
- Provide technical assistance in areas such as census management, cartography and sampling techniques, and if required, financial resources for conducting censuses;
- Provide data processing and other essential equipment for censuses;
- Support regional workshops and initiatives aimed at enhancing national capacities in census-taking, and meet *ad hoc* technical assistance needs for census activities.

UNFPA would be pleased to moderate such a Working Group.

**Annex Table 1 Population Censuses Held and Planned by African and Asian Countries in the 1990 and 2000 Rounds**

Country	1990 Census Round 1985-94	2000 Census Round 1995-04	Comments
<i>Africa</i>			
Angola		2002	
Benin	02/92	02/02	
Botswana	08/91	08/01	
Bukina Faso	12/85	12/96	
Burundi	08/90	08/00	Postponed
Cameroon	04/87	1997	Postponed to 2001
Cape Verde	06/90	2000	
Central African Rep.	12/88	01/00	
Chad	04/93	2003	
Comoros	09/91	2001	
Congo	11/94		
Cote d'Ivoire	03/88	11/98	
DR of Congo	na	2003	
Equatorial Guinea	07/94	2004	
Eritrea	na	12/01	Postponed from 03/99
Ethiopia	09/94	09/04	
Gabon	07/93	07/03	
Gambia	04/93	04/03	
Ghana		03/00	
Guinea	12/96		
Guinea Bissau	12/91	12/00	
Kenya	08/89	08/99	Held on schedule
Lesotho	04/86	04/96	
Liberia		2002	
Madagascar	08/93	2003	
Malawi	09/87	09/98	
Mali	04/87	04/99	
Mauritania	04/88	12/99	Postponed 10/00 ?
Mauritius	07/90	2000	
Mozambique		08/97	
Namibia	10/91	10/01	
Niger	05/88	05/99	Postponed 11/00 ?
Nigeria	11/91	2001	
Rwanda	08/91	2001	Postponed
Saint Helena	02/87	1997	
SaoTome & Principe	08/91	08/01	
Senegal	05/88	12/99	Postponed 04/00 ?
Seychelles	08/87	1997	Postponed
Sierra Leone	12/85	1996	Postponed /01 ?
South Africa	03/91	2001	
Swaziland	08/86	05/97	
Togo	11/93	11/98	
Tanzania	08/88	1999	Postponed 2002 ?
Uganda	01/91	08/00	
Zambia	08/90	08/00	
Zimbabwe	08/92	08/02	

**Annex Table 1 (continued)**

Country	1990 Census Round 1985-94	2000 Census Round 1995-04	Comments on prospects and problems
<i>Asia</i>			
Afghanistan			
Azerbaijan	na	2/99	
Bangladesh	03/91	2001	
Bhutan			
Brunei	08/91	08/01	
Cambodia	Not held	03/98	
China	07/90	2000	
Honk Kong (China)	03/91	03/01	
East Timor	10/90	2000	
India	03/91	03/01	
Indonesia	10/90	2000	
Iran	09/86	09/96	
Iraq	10/87	10/97	
Kazakhstan	na	2/99	
DR of Korea	12/93		
R of Korea	11/90	11/00	
Kyrgystan	na	3/99	
Lao	03/85	03/95	
Macau (China)	08/91	2001	
Malaysia	08/91	2001	
Maldives	03/85	03/00	
Mongolia	01/89	01/00	One year delay because of funding
Myanmar	04/94		
Nepal	06/91	2001	
Pakistan	03/98		'91 census postponed to '98
Philippines	05/90	2000	
Singapore	06/90	2000	
Sri Lanka	/91	03/01	
Tajikstan	na	01/00	
Thailand	04/90	2000	
Turkmenistan	na	1/04	
Uzbekistan	na	2001	Postponed
Viet Nam	04/89	1999	