

**Symposium on Global Review of 2000 Round of  
Population and Housing Censuses:  
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**Population and Housing Censuses  
A Funding Crisis?\***  
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# **Population and Housing Censuses A Funding Crisis?**

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## **Population and Housing Censuses: A Funding Crisis?**

For more than three decades UNFPA, working in multiple-partnerships, has played a leadership role in supporting population and housing censuses in developing and transition 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, particularly in countries conducting a first modern census, to highly technical elements of census capacity building in other countries. In many countries, 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.

Population censuses are essential for policy and planning purposes. Censuses provide the foundation for good governance and for measuring development progress. They should be held every 10 years as part of a country's strategy for sequenced and integrated information. Funding constraints have seriously affected the 2000 census round, especially in least developed countries: several countries have postponed censuses or are experiencing funding shortages.

A lack of data is seriously hampering policy-making and planning across a broad range of sectors in many countries, and the measurement of progress towards national and international development goals. Developing countries are at differing levels of statistical capability 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.

The high and growing 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. This paper makes

the case for ensuring adequate and timely support for censuses in developing and transition countries lacking sufficient technical and financial resources, and makes proposals for helping to avert a funding crisis in the next round of censuses.

### **Value of Censuses**

Population-based data and indicators are crucial for national and sub-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 tracking progress towards the Millennium 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 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 population 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 can provide for the comparability of basic development indicators between countries, provided that, of course, 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. Administrative boundaries will be incorrectly drawn. 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 will lead to serious policy and resource allocation distortions.

Population censuses based on household registers are viable for countries with such registers, as in some European countries for example. But the costs of establishing and maintaining household registers are such that they preclude the use of this option in developing countries for the foreseeable future.

### **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. Beyond mid-way through this period, it is apparent that the 2000 round of censuses is comparing less favourably than the 1990 round.

Several countries, especially in sub-Saharan Africa, have postponed their censuses thereby increasing the interval of time since the previous census to more than 10 years (Box 2). Other countries have secured funding at a very late stage in their census preparations thereby forcing compromises in decision making, while others are experiencing funding gaps that are slowing post-enumeration activities and curtailing plans for the dissemination of census results. Funding delays and uncertainty almost inevitably lead to delays in data processing and affects the range and quality of census results.

#### **Box 1 Sub-Saharan African Countries: Censuses with Intervals Exceeding 10 years**

##### ***Census interval 11 to 12 years (actual or expected)***

Burkina Faso; Ghana, Malawi, Mali, Nigeria, Rwanda and Uganda

##### ***Census interval 13 + years (actual or expected)***

Angola, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Mauritania, Niger, Senegal, Sierra Leone and Tanzania

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.

The international community recognises that many developing countries lack the financial and human resource capacity to conduct censuses without at least some technical assistance. Even the countries with economies in transition face constraints in carrying out censuses due for example to collapses in institutional infrastructures and an inability to give priority to censuses amid competing demands on resources. Thus 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. But with rising costs of censuses there appears to be some donor fatigue in meeting gaps in census funding.

Almost all 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. Yet 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 helped create 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 2 outlines a

successfully organised census with well-coordinated international collaboration led by UNFPA.

### **Box 2 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 mobilize 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 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 and Cost Saving Strategies**

Censuses are the largest, most elaborate and costly data collection activity that Statistical Offices undertake, and costs are rising - in many countries a census covers around 10-15 per cent of the budget of Statistical Offices over an entire decade. One factor contributing to the increase in census costs in developing countries is relatively high population growth. In many, annual population growth exceeds 2 per cent per annum implying an increase in population size of at least one third over a normal 10 year census period. Another is that labour-saving and time-reducing technology comes with a hefty price tag. Even in industrialised countries, *per capita* census costs are rising, despite the use of mail-out and mail-back questionnaires, sophisticated computer data processing technology and having relatively small annual population growth. For example, the year

2000 US population census is estimated to have cost \$4.5 billion, or \$16 per head, compared with a figure of around \$10 per head in 1990.<sup>1</sup>

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 emphasize the need for countries to keep account of 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, quantity and timeliness of census results.

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. 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 tend to 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, with ground-truthing, can lead to significant cost savings in the determination of enumeration areas. Further, the continuous and multiple use of maps by and across different government departments can help spread cartographic costs.

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. Sampling can reduce census enumeration and processing costs, and

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<sup>1</sup> See, Kent *et al.*, (2001). First Glimpses from the 2000 U.S. Census, *Population Bulletin*, vol. 56, no. 2.

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.

Third, data capture, processing, analysis, and dissemination. Continued advances in computer systems technology, such as electronic scanning of marks and characters have greatly increased the speed and reliability in producing and disseminating tabulations, making automation the standard method of processing. However, modern high-level data processing technology, and the skills to handle it, are frequently in short supply in developing countries. And it is by no means self-evident that in labour surplus situations that such technology should necessarily be chosen to replace personal computers. Although avoiding human transcription errors, such as data mis-reading or mis-punching, the technology may have limited application in the years following a census. By contrast, a large number of personal computers and related equipment brought to facilitate census data processing may help permanently upgrade institutional capacity.

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 Foundations and 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 more than three decades UNFPA has played a leadership role in supporting census programmes in developing and transition countries. The Fund has also been prominent in helping to mobilize 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 reductions 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 mobilize resources for censuses in most developing countries, in conjunction with multiple partnerships, donors and technical assistance organizations, such as the PARIS 21, European Union, USAID, the World Bank and others. The Fund also plays a key role in 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.

Donors are conscious of the critical need for census data for many purposes and of the consequences of not having such data.<sup>2</sup> Yet there is a sometimes donor fatigue with idea of having to support yet another census, particularly when the donor support has been given to a particular country for several previous censuses. The amounts requested from donors are relatively large in relation to their budgets for particular countries. Often requests to donors for support for their censuses are received late and the budget is overly ambitious. Developing countries need the requisite skills to negotiate with, and coordinate, a large number of donors. They also need to make an early start in trying to bridge the budget gap between what resources are available from the government in relation to estimated census costs.

There is a need to redefine negotiating positions whereby (i) governments start too high; (ii) donors are reluctant to commit before the size of the government commitment is known; (each side waits for each other, and (iii) donors are reluctant to commit funds for necessary pre-enumeration preparatory work for fear it will be wasted. Moreover, donor guidelines on what they are prepared to fund can give rise to costing distortions and inefficiencies. Thus some donors will support the purchase of expensive technology but not meet local costs of a census.

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.

## **Conclusion**

Censuses will continue to be a unique source of data for many planning purposes. In order to avert a funding crisis and ensure their future stability there is a need to systematically:

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<sup>2</sup> UNFPA (2000). *Report of the Joint Interagency Coordinating Committee on Censuses for sub-Saharan Africa and PARIS 21 Task Force Meetings*. Eurostat, Luxembourg, 26-27 October 2000.

- Assess funding problems that have arisen in the current census round, from the perspectives of developing countries and donors;
- Research into census costs and operational methods to determine what practical measures can be taken to reduce costs, as well as how to maximise the timely dissemination and use of census results;
- Assist countries in advocating the need for conducting regular censuses and securing the necessary funding within countries, and across the donor community. Much more needs to be done by line ministries to support the efforts of national statistical offices in making the case to finance ministries for supporting national censuses.
- Similarly, international agencies who use national census data for a variety of purposes could help support the case of UNFPA to convince bilateral and multilateral donors to provide support for censuses.

UNFPA, working in partnerships with others and building on comparative advantages, will continue to play a leadership role in support of these aims.