

Conducting Censuses under Challenging Situations, Crisis and post Conflict

Fernández-Castilla, Rogelio E.

Universidad Nacional de Catamarca (Arg.), Facultad de Ciencias Económicas y Administración, Instituto de Estadística y Demografía

Mailing Address: Sarmiento 869, T.Este, Apt 7-D

Sn. Fdo. Del V. de Catamarca (4700), Prov. de Catamarca, Republica Argentina

E-mail: rfernandez.castilla@gmail.com

Introduction

A population census is a largely standardized statistical operation, which is carried out in most countries of the world. In its essence, censuses everywhere follow the standards set in the United Nations Principles and Recommendations for Population and Housing Census (United Nations, 2008). Within those standards, the modalities of data collection have evolved to take advantages of new technologies and to adjust to the specific situations of each country. In its traditional format, each individual and its characteristics are registered by completing the census enumeration forms. In most developing countries the forms are filled in by census enumerators who visit each household and interview the residents to collect these data. In some countries (usually with a relatively more advanced stage of statistical development) census questionnaires are delivered and collected by census enumerators, but the forms are filled directly by the respondents. Censuses are increasingly delivered or collected by mail or utilizing Internet, to reduce logistics and costs where country conditions allow it. These adjustments to reduce costs and take advantage of technology and faster communications are becoming more prevalent.

Yet, in a number of countries –usually less developed countries- the incidence of social and political conflicts or crisis of different nature, demand other types of adaptations in census taking exercises. Such adaptations aim to: i) ensure that data collection is still feasible under very difficult conditions; ii) produce information that is relevant to a society facing great sufferings and hardships; iii) obtain data that are reliable and available to decision makers within a reasonable timeframe to guide humanitarian, relief and recovery interventions; iv) build into census strategies, management and planning some mechanisms that enhance credibility and secure acceptance of census results in a social and political environment where controversy can seriously damage proper acceptance and use of the statistical data. The number of countries and people under these conditions is not negligible. In a recent interview reported by Associated Press (July 20, 2011), Valerie Amos, the U.N.'s top humanitarian and emergency relief official, declared that \$7.9 billion was needed this year (2011) by the U.N. and hundreds of other aid organizations to help those suffering from disasters, drought and violence in 31 nations.

This paper attempts to review the different challenges facing census operations in situations of post crisis and post conflict, drawing from the experience of operations supported by the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) in different countries. It analyses diverse options available to census planners in their efforts to ensure adequate strategies to respond to such challenges.

Background

Collecting data on the population and its characteristics is an essential public service. The value of public statistics takes on greater relevance when they constitute the basis to guide interventions to mitigate the consequences of conflict and humanitarian crisis. These conditions are often associated with great upheavals, disrupting and destroying life as well as social and economic infrastructure, and causing massive population displacements. Population upheavals associated with crisis and conflict tend to quickly render data obsolete. At the same time these events make the situation on the ground more complex and difficult for executing data collection activities. At the same time, the urgency of humanitarian situations requires timely information to guide interventions and make the use of scarce resources more efficient. In situations of post crisis and post conflict, every part of the territory presents characteristics that are unique and require differential humanitarian relief interventions. Emergency responses require accurate, updated and disaggregated data by small areas, gender, social groups and local administrative districts. This is so because populations are affected in a different manner according to geographic location, gender, ethnic, social and other individual or group characteristics. Specially tailored statistical exercises targeting affected groups or areas can be the best strategies in some situations, particularly where disasters had hit only specific spaces. Yet, population and housing censuses are the only data collection instrument which can provide information on a national scale. Its main strength arises from the completeness of coverage and the detail it provides for local areas and subgroups. When information is required for the whole national population and for small areas, the census becomes the only option. Regarding natural disasters, geo-referenced data that include altitude, distance from water courses and other relevant information associated with the causes and nature of disasters would lead to more efficient response planning to benefit affected populations. Geographic data bases on areas and affected groups will facilitate assessments of impacts and provide the basis to improve risk assessment, prevention and preparedness.

The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) has participated in enumeration studies during and after crises, in over 40 countries affected by situations of crisis in recent years. These studies include rapid population estimates, specific surveys on issues related to the specific mandate of UNFPA, as well as more extensive household surveys and censuses (IDP enumeration in Congo-Brazzaville and the censuses of Rwanda, Mozambique, Sudan, Burundi, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Central African Republic, Congo, Afghanistan and East Timor censuses for instance) (UNFPA, June 2010). As mentioned above, the situation on the field may require different data collection methods, although this paper will only focus on national population censuses.

Special Challenges and Strategy Responses in Census Following Crisis or Conflicts

The census operation is a very demanding exercise for any country. For developing countries in general it becomes a huge challenge, and this is further heightened under the conditions that usually emerge after crisis and conflict. Additional burdens emanates from a host of sources: **a)** the destruction of infrastructure and communications makes operations and logistics very difficult; **b)** political conditions and conflict frequently have an impact on human resources, depleting Statistical Offices of experienced staff; **c)**

sometimes natural disasters exert a heavy toll on human lives at the same time as infrastructure -as in the recent earthquake in Haiti- heavily eroding the statistical capacities of the country; **d)** after conflicts the society is frequently divided along political, ethnic, regional or other lines; in such situations statistical data may assume political connotations: it may become the basis for power sharing, distribution of seats in parliament or distribution of resources; when this happens conducting a good census is only part of the task, convincing parties that the results are accurate may become a more complex undertaking; **e)** when all previous matters had been solved, the census results are expected to be available within very tight time schedules for decision making, raising additional demands on data processing and dissemination.

Some of those challenges have to be tackled through conventional census strategies, by putting special care and perhaps additional efforts and more resources into planning and executing activities that otherwise are standard features in every census. There are other issues that would require nontraditional strategies and targeted approaches. The paper will structure the presentation and discussions organizing the issues into the four categories of strategy adaptation requirements, listed in the Introduction section:

- i.-** ensure that data collection is still feasible under very difficult conditions;
- ii.-** produce information that is relevant to a society facing great sufferings and hardships;
- iii.-** obtain data that is reliable and available to decision makers within a reasonable timeframe to guide humanitarian, relief and recovery interventions;
- iv.-** build into census strategy, management and planning, some mechanisms that enhance credibility and secure acceptance of census results in a social and political environment where controversy can seriously damage the legitimacy, acceptance and utilization of the statistical data.

i.- Ensure that data collection is still feasible under very difficult conditions:

Facing the complex situations created by crisis and conflict, all census stakeholders, including Statistical Offices, Governments, UN organizations and development partners must decide whether under such conditions a census is still feasible. The ensuing feasibility study and risk analysis should incorporate all the elements: political, humanitarian, technical, logistical and financial. Reaching a consensus that the expected benefits from the census outweighs the risks and financial costs, the next step is adequate planning and preparation to meet the challenges.

Figure1: Images from Census Operations in Liberia, the 2008 National Population and Housing Census



Photographs from the presentation made by Dr. T. Edward Liberty, Director General LISGIS, at the 41st Session of the UN Statistical Commission, New York, Side Event on 25th Feb., 2010

Destruction of roads and other infrastructure are some of the features observed in situations of crisis and conflict. Weak or inadequate infrastructure impacts on longer periods to complete the cartography and increase costs, requiring additional resources to complete the work within a given timeframe. A proper evaluation of these conditions is essential, and heightened demands and costs must be properly factored into budgets, work plans and the calendars. In addition to infrastructure, the issue of human resources must receive special attention. The conditions which are determinants of conflict situations have sensible impact on the human resources of any society.

In the case of Iraq for example, highly trained and very competent professional personnel were available at COSIT at the time of planning the 2010 census. But the upheavals of previous years had deprived the census agency of personnel with hands-on experience from previous censuses exercises. However, the census in Iraq enjoyed high political and popular support. This support facilitated adequate budget allocations and allowed the Government and UNFPA to work together, incorporating institutional South-South cooperation from other countries as well as the set-up of an International Technical Advisory Board for Iraq Census (ITAB-IC). These mechanisms and the assignment of a senior technical adviser with relevant experience on census under difficult conditions strengthened COSIT and ensured that all census operations, technical documents, planning design and other tools were carefully assessed, bringing them in line with international quality standards. In other cases, like Haiti, international cooperation provided additional support to strengthen national capacities for data collection to supply relevant data for relief and rehabilitation.

A careful assessment of the national context, available human resources and prevailing conditions, then factoring all these into adequate preparations, technical support, human resource strengthening and careful planning and budget support can solve the constraints and enable Statistical Offices to conduct successful censuses even under very difficult conditions.

ii.- Produce information that is relevant to a society facing great sufferings and hardships:

To a large extent issues of relevance can be addressed by adhering to the UN principles and recommendations. These have been developed through an exhaustive process of consultation, incorporating the contributions of the most experienced professionals from around the world and legitimized through adoption by the UN Statistical Commission. However, in situations of post conflict or humanitarian crisis, particular topics take on special relevance for evaluating patterns of vulnerability and special needs of the population. Such could be the case of internally displaced persons, which may require additional questions to the usual ones on internal migration, to more precisely assess the timing of movements, place of origin, and/or the characteristics of individuals affected by those movements; gender based violence could have been a feature of the conflict, in which case some specific questions may be of value for programs to support the victims or designing programs to empower women to play a more prominent role on peace building and peace keeping as well as enhancing gender equality.

In a context of natural disasters, additional efforts to strengthen data for geographic information systems (GIS), including valuable geographic references to guide human settlements for better protection and prevention deserve special attention. GIS are of enormous value to relief and rehabilitation programs from natural disasters. In any case, wide consultations including legitimate stakeholders must be part of the

preparations and the design of the census plan. The specific features of the post crisis and post conflict situation must guide design and inclusion of special questions in order to enhance the relevance of statistical data to decision makers and planners. Enhancing the value of data for humanitarian actions, require a proper definition of target groups and their special needs. Characteristics like gender, age, illness, disabilities are relevant for defining vulnerability patterns, and the capacity of individuals or groups to adapt and survive in crisis situations. Knowing these patterns would help in designing interventions to enhance survival chances, wellbeing and security for those groups.

iii.- Obtain data that are reliable and available to decision makers within a reasonable timeframe to guide humanitarian, relief and recovery interventions:

Countries emerging from crisis and conflicts most often have weakened institutions and outdated systems and administrative structures. No investment is usually made on statistical capacity development during conflict, while mass displacements of people quickly render obsolete any previously available data. Existing data bases are sometimes destroyed during conflict. In Liberia for example, the only available data previous to the successful 2008 census operation was from the 1976 census. A census had been carried out in 1984, but the data was never fully processed, analyzed and published, and it was lost during the 14 years of civil crisis and war (Liberty, 19-26 February, 2010). Under these critical circumstances the relevance of statistics and its value for policy making and program design become evident. Statistical institutions have a unique opportunity to place institution building and capacity development at the center of investment priorities for the government. Simultaneously, statistical institutions assume a great responsibility. Their work becomes highly visible and expectations would also be high, as well as the challenges they have to meet. Specific demands geared to identify target groups for relief and rehabilitation may push questionnaire design toward difficult and sensitive survey content, with potentially poor response rates. In parallel, complex nontraditional census questions increase the difficulties of data processing, consistency checks and editing, delaying availability of results for decision making. Negotiations and tradeoffs with stakeholders and partners can be difficult, but it is critical that a balanced approach between additional survey contents, viability for quality data collection and timely availability of results be achieved.

Sometimes the census can be part of agreements to solve conflicts, and census data explicitly becomes the basis for power sharing arrangements aimed to solve conflicts. In Sudan, the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) signed by Government of Sudan and the Sudanese People's Liberation Movement (SPLM) in 2005 articulated a plan for conducting a comprehensive population census (Osman, May, 2010). While these situations ensure high political support and resource allocation, they risk over politicizing statistical activities and could make acceptance of final results by some parties more difficult. Simultaneously, an impasse on the acceptance of results can delay official declaration of census results and release of census data, which would jeopardize its positive contribution to relief and rehabilitation efforts. All these elements have to be carefully analyzed and factored into a risk assessment exercise. The census management has to solve potential conflicts between relevant questionnaire content and quality and timely availability of data, and make decisions. Best accuracy might require a longer data collection period to follow up non-respondents. What is the limit in time delays to improve data, so that users and decision makers are informed to make evidence based policy and program decisions? An in-depth risk analysis would

help to make judgments on the value added of specific questions or other controversial census decisions, providing better basis to solve trade-offs controversies. Risk analysis involves a systematic process integrating events, the probability of its occurrence and professional judgment on the consequences of such probable events. The risk assessment may constitute a qualitative exercise, involving opinion and judgments of experts, or a more elaborate exercise supported by probability theory models. In developing countries, under the time constraints and contexts where these census have to be conducted, the decision making process has to be simplified, but careful analysis should not be avoided.

Another strategy that has to be incorporated in order to enhance the value and relevance of census data for opportune and timely decision making is to segment and stratify the products the census can provide. The release of total population by ethnic groups or regions may touch sensitive controversial issues, and this may require a careful process of advocacy and consensus building. That category of information may follow a specific strategy and intricate process before it can be released. In the mean time, partial information, which would not condition overarching decisions on fundamental political issues, can be labeled as “preliminary partial data”, which can be packaged and delivered to serve the identification of most vulnerable groups, its characteristics and location. Advancing this category of information “on a preliminary basis”, would not raise objections and will contribute to better targeting life saving interventions and programs geared to reduce hardships and human suffering in the most affected areas. A more effective segmentation of these critical data can be achieved if good geographic information systems have been developed on the basis of digital files from good quality census mapping and socio-demographic information collected in the survey.

iv.- Building into census strategy some mechanisms aimed to enhance credibility and acceptance of census results:

As indicated elsewhere in the paper, recommendations on census taking may be incorporated in agreements for conflict solving and power sharing. While this in itself is recognition of the value of statistical activities, it will contribute to shaping an environment where it would be more difficult to provide statistical services in the usual manner. It may create pressures aiming to influence census operations in each of the implementation phases (planning, mapping, monitoring, staff recruitment, quality control, results evaluation, dissemination, data utilization and so on). Even when the census is not explicitly part of the mechanisms for peace negotiation and power sharing, the timing of the census may follow some destabilizing events like ethnic/religious tensions, security problems, or others, raising concerns about the way the census results might be used, the political consequences of new census data, or potential public perceptions and reactions to some of the census questions. All these could potentially damage the veracity of reporting, affecting data quality. For example, the last census in Kenya came after ethnic confrontations of serious consequences took place, following the elections. This situation had several implications on different phases of the census preparation. The emergence of a new coalition and rules for governance introduced disagreements between the National Bureau of Statistic (KNBS) and the Ministry of Finance on the authority to chair fund-raising exercises, delaying the process. The tense situation in some areas where ethnic clashes had occurred conditioned decisions on the creation of new districts. To avoid perceptions that new districts could be a maneuver for political gains, a strategic decision was taken whereby the KNBS would work with existing districts, with no changes. In the event that for good reasons new districts had to be set up and announced officially, a reconstruction would be done at a later stage, redistributing the enumerated population after the census. Also, the census included questions on ethnicity; in that context some development partners felt it was too sensitive, and asked the question to be removed. The Government

wanted to maintain them, arguing that the question has always been included in previous censuses and there was no indication from the pilot survey that the question was sensitive or problematic. Arguments from both sides had a point. On the one side, the real issue was not whether the questions had been included in previous census or not, but whether inclusion in the present context was justified. Certainly inclusion could be justified if the coalition had the commitment to address inequalities and marginalized groups grievances, which were at the roots of the conflict, preventing further confrontations. In such case ethnicity data would be important to identify vulnerable groups within each ethnics, their location and characteristics, for more efficient targeting of social programs. On the other hand, it is possible as well to minimize the risks associated with the inclusion of questions on ethnicity, if national, local and community leaders having legitimacy within each of the ethnic groups make public calls to their constituencies, advocating for full participation in the census, and encouraging the population to provide accurate and complete information for the census.

Vigorous publicity and communication campaigns during the months preceding the census is always of critical importance. In sensitive contexts like that in Kenya, this is even more important, being absolutely essential that leaders from all groups should be seen publicly supporting the census and advocating for full and accurate information to be provided. This minimizes any suspicions from one party that the other one could misuse or unduly benefit from census information. Participation of leaders from both sides legitimizes the whole census exercise. If such campaigns are well organized and leaders are visibly engaging in a common objective, the census can become a positive force for confidence building and restoring consensus on essential state policy issues, marginalizing petty party politics.

The Kenyan Government also adopted a decision to engage national as well as international census monitors, to provide independent, unbiased assessments on the reliability of the census process and its ability to produce accurate results. This is an approach which had been utilized in many censuses, particularly catering to sensitive scenarios and suspicions that census results could be biased or manipulated to benefit some sectors. "Census monitors" is not a regular mechanism utilized for population census. The idea derives from the concept of international monitoring of elections, which has been utilized for a long time to verify and legitimize results of national elections. Monitors are not expected to play an oversight technical or management role. They should not interfere with the census operations. They observe whether the interviews are conducted in an unbiased and objective way, see that no areas or households are omitted or duplicated, and they would provide reports on their observations, guaranteeing a fair and transparent operation. The presence of observers is expected to contribute to the credibility and acceptance of the census results from all parties. Being effectively used in this way, it becomes an excellent contribution to enhance the legitimacy and acceptance of census. In some cases development partners have contributed financial resources and even provided personnel to implement these international census monitoring operations. Sudan established an International Monitoring and Observatory Commission (MoC); this commission played a dual role: on the one hand it was established as a quality assurance and quality control mechanism; on the other hand, and perhaps in non-explicit manner, this commission played a relevant role in gaining legitimacy and credibility for the operation. The endorsement of census operations by international observers generates confidence on the work of national technical teams. This reduces the risk that political divergences may lead to dismissing uncomfortable census results as just "non sense statistics". Frequently politicians genuinely feel they know better what the realities of their constituencies are, and feel at easy rejecting statistical results if these show otherwise.

Similarly, strict adherence to internationally recognized good practices and standards play an important role in trust-building. Census officers are committed to professional scientific approaches and emphasize respect to international standards. However, national professionals may not have by themselves the necessary weight to prevent or

counter politically motivated influences and the difficulties they may originate. In addition to international census observers, many countries have decided to institute international committees to monitor, verify and certify adherence to recognized good practices and international standards. In the case of Iraq, COSIT with support from UNFPA established an International Technical Advisory Board for the Iraq Census (ITAB-IC).

Mechanisms like the International Monitoring and Observatory Commission and International Technical Advisory Board, play complementary roles. In the monitoring and observatory roles, the census observers play more of a field monitoring and operations observation role. The Technical Advisory Board plays a cabinet role, focusing on desk review of documents and plans. In some countries both mechanisms were adopted, like Sudan and Bosnia-Herzegovina. In both countries the Technical Advisory role was discharged by **Technical Working Groups (TWG)** integrated by neutral and reliable partners in addition to the national agencies responsible for executing census operations (headed by National Statistical Institutes or equivalent). Those external partners can be representatives of donor agencies and/or other development partners that have a legitimate stake on census operations and results. The TWG becomes the core committee of the census and in addition there will be other committees with supporting technical functions. Major tasks of the TWG center on critical elements that ensure quality planning and execution, such as reviewing plans, budgets and the timetable for the population census operations, reviewing and finalizing census technical documents and tools (concepts and definitions, questionnaires, manuals, logistics, the training plan, methodology, etc). The functions of observation and monitoring have been discussed above. In some countries the security situation can make it difficult or too risky for teams of international observers to move around the country observing field operations. In the case of Iraq and Afghanistan the countries opted to establish only an international advisory board, with functions related to desk reviews for quality assessments, with no field monitoring.

In all cases the role of these technical bodies can make a substantive contribution to the success of census operations, even if they cannot make on-the-ground assessments. In the case of Iraq, the ITAB-IC constituted a good a mechanism for International Quality Assurance. Key functions of ITAB-IC included assessing and providing feedback on all census instruments and methodologies, advice on strengthening the monitoring and evaluation and serving as an early warning system that detects technical issues which may lead to impaired quality and/or delays in implementation. ITAB-IC held meetings in Amman in January 2009, July 2009, December 2009, and July 2010. The contribution of ITAB-IC was highly appreciated by the Government, which recognized the relevant value added provided by ITAB-IC.

Conclusions

Crisis and conflicts increase the importance of quality data for relief and rehabilitation as well as preparing a better basis to resume development efforts. The challenges and difficulties to produce good statistics can be daunting. Material difficulties are frequently compounded with conflicting political interests. Nevertheless, the key to success is always emphasizing quality control and quality assurance, and a good understanding of the social and political environment. Adequate risk assessment and mitigation must guide planning and operations. Similarly, innovative mechanisms have been incorporated into census strategies to mitigate risks, increasing the transparency of the process, enhancing stakeholder's participation, and reducing undue politicization of the census process and results. Enhanced multi-party advocacy in support of the census, wide participation in census field monitoring and observation, establishing international technical advisory boards as essential mechanisms for transparent quality assessment and quality assurance are some of the strategies incorporated successfully in various census during the 2010 decade. These constitute a valuable collection of lessons learned, that can guide future operations under similar circumstances.

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