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UNFPA-SPC REGIONAL WORKSHOP REVIEWING THE 2010 ROUND OF POPULATION
AND HOUSING CENSUSES IN THE PACIFIC
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Experience from the Pacific – Lessons learned for 2020

Session 7 : MANAGING CENSUS FIELD WORK PREPARATION & COLLECTION
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1. INTRODUCTION

Statistical collections, like a Population and Housing census and other household surveys can be divided into three key phases:

1. Pre-enumeration
2. Enumeration
3. Post-enumeration

This paper will primarily focus on the middle phase, enumeration, which for the purpose of this paper will be viewed as covering the following key activities:

- Deployment of field staff to their respective enumeration areas
- Conduct of data collection from both private and non-private dwellings
- Collection and return of all relevant survey materials to the data processing centre/s.

To tackle this topic, the paper will firstly look at the issue of project ownership, and the impact this can have on a successful enumeration phase. This will be briefly followed by some discussion on the importance of ensuring suitable financial plans have been put in place to ensure the enumeration phase both starts, and continues to run, smoothly. Finally, the important issue of field work supervision will be addressed, looking at each level of supervision that may be required for each Pacific Island Country and Territory (PICT), depending on its geographical make-up and size.

Whilst many problem areas will be addressed in this paper, suggestions on how best to tackle these issues for the next round on censuses will be provided for consideration.

2. BACKGROUND

The conduct and review of survey activities such as a census have been discussed at great length in many a meeting conducted in the Pacific Region. A common discussion point during such gatherings is the additional challenges faced by PICTs when undertaking these activities, not experienced to the same degree in countries from other regions around the world. Some typical examples include:

- Many PICTs are spread over large geographical areas, with access to some of these areas very limited and infrequent
- Communication to these remote areas is also very scarce and unreliable
- Some PICTs have many languages, with PNG being credited with over 700 languages alone
- Qualified field staff are difficult to find due to the infrequent nature of such surveys, and the educational backgrounds of available personnel in some areas

Being faced with such significant additional challenges to an already somewhat daunting task can be viewed as i) a mission destined for mediocre returns, or ii) a challenge which provides an opportunity to bring the best out of those involved, in particular to the staff of the National Statistics Office (NSO) who hold ownership of such projects.

During the conduct of the census project in the Pacific, outside technical assistance from agencies such as SPC is often called upon and provided for both pre-enumeration and post-enumeration activities in a range of areas. The one phase where the performance of the NSO staff is paramount to the success of the census, clearly takes place during enumeration, where more often than not, full responsibility lies with them. This also coincides with the most difficult phase to control, and most important in ensuring credible results prevail.

3. PROJECT OWNERSHIP

Census projects in the Pacific region should be owned in-country by the NSO. That is, despite the degree of help from technical assistance agencies throughout the course of the project, the responsibility of the survey lies squarely with the census manager, generally a senior staff member of the NSO.

Whilst this is working very effectively in some PICTs, it is a little more difficult to identify a person within some NSOs willing to put their hand up and take on the role of census manager. This is to be expected as it is common for an NSO to have no staff member with any significant experience in the conduct of a census, let alone the management of one.

A method employed for some PICTs is to assign a census technical advisor (CTA) to the PICT for a lengthy period during the planning phase of the census. The CTA's role is to work closely with the census manager to provide assistance in a range of areas such as questionnaire design, development of manuals, field work planning, training of field staff, etc.

Having a CTA in place for some PICTs during the last round of censuses appeared to work extremely well in all instances. The most noticeable benefit of their presence was the easing of pressure on census managers, especially in identifying problem areas in advance and working closely with the census managers to determine strategies to address these potential problems. The only negative was that the presence of a CTA can lead towards some loss of project ownership from the NSO. This was partially due to an over reliance on the CTA, seeing the role developing more into a census manager, rather than an advisor to the census manager.

As discussed above, given the enumeration phase on the census is largely the sole responsibility of the NSO, it's important the census manager is in full control of the project before this phase commences, and has a well developed plan for monitoring and supervising the data collection, with the assistance of other key NSO staff involved in the project. It is clearly the time when the leadership of the census manager needs to be at its best in order to ensure good quality information is collected in the field.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPROVEMENTS

- *Technical assistance providers such as SPC, need to step back a little and encourage more involvement from all relevant members of the NSO*
- *Key staff within the NSO, especially the census manager, need to make themselves more accountable and take on the responsibility of all major tasks*

4. MANAGING FINANCES IN LEAD UP TO FIELD WORK

A key component to the successful conduct of field work is having in place a procedure for ensuring all financial considerations are addressed for field staff well in advance. This is imperative because field staff cannot be expected to cover costs incurred during data collection only to be compensated at a later date. The sort of financial issues which need to be addressed include:

- Salary payments
- Per diems to cover meals and accommodation when required
- Travel costs in the field
- Communication costs in the field
- Any other costs which may occur

Some PICTs experience difficulties in acquiring the funds through the required procedures to cover these expenses, so without a good plan in place, delays to field work can and do happen. Every effort should be made to avoid this from occurring as the "census night" date is not flexible, and all field staff should be in position prior to this date.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPROVEMENTS

- *PICTs who experience this problem already know it's a problem, so much better planning must be established to address this issue*
- *Where possible, organise meetings with persons responsible for releasing funds to develop a suitable strategy for releasing these funds*
- *Have an NSO staff member assigned to this task, so they know they are accountable for the smooth running of this activity.*

5. SUPERVISION AND MONITORING OF FIELD WORK

The last main section of this paper focuses on the all important task of monitoring the progress of field work. The supervision and monitoring of the field work can be broken into three components:

- Ensuring interviewers are aware of their location boundaries allocated to them
- Ensuring data of a suitable quality is collected from private and non-private dwellings
- Ensuring all dwellings are covered within each boundary, and all relevant forms are returned to the NSO for data processing

Depending on the hierarchical structure of the field team, the supervision and monitoring of field work may be required at numerous levels. For small countries such as Niue, Nauru, Tokelau, etc, the census manager may be responsible for supervising a handful of supervisors, who in turn supervise a handful of interviewers. For larger countries such as PNG, Solomons, Fiji, etc, the census manager may have the responsibility of overseeing state/province/district managers, who in turn oversee the work of senior supervisors, who in turn oversee the work of supervisors, who in turn oversee the work of interviewers.

The supervision role at each level can differ quite significantly. For instance, field staff responsible for directly supervising interviewers, will be required to ensure that all households within each interviewer's boundaries have been enumerated, forms have been filled in correctly, and all forms have been accounted for and ticked off. Staff within the NSO responsible for overseeing the work of supervisors, will be required to primarily make sure supervisors are undertaking their tasks to a suitable level, but also assisting with any field problems supervisors may encounter which they need help with.

Regardless of the number of supervisory levels established for census field work, and the differing tasks assigned to each level, two things are certain:

- Every person at all levels, given a supervisory role during fieldwork, plays a very significant role in ensuring good quality data is collected from the field.
- The supervisory role at all levels, if done properly, is an extremely pro-active one, requiring a full commitment from each person during the entire phase of fieldwork.

Drawing from our collective experience of providing technical assistance to a large number of Pacific NSOs over the past 7 years across a broad range of census operations, it would be fair to say that poor supervision of census field enumeration would be the main contributing factor to poor census data quality, with erroneous data being collected in the field. Having said this, not all countries have been doing poorly in this area, but evidence from the last round of censuses in the region certainly shows that most countries could perform significantly better in this area.

The two major flaws taking place with the supervision and monitoring of fieldwork in the Pacific region are:

- a. A high proportion of persons directly responsible for supervising interviewers don't check forms when they collect them, they simply sign them and put them in their carry bag.
- b. Field staff with higher level supervisory roles (including staff from the NSO) are not pro-active enough throughout the entire fieldwork phase, in ensuring supervisory staff they are overseeing are undertaking all aspects of their job to a suitable standard.

The end result is simple – data of poor quality is coming back from the field, requiring far too many edit adjustments, some which can't be detected, and thus left incorrect. Whilst the magnitude of this problem is hard to determine without revisiting each household and conducting the interview again, random checks of field work have shown an alarmingly high incidence of errors in some PICTs, totally unsatisfactory for a project of this importance.

Whilst the selection and training of field staff is a significant contributing factor to the quality of the field work, there is little doubt better supervision would minimise this impact substantially.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPROVEMENTS

- *NSO staff involved with the census project need to be far more pro-active during field work, spending as much time as possible in the field checking forms and ensuring all additional field staff are doing their work to a suitable level.*
- *Where possible, after the first 2 days of data collection, have a half day break in field work and bring all field staff back to the office for a debriefing on how things are progressing thus far.*
 - *Have a separate session for 30 minutes with just supervisors to re-emphasize their role, discussing what they have been doing right and wrong thus far.*

6. CONCLUSION

Impressive improvements have been made to the manner in which census projects have been conducted in the region during the last census round, largely through the introduction of new technologies at both the pre and post enumeration phase. However, the one area which is still the main contributing factor to poor quality data being generated is the manner in which the field work is conducted. Until NSO's within the pacific region start acknowledging the impact of poor supervision of data collection, shortfalls significantly below what is achievable will continue to occur from census project activities.
