

SECRETARIAT OF THE PACIFIC COMMUNITY
STATISTICS FOR DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME

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 2 : CENSUS PLANNING

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1. INTRODUCTION

We all agree that census taking is a huge and challenging undertaking in any country. It brings together diverse political, economic and social demands in terms of the resources that have to be deployed to collect the required data. Thus, the role of a population and housing census obviously is to collect, process, and disseminate detailed statistics on population size, composition and distribution as well as their socioeconomic characteristics at small area level unlike sample surveys which provide data at much higher geographic levels such as the national and provincial/island levels. Evidence-based decision making is increasingly becoming an important best practice which many countries including us in the Pacific embrace. It is in this regard that Pacific governments have continued to commit themselves to ensuring that their censuses in the 2010 round were successfully carried out as part of the 2010 Round of Population and Housing Censuses Programme. In this connection, all except one country in the Pacific have conducted one or two censuses in the present round of censuses.

For all Pacific countries, it is not a first census as many PICs have conducted more than one census prior to the 2010 round. The data collected in these censuses have been used in evaluating the impact of various policies and programmes have had on improving the standard of living of the populations, particularly the reduction of poverty or in evidence based policy review and development and in development planning. In addition, the data collected in the censuses had provided evidence on how far many PICs have addressed the achievement of population based MDGs.

Census Planning therefore is the **core process** in linking the different phases of the census cycle' (as noted in the *UN Principles and Recommendations For Population and Housing Censuses Revision 2*). Planning therefore, plays a key role in the entire programme of census taking in any country. It facilitates effective integration and implementation of various activities by ensuring that each phase is properly resourced and that quality outputs are achieved within prescribed timeframes. The focus in the early stages of planning is primarily on setting strategic directions, and all dependencies between the different phases are identified. Potential risks are also identified and control measures are put in place to minimize their effects on progress. Also the census project owners are identified early in the planning stage and ownership established to ensure successful census planning, budgeting, and execution.

This paper focuses on the approach that has been used to assist countries plan to take census during the 2010 round of censuses, the paper then summarises the achievements as well as areas that did not work well. Since questionnaire design is central to meeting user data needs, it is discussed briefly here. The paper finally makes suggestions/recommendations for improving in areas noted for improvement in the 2020 round of censuses.

2. TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE IN CENSUS PLANNING

Our technical assistance to countries to develop census plans were mobilised and delivered in the following manner:

- (i) Direct assistance to census offices – technical adviser working with one or more national counterparts to develop census plans and write funding proposals. SPC then helped countries to seek funding support from development partners;

Tonga, Tuvalu, Kiribati, RMI

- (ii) Short-term independent consultants engaged to provide support externally with specific TOR and time frame, and working with TA from SPC; and

Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, RMI

- (iii) Census planning and management workshops for two weeks in country to develop census plans using Microsoft Project software. The participating NSOs were expected to use the plans to undertake detailed costing as well as develop census management plans.

FSM, RMI

3. LESSONS LEARNED IN PLANNING

During the present round of censuses, there were a few countries like Samoa that had their census planning done well in advance, costed well, resources mobilized, had management support at every phase of the census, quality control and field management support, through and are monitoring the activities and timing at every phase. There was a real commitment by all stakeholders from politicians to the respondents at every phase of the census.

A **second** group of countries like Vanuatu had everything going well in every phase, except a few areas like field management and using pencils for recording answers introduced errors into data processing.

A **third** group of countries Solomon Islands and RMI that had a mix of things going wrong at various stage of the census cycle. These included lack of funding support led to RMI deferring the census from 2009 to 2011, but did not review the census plan, especially the timing of activities which led to output delivery timing issues. Lack of financial management and field management in the Solomon Islands led to introduction of data errors at every phase of the census, from household listing to field operations. In addition, census methodology was not well thought out despite external advice not to conduct a two round enumeration – the advice was rejected by SI census team which was unfortunate, as they did not conduct the two round census in the end. They may have introduced coverage errors as well as possible content errors.

Several important strategic lessons were learnt, and many of these are a repeat from previous census experiences. These include the following:

1. Integrated planning constitutes a critical phase of the census programme. It sets the strategic path or direction to be followed and the inter-dependencies that need to be effectively monitored and managed. This vital component was not implemented well in some countries during the current round of censuses. While all countries developed census plans, many were not always monitored on a regular basis. It was extremely difficult to determine the value added by different work streams to the overall census programme. In some countries there was no regular meeting of census steering committees and census technical committees, and some countries did not have such management or monitoring committee structure in place at all;
2. It is very important to involve stakeholders in all phases of the programme in order to enhance both ownership and accountability. Involvement of stakeholders was limited to content development in many countries, not much involvement in product definition and development. For example, publicity and advocacy strategies did not cut across all the phases of the census. They were focused mainly on enumeration phases. None on dissemination phases and other phases in some countries. This is one of the factors which greatly contributed to potential high undercount in a few countries, particularly the larger Melanesian countries;
3. Timely demarcation of the country into Enumeration Areas (EAs), and complete listing of dwelling units/households constitutes the cornerstone of managing effective budgeting and field control during enumeration. Some countries in this current census round suffered the most in this regard, with these exercises often hurriedly carried out, not always fully completed, not adequately resourced and managed. Even when resourced properly, quality suffered in circumstances of poor field management and poor quality control resulting in incomplete household listing and data errors. It was therefore, not possible to ascertain whether the enumerators had fully covered the EAs assigned to them;
4. Similarly, poor recruitment practices and poor field supervision in some countries, quality control, and management led to poor quality data collection, incomplete census questionnaires in some countries;
5. Data processing and other logistical systems should be well resourced, systems well developed and adequately tested before the main enumeration, preferably during pilot censuses. The processing of the data collected in the current census round was delayed due to an oversight of this important aspect of planning in some countries;
6. It is important to have adequate human resources dedicated to the census programme, rather than having a fragmented team comprising of people who are required to carry out other core activities in the NSOs. This particular approach resulted in the diversion of personnel to the census and inadequate attention to the core business of the organization during the peak of major census activities such as mapping and enumeration, or visa versa;
7. A pilot census should be carried out at least a year before enumeration to provide insights into the effectiveness of the various operational procedures and systems that are scheduled to be implemented. Many countries carried out the pilot census less than 12 months before main census enumeration. The results observed from this pilot census exercise could not be utilized to improve the core census operations, systems and processes;
8. Post enumeration Survey should be planned, costed, well resourced and executed at least 2 months after main census enumeration. No country in the Pacific had conducted a PES in the current round of censuses. Therefore, there is no way of determining the level of undercount in the current round of censuses in these countries

4. QUESTIONNAIRE DESIGN

The questionnaires to be used in population censuses are important instruments therefore designing should be done well in advance with proper testing to ensure that questions are well structured, following logical sequence, as well as easy to follow guides within questionnaires. Care should be taken in language used to form questions as that the main means of communicating the intent of the questions to the respondents. There are a few key issues experienced in the current round of censuses that we noted in our engagement with the countries which are listed here:

1. Questionnaire format – there were discussions on questionnaires paper size A3 back to back or A4 book type; and whether to have questions across the top or along the side as was the case in some countries – which was more convenient to administer?;
2. Which questions to ask and what response options to include – this is particularly important as there are many request for expansion to answer categories to consider new and emerging data needs;
3. Questions should only be included where NSOs are confident that the information collected will address critical information demands and that specific questions are linked to policy and planning requirements; that questions yield unambiguous answers of sufficient quality to be useful to users; and that questions are not simply included because someone wants them included
4. Impact on respondents – will their answer be honest and true and of sufficient quality?; respondent burden (dependent on questionnaire length and questions asked)
5. An overcrowded questionnaire with small fonts – difficult to record answers, introduces errors.

5. WHAT ABOUT THE FUTURE?

What has been documented above under Section 3 on “Lessons learnt from census planning” and under Section 4 on “Questionnaire design” need to be considered, corrected or addressed in the 2020 round of census planning and execution.
