

Evaluation of UNFPA support to population and housing census data to inform decision-making and policy formulation 2005-2014



Evaluation Office, UNFPA
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Contents

1. Introduction, 4
2. The context, 6
3. Evaluation approach, 8
4. Overall assessment, 10
5. Key results, 12
6. Summary of conclusions, 18
7. Key recommendations, 20

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Foreword

I am pleased to present the independent evaluation of UNFPA support to population and housing census data to inform decision-making and policy formulation (2005-2014). In UNFPA, this evaluation is considered ground breaking.

Valid, reliable, timely, culturally relevant and internationally comparable data have never been more crucial for the development and implementation of evidence-based policies. This fact was underscored at the International Convention on Population and Development Programme for Action in 1994. The need for disaggregated data in particular was emphasized in the newly adopted Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Disaggregated data is central to ensuring that development policies and programmes address inequality within and between communities and countries and advance a rights-based, equitable, and sustainable development. The SDGs call for disaggregation by income, gender, age, migratory status, disability, geographic location and other characteristics relevant in national contexts. This allows for the monitoring of progress in the implementation of the goals and ensures that “no one is left behind”.

This evaluation is the result of a fruitful collaboration among many individuals and institutions. It would not have been possible without the involvement of a wide range of stakeholders at country, regional and global levels. UNFPA staff members at headquarters and regional and country offices generously shared their time, energy and ideas throughout the evaluation process.

The Evaluation Office is very grateful for the knowledge provided by representatives of other United Nations agencies, partner governments, national and development partners, and other key stakeholders, informants and experts who provided critical information through surveys and interviews.

The evaluation generated challenges, opportunities, lessons learned and recommendations to more effectively support the conduct of census and I hope it will be useful to UNFPA, the Executive Board, and to a wider audience in general. I believe that the evaluation contributes to the body of evidence that reaffirms the significance of reliable data for decision-making, underscores the importance of census as a global public good, and highlights the need to intensify efforts to strengthen statistical capacities in developing countries.

Support to census ought to be a central feature in our continued endeavour to advance evidence-based policy-making. As we scale up our support for full implementation of the ICPD Programme for Action and re-double our commitment to sustainable development through the implementation of Agenda 2030, quality, disaggregated and accessible data have never been more vital in ensuring that no one is left behind.

Andrea Cook

Director, UNFPA Evaluation Office

1. Introduction

This is the first time that UNFPA has evaluated its support to the worldwide census round. UNFPA has been supporting countries' participation in the worldwide census since the 1970s and its contribution to these census rounds has routinely been included as part of country programme assessments.

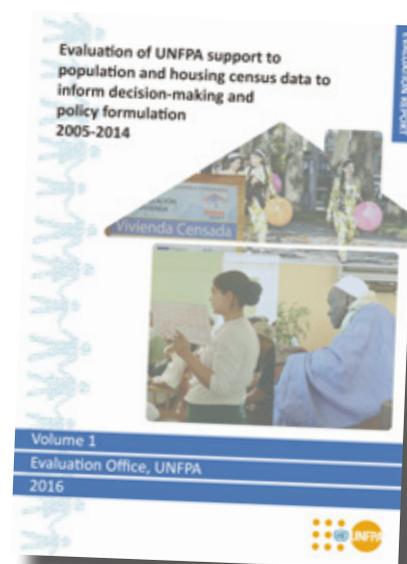
The evaluation included all countries in which UNFPA provided support during the 2010 round of worldwide census. It looked at how relevant, effective, efficient and sustainable UNFPA support has been and how much it added value to the census. The evaluation also looked at the extent to which the data, once collected, was used by countries to influence decisions and policies. Support was evaluated at the country, regional and global levels and the results were used to identify lessons ahead of the next (2020) round of census.

This independent evaluation was conducted in 2014/2015 by the Evaluation Office of UNFPA, United Nations Population Fund, in collaboration with an external, multidisciplinary team of evaluators, statisticians and census experts from the ICON Institute Public Sector GmbH. The team was supervised and guided by the Evaluation Office in consultation with the evaluation reference group.

Evaluation outputs include a thematic evaluation report, an evaluation brief, and stand-alone country case study reports for **Kenya, Mauritania, Myanmar, Palestine, Peru and Tajikistan**.

The evaluation had three primary objectives:

- 1** To assess whether the support provided was relevant, effective, efficient, sustainable and had added value.
- 2** To assess how census-related data was used to develop national policies on population dynamics, reproductive health and rights, youth and gender equality.
- 3** To identify lessons learned, to inform the midterm review of the UNFPA Strategic Plan and to inform the design of support for the 2020 census round and for the post 2015 development agenda on data for development.



2. The context

What is a population and housing census?

A population and housing census is the process of collecting, compiling, evaluating, analysing and disseminating data. That data is collected from all persons in a country, in all living quarters, at a single, specified time. It provides demographic, economic and social information about the people living in that country.

Why is census important?

A census is a critical planning tool. It helps policymakers plan for the future in terms of schools, clinics and hospitals, roads, urban infrastructure and more. By measuring elements such as fertility, mortality and spatial distribution, a census can help to predict demographic trends and map geographical patterns of social characteristics, such as poverty. Census data is particularly useful for local-level policymaking as it generates data from geographically specific areas. Population and housing censuses are often the main statistical operation in countries that have yet to fully develop a statistical system.

What is the 2010 census round?

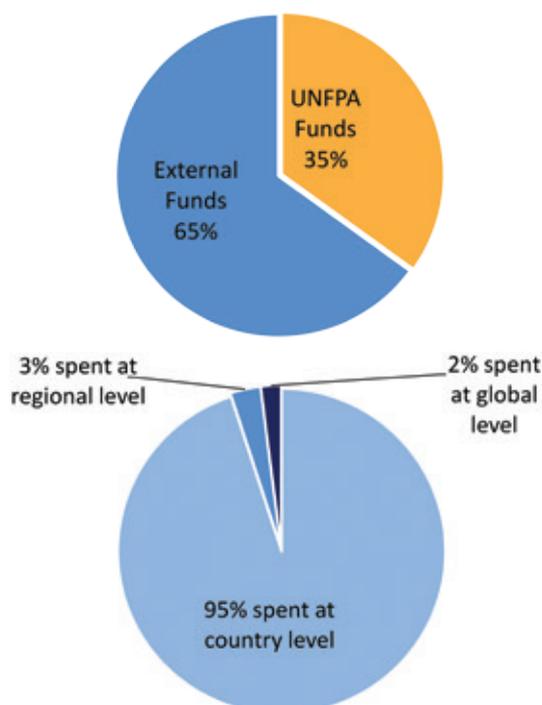
In 2005, at its 36th session, the United Nations Statistical Commission approved the work programme of the 2010 round of population and housing censuses (2005-2014). During that 2010 round, an estimated 6.4 billion people (93 per cent of the estimated world population) were enumerated.

Where does UNFPA fit into the census round?

In collaboration with other United Nations agencies, in particular the United Nations Statistics Division, UNFPA has provided support to census worldwide, assisting governments to address the financial and technical barriers to census implementation. It did so through policy dialogue and advice, advocacy, technical assistance, capacity development, procurement of equipment or services, financial support, coordination and management of financial resources for the census (on behalf of the partner governments) and by facilitating South-South cooperation.

Census support is an integral part of UNFPA country-level interventions and a major component of its population and development work. In addition, censuses provide the evidence-base for UNFPA mandate areas and the realisation of the ICPD agenda.

UNFPA provided support to more than 130 countries during the 2010 census round (2005-2014). During this period total UNFPA expenditure on census was \$301 million.



UNFPA expenditure on census

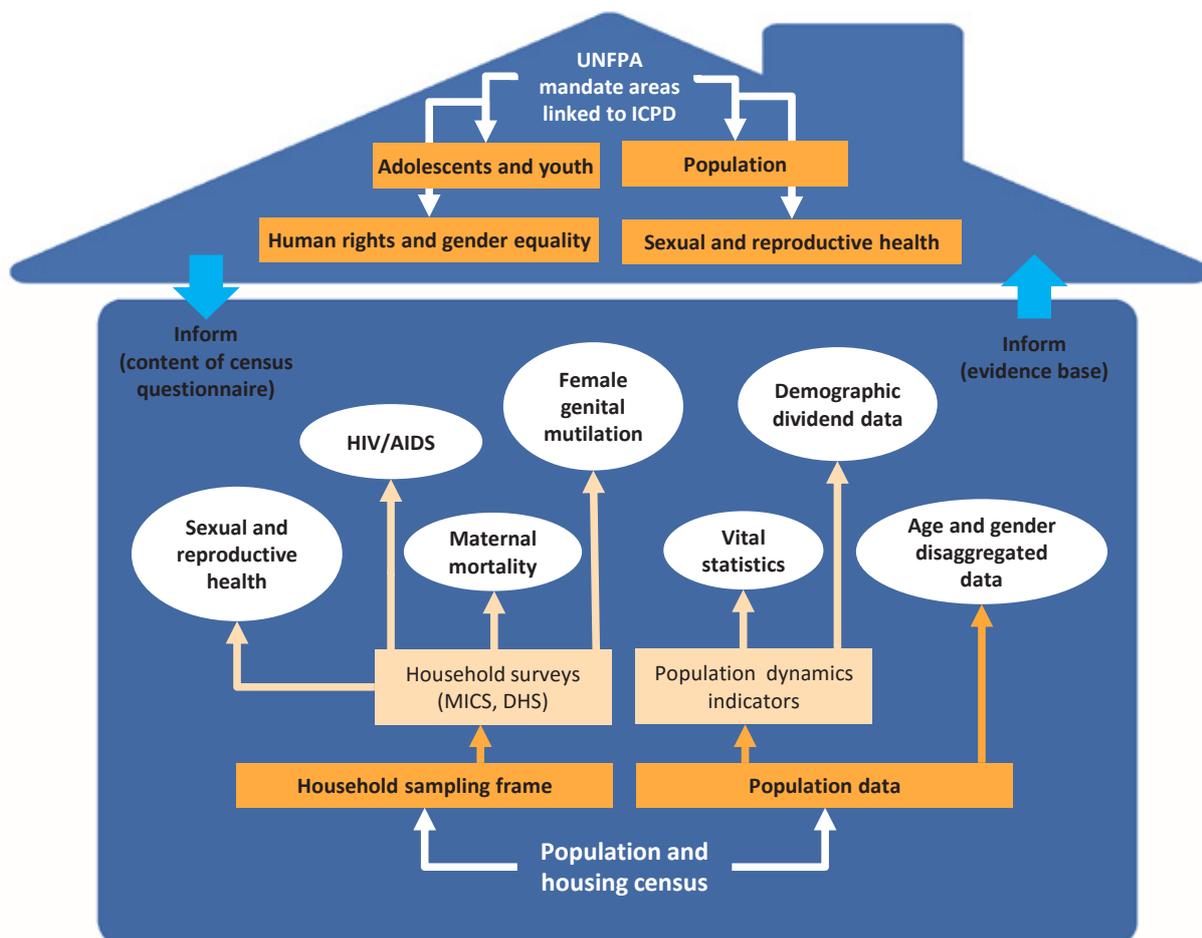
What is the International Conference on Population and Development?

The International Conference on Population and Development, held in Cairo in 1994, is considered a milestone in the history of population and development. It represented a remarkable consensus among 179 governments that individual human rights and dignity are a necessary precondition for sustainable development. This included the equal rights of women and girls and universal access to sexual and reproductive health and rights.

The Conference resulted in an ambitious set of goals, captured in the Programme of Action. This detailed recommendations on population and development within a range of fields, including technology, research and development. It underscored the importance of “valid, reliable, timely, culturally relevant and internationally comparable data” for the development, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of programmes and policies.

Twenty years after its adoption, a comprehensive, operational review of the ICPD implementation was undertaken. The “ICPD Beyond 2014” process “overwhelmingly supported the consensus that investing in individual human rights, capabilities and dignity – across multiple sectors and through the life course – is the foundation of sustainable development.” During a 2014 special session of the General Assembly, governments reaffirmed their commitment to the ICPD and endorsed a new Framework for Action to intensify efforts for its full implementation in the 21st century.

The ICPD – together with the Millennium Development Goals and the recently adopted Sustainable Development Goals – provide the global framework in which UNFPA advances its support to census and, indeed, its mandate to achieve universal access to sexual and reproductive health, promote reproductive rights, reduce maternal mortality and accelerate progress on the ICPD agenda.



Contribution of the census to the realisation of ICPD agenda

3. Evaluation approach

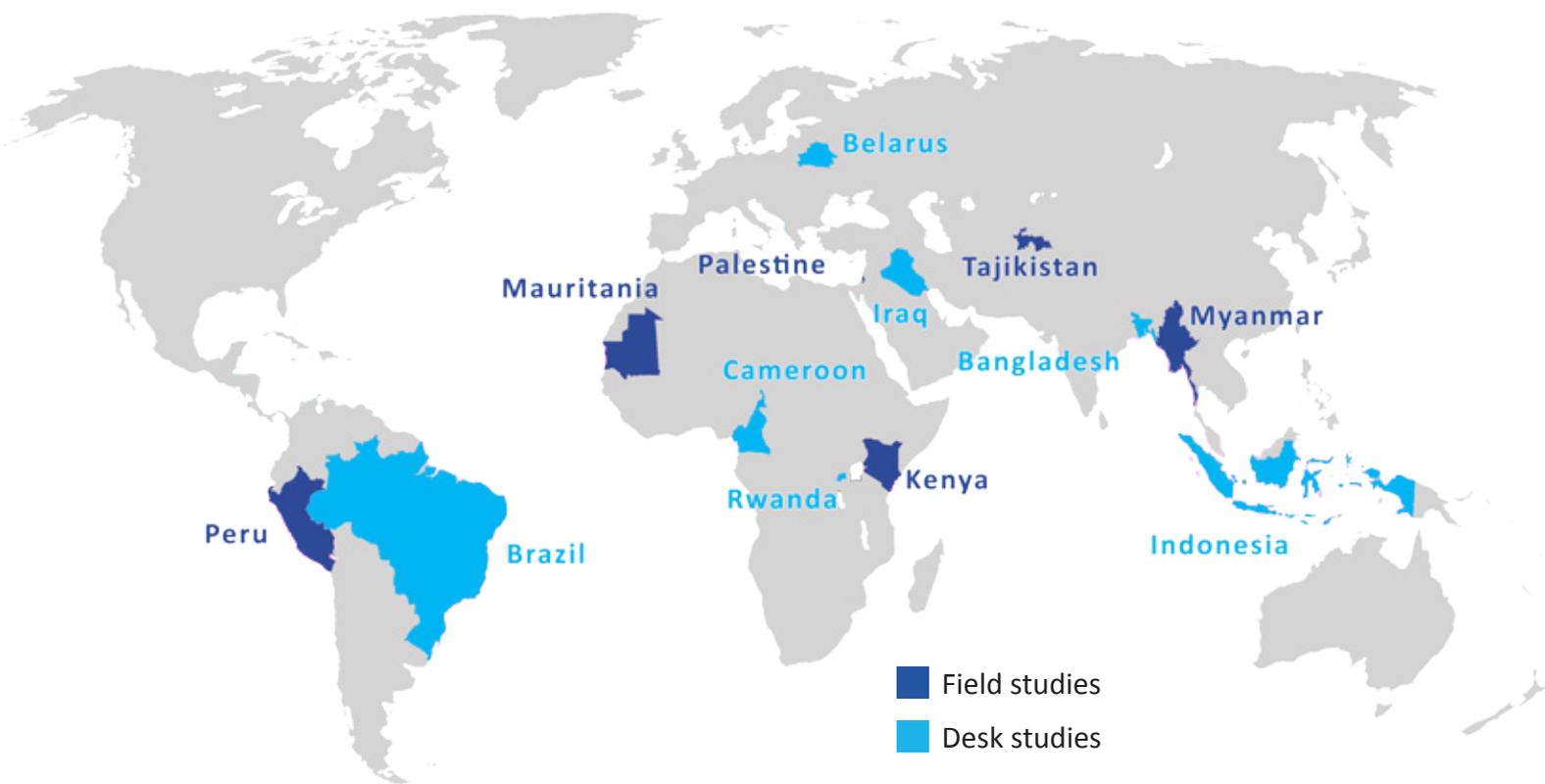
The evaluation was shaped around seven evaluation questions which guided data collection, analysis and report writing, and covered the five evaluation criteria: relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, sustainability and added-value. A series of assumptions and indicators were developed to frame the evaluation questions.

The evaluation team conducted a detailed assessment of 13 programme countries.

Six countries were assessed in depth, using in-country case studies. These field studies involved interviews with key informants from various stakeholders at national and subnational level, site visits, group interviews, briefings and debriefings with country offices, and extensive documentary review.

A further seven countries were then analysed through desk studies. This was done by remote interviews with key informants from various stakeholders at national level, extensive documentary reviews and questionnaires on the use of census data.

The evaluation team collected data from a survey administered to all UNFPA country offices as well as a survey administered to NSOs in all the countries supported by UNFPA. Secondary data sources at country, regional and global levels were also included.



Geographic coverage of the countries studied

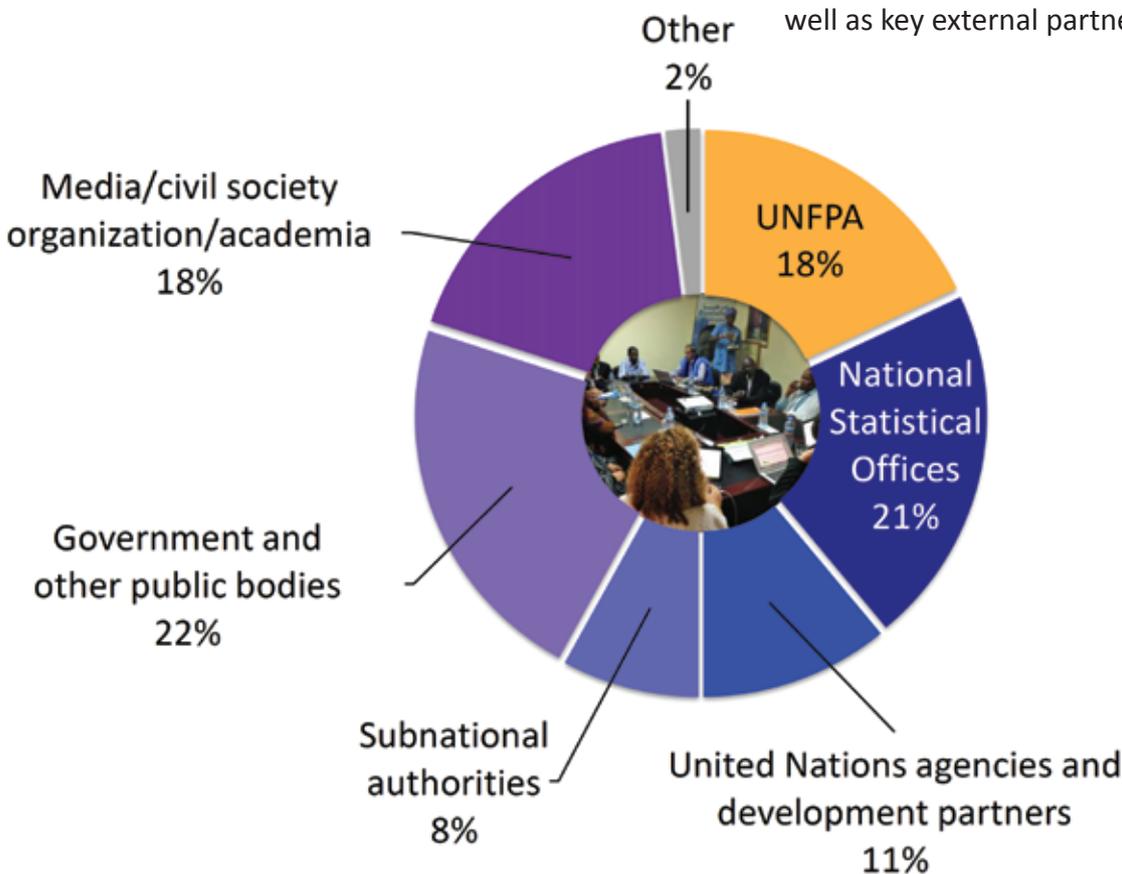


The evaluation followed a mixed-method, multiple-level analysis and utilisation-focused approach. Other methodology features included a focus on results and an analytical methodology based on contribution analysis. Triangulation was used to guarantee the reliability and robustness of data collected. The triangulation drew upon the following:

- ▶ A review of documentation at global, regional and national levels, including online media
- ▶ Surveys to 132 national statistical offices and 119 UNFPA country offices
- ▶ Individual and group interviews with key informants at global, regional, national and subnational levels

The evaluation process was highly participative and consultative. Wide ranging stakeholder consultations were conducted at country, regional and global levels. Overall, the evaluation team consulted 795 people through individual and group interviews.

An evaluation reference group supported the Evaluation Office throughout the evaluation process. The group was comprised of UNFPA staff at the headquarters, regional and country levels as well as key external partners.



Distribution of key informants by type of stakeholder

4. Overall assessment

UNFPA makes a real and tangible difference to the countries it supports during census. It strengthens their national capacity to produce quality census data and it helps to maintain international standards. In addition, UNFPA has a credible reputation and is widely perceived as a key census partner with a clear, convening role. It provides technical expertise and brings stakeholders together to help them prepare and conduct their censuses efficiently. Without UNFPA support, it is widely believed that some national censuses would not have been completed. **At the country level, the UNFPA role on census is often seen as a flagship of UNFPA support.**

Based on the evidence, the evaluation was able to highlight three main strengths of UNFPA:

- ▶ The provision of quality technical assistance
- ▶ The credibility that UNFPA offers to the census process, which ensured that census results abided by international standards
- ▶ The UNFPA convening role

However, the evaluation report revealed that UNFPA support did not enhance the use of census-related data in decision-making and policy formulation. The intended strategic outcomes and goals of the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) were not met.



Census as a flagship of UNFPA support

Among key census actors in all countries assessed in detail, the evaluation team found a shared perception that UNFPA was a key partner in supporting the 2010 census round.

There is also a widely held view that without UNFPA support, some national censuses would not have been conducted or would have failed to meet international standards.

Key stakeholders recognise UNFPA as an important player and convener in the field of population and housing censuses and as a guarantor of the census operation.



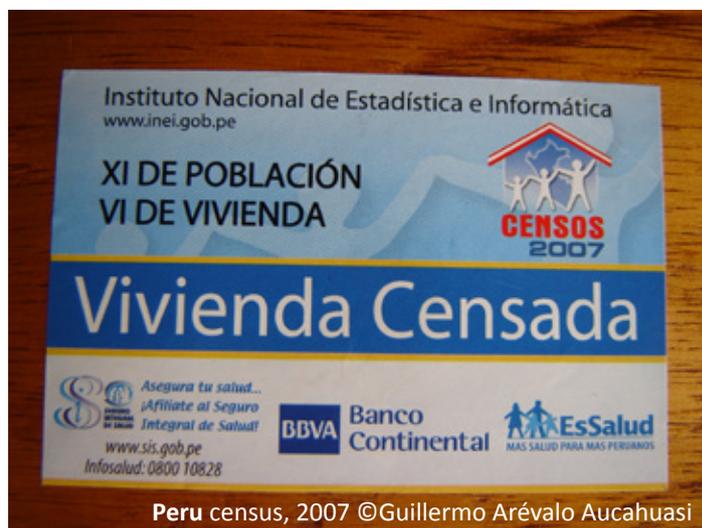
5. Key results

UNFPA is a key partner in census support

Convening as a core asset

UNFPA has shown an open attitude towards working with civil society and was able to bring together a wide range of stakeholders beyond typical institutional circles. It encouraged the involvement of bodies such as NSOs and ministries, for example.

UNFPA played a strong intermediary role between governments, civil society and other development partners. Many of the people interviewed pointed to several factors enabling this convening role, including UNFPA neutrality, even in complex political and security environments such as in **Palestine** and the **Sudan**, and the strong respect that UNFPA has for national sovereignty and leadership: for example, UNFPA has positioned itself as a facilitator that refrains from imposing models. The highly demand-driven nature of UNFPA support also generated national ownership and leadership.



Peru census, 2007 ©Guillermo Arévalo Aucahuasi

Census expertise as a core asset

UNFPA staff knowledge and expertise on census gives UNFPA significant technical legitimacy and this adds weight to its reputation as a convener. UNFPA census expertise is clearly a core asset.

However, this asset is presently at risk. During the 2010 census round, there was a loss of staff with census expertise, primarily due to retirements and newly recruited population and development officers lacking census-specific expertise. Still ongoing, this issue could affect the 2020 census round if left unaddressed and is linked to a wider phenomenon. The International Conference on Population and Development Beyond 2014 report noted concerns on the declining number of census experts and demographers available to NSOs in developing countries.



UNFPA is noted for inclusivity and partnership

Beyond consultations

In **Myanmar** consultations were not a government practice. There was initial resistance. UNFPA pushed for and obtained a census consultation committee, including civil society and ethnic groups. Though the committee had some shortcomings, it contributed in developing (previously non-existent) social dialogue between civil society and national authorities and ensuring equal access to data.

Civil society engagement as a core asset

UNFPA financially and actively encouraged consultations with the public. It supported including specific topics raised by civil society in the census questionnaires, like disability and migration. UNFPA assisted governments in organising the consultations and was particularly involved in discussions with civil society groups. UNFPA also supported public awareness campaigns to mobilise the population. In some cases, however, the scope, coverage and involvement of the public in the census consultation process could have been more comprehensive. These aspects are hindered by reluctance from civil society, capacity of government authorities and the degree of openness towards civil society. In spite of these difficulties, UNFPA efforts were commendable and generated positive effects beyond the consultations.

Partnerships as a core asset

UNFPA was able to mobilise and engage with multilevel, multi-stakeholder partners and networks, as a regular part of its support to census. This included partnering with all government administrative-territorial tiers, ministries, academia and civil society.

Partnerships made large and logistically complex census operations feasible. For example, it was through partnerships that UNFPA was able to pay enumerators in **Peru** and **Myanmar**, where banks were not operating in all geographical areas.

UNFPA also established strong partnerships with United Nations country teams and other United Nations system organisations in the majority of country cases studied. This was particularly visible, though to varying degrees, in **Kenya, Mauritania, Myanmar, Palestine** and **Tajikistan**. This partnership approach extended beyond the national level. In their support to country offices, regional offices used a partnership approach with regional stakeholders.



UNFPA needs to improve guidance

Comprehensive corporate guidance

UNFPA made sure that its support was aligned with the United Nations Principles and Recommendations for Population and Housing Censuses. This was adopted by the United Nations Statistical Commission in March 2005 for the 2010 census round.

Country offices were aware of these principles and recommendations and have been strong advocates for them. They set a clear and broad direction, but put less emphasis on the operational guidance for implementation. This has produced difficulties in how to practically apply the principles and recommendations when it comes to supporting census.

In 2001, the United Nations Statistics Division published a handbook on census management for population and housing censuses. The handbook is currently being reviewed. Although the structure of the handbook reflects the census cycle, it does not address some relevant aspects of the UNFPA support to census. The evaluation has identified a need for corporate guidance to frame UNFPA support to the 2020 census round.

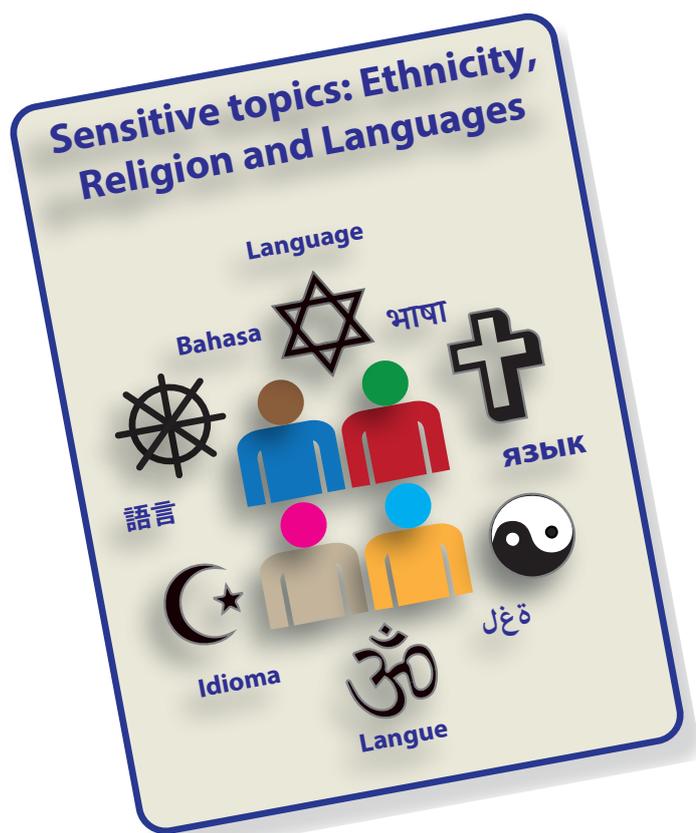
Country offices need corporate guidance on:

- 1 How to implement consistent approaches and minimum standards for census governance mechanisms
- 2 How to develop support for the use of data for policy making
- 3 How to conduct formal assessments of the capacity of national statistical offices
- 4 The use of new technologies and how to promote them
- 5 How to proceed with sensitive topics (ethnicity, religion, minorities, and disability) in countries with particularly complex socio-political contexts
- 6 How to establish effective census governance mechanisms

Socio-political guidance

Population censuses are statistical operations of a technical nature, yet they may carry significant socio-political implications. There are consequences of including (or excluding) questions related to ethnicity, religion or language in census questionnaires. Such topics must be addressed within the particularised socio-political and cultural contexts in which a census takes place. For example, in **Peru**, the inclusion of ethnicity in the census questionnaire was perceived as a matter of social inclusion, whereas in **Myanmar** it was seen as tool for political exclusion.

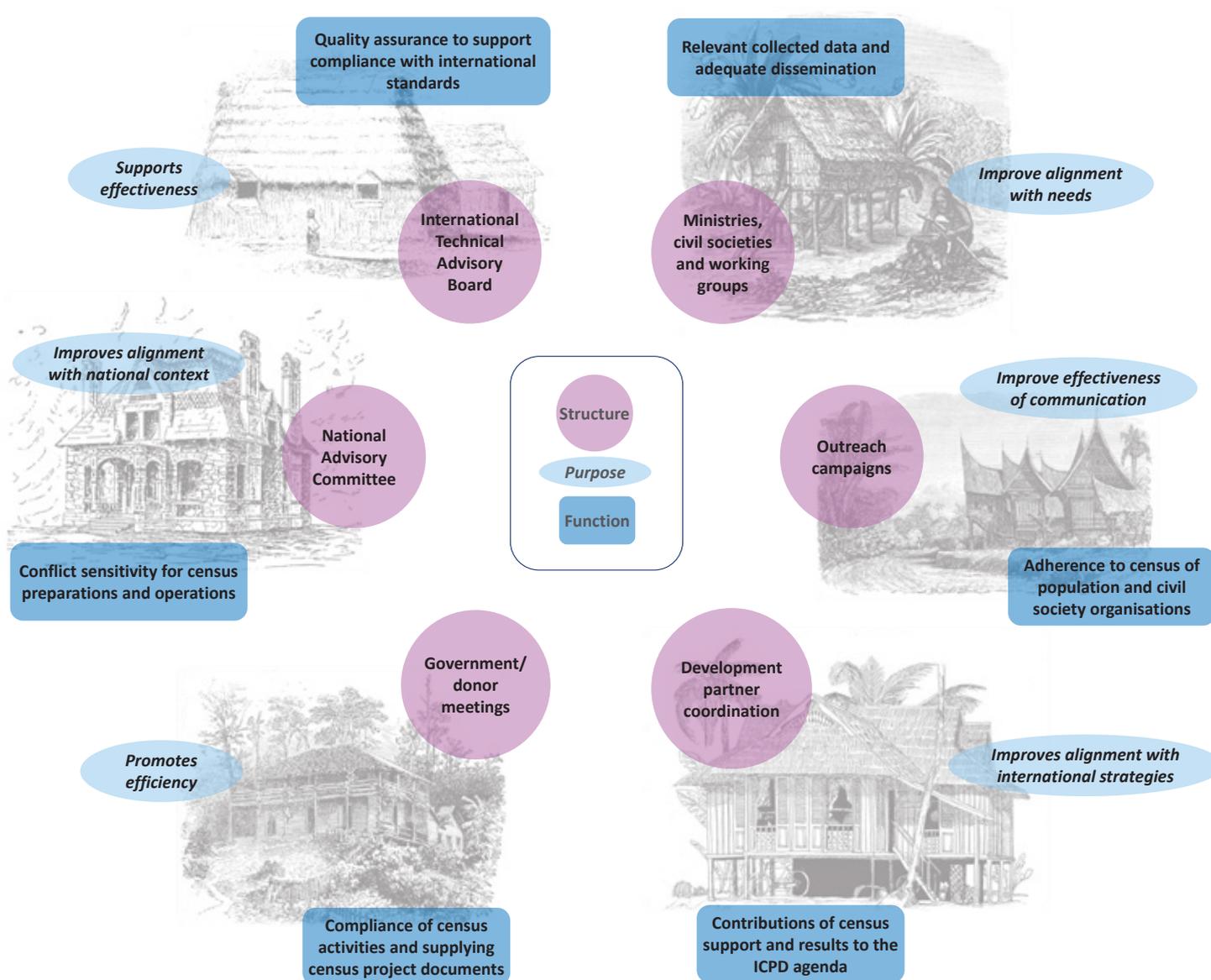
The principles and recommendations consider ethnicity a non-core topic, in contrast to national stakeholder perspectives that it is a core one. UNFPA country offices are not well equipped with practical guidance or operational tools to address such complex scenarios.



Guidance for census governance

A national operation, census affects all groups in society in some form. It is imperative to ensure that the entire process of census design and decision-making is inclusive of all relevant voices in society. In this context, and given the potential socio-political implications of a census, it is essential to establish properly functioning census governance mechanisms. Further, census governance structures play a fundamental role in ensuring UNFPA principles such as transparency, accountability, impartiality and enabling all stakeholders to voice concerns.

During the 2010 census round, UNFPA played an important role in advocating for, putting in place and ensuring the proper functioning of census governance mechanisms. However, there was no UNFPA corporate guidance on when, why, how and in what sequence census governance mechanisms should be established and used. Some countries put them in place whereas others did not, even when country settings were similar.



The key elements of successful census governance: learning from the country case studies

UNFPA needs to promote data use

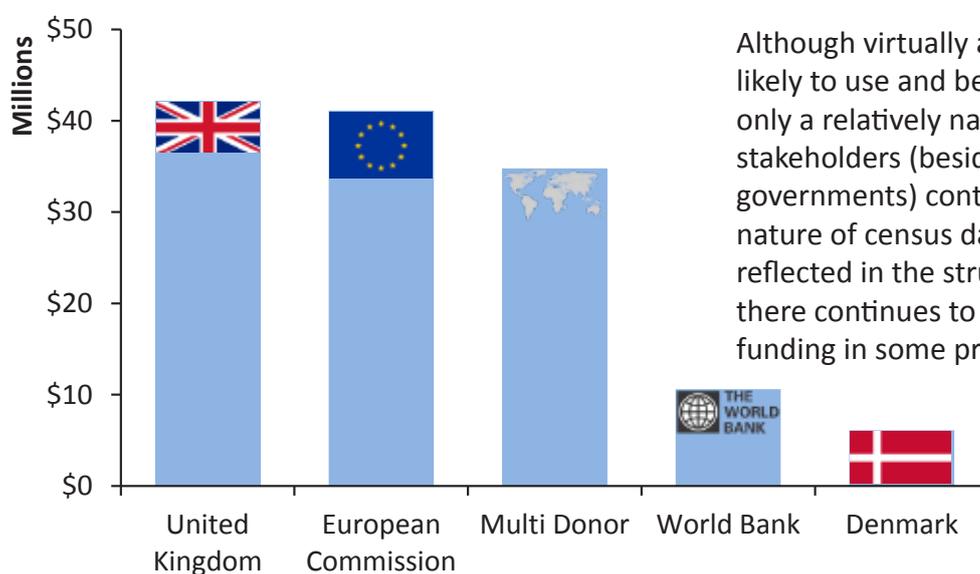
Census related data is underutilised

The UNFPA strategy to support censuses had two main thrusts: strengthening NSO capacity for the production and availability of good quality census data and strengthening national stakeholder capacity to use census data to inform decision-making and policy formulation. UNFPA was successful in the first, but not the second. Although the evaluation team did find evidence of census data being used, it was not to the extent foreseen by UNFPA objectives.

Moreover, census data use was generally low. Data use was in fact particularly limited at subnational government levels (regional and local authorities). Data use among other key national users such as academics, researchers and civil society organisations was also restricted.

The report “International Conference on Population and Development Beyond 2014” recognised that the integration of population data into development planning has not been realised over the last two decades.

Although UNFPA did provide some support to enhance the capacity of national census data users, the magnitude of the problem surpasses both the level and scope of UNFPA support. The underlying reasons for low usage call for a comprehensive and collaborative long-term response to which UNFPA can only partially contribute.



Narrow funding base: top five donors of UNFPA support to census (non-core)

Some reasons why census data is not used:

- 1 Weak dissemination of census data, with issues concerning access to raw and micro-data overlooked
- 2 UNFPA and national statistical offices seem to believe support to census ends after enumeration
- 3 Widespread assumption that once made available, data generated will be automatically used, which was not the case
- 4 Lack of a culture of utilising statistical data for planning and policymaking in programme countries
- 5 Absence of personnel with expertise in statistical analysis and data use for policymaking

Census data is a global public good

Census data is a clear example of a global public good. It is not only necessary for designing better national-level policies, but also for monitoring international community development efforts such as the Sustainable Development Goals and the objectives of the International Conference on Population and Development. This reinforces the relevance of a collaborative response to the low use of census-related data.

Although virtually all development partners are likely to use and benefit from census-related data, only a relatively narrow base of international stakeholders (besides programme country governments) contribute to census funding; the nature of census data as a public good is not reflected in the structure of census funding. Further, there continues to be unmet need for census funding in some programme countries.

6. Summary of conclusions

The main conclusions are presented in the light of the three primary evaluation objectives.

Has UNFPA support been relevant, effective, efficient, sustainable and has it added value?

UNFPA support to the 2010 census round contributed significantly to strengthening the capacity of national statistic offices. It allowed the countries it supported to produce census data in line with international standards.

UNFPA was widely perceived as a vital component of the 2010 round of census and was recognised as a key convener and guarantor of census operations. However, census support ranked rather modestly among UNFPA global strategic priorities. UNFPA has not fully taken stock of the wealth of knowledge and experience generated by its global census support.



How was census-related data used to develop national policies on population dynamics, reproductive health and rights, youth and gender equality?

In contrast to the strong focus and effectiveness on data production and availability, the focus on data use has been comparatively weak. UNFPA has not therefore enhanced national stakeholders' capacity to use data to inform decision-making and policy formulation to the extent envisaged in the planned objectives.

UNFPA could do much more to prompt partner governments to explore the full potential of combining census data with specific surveys or other sources of data (such as administrative sources or big data). Without effective use, the value for money and the relevance of support to censuses by international agencies, including UNFPA, is at stake.

The challenge of limited use of data for development planning transcends UNFPA support to census and calls for a collaborative approach by development partners.

What are the key lessons learned?

UNFPA support has encompassed the setting up of governance mechanisms, but there is a need for corporate guidance.

UNFPA has successfully advocated for and assisted with the implementation of census governance mechanisms. These are essential for the application of United Nations principles and guidelines. However, there is no corporate guidance on appropriate minimum standards, or on how these mechanisms should be established and used.

Corporate guidance is lacking in relation to the sociopolitical implications of censuses, which may be particularly complex in fragile contexts and countries affected by conflict. Country offices varied in their approach to the inclusion of questions on ethnicity, religion or language. This may not have always promoted human rights in the most effective or appropriate manner.

The strong position of UNFPA support to census is linked to the expertise of its staff. However, UNFPA has experienced an unresolved, significant attrition of census expertise.

The demand-driven character of UNFPA census support (especially to NSOs) is a positive feature, but it has undermined proactive and innovative advice from UNFPA, particularly in the absence of capacity assessments. In some country offices, UNFPA delivers exclusively on the basis of short-term, supply-based demands.



7. Key recommendations

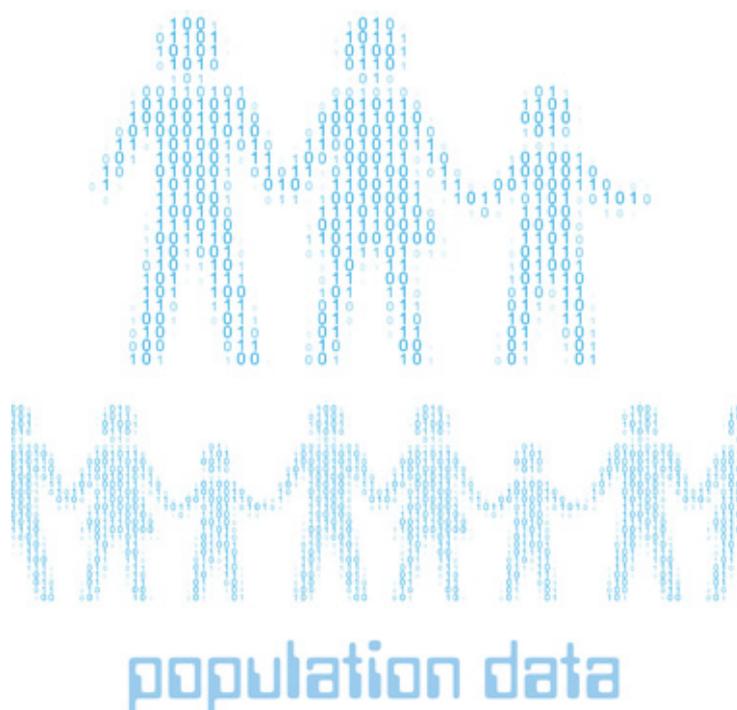
I - Consolidate the position of UNFPA on population and housing censuses

- ▶ UNFPA should continue to provide and also expand support to population and housing censuses, drawing up a corporate strategy and guidance for the 2020 census round.
- ▶ UNFPA should adapt current human resource and technical assistance strategies to address the attrition of census expertise and to ensure adequate support for the 2020 census round.
- ▶ UNFPA should activate the corporate-level knowledge management function in order to secure the transfer of experience on census support which was generated by the 2010 census round.



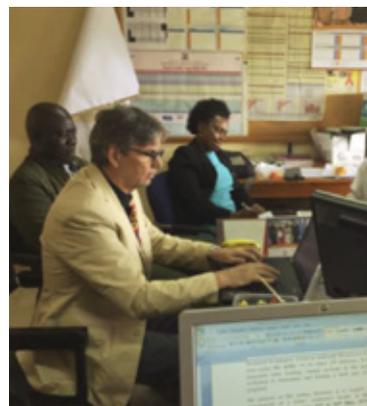
II - Exploit the full potential of census data

- ▶ Support to the 2020 census round should emphasise the focus on data use for national-level policymaking. The current focus on support to NSOs for the production and availability of census data should expand to include a focus on dissemination and use of census-related data, adapting the UNFPA business model accordingly.
- ▶ Current views on census data dissemination should evolve to make dissemination the link between data availability and data use for national-level policymaking and advocacy. UNFPA should support NSO efforts to develop innovative ways to ensure that census-related data is disseminated in a manner that fosters data use for policymaking and advocacy.
- ▶ In collaboration with national stakeholders and development partners, UNFPA should explore the potential uses of combining census data with other sources of data for development, including surveys, administrative sources and big data in order to foster the full use of census data within national statistical systems.



III - Explore new resource mobilisation strategies and tap into the full potential of South-South cooperation

- ▶ UNFPA should examine the possibilities and feasibility of a global-level trust fund dedicated exclusively to supporting the dissemination and use of data, including census-related data in the 2020 census round.
- ▶ UNFPA should take action to maximise the potential of South-South cooperation for census support, in line with the Strategic Plan, by promoting it as a mechanism for technical assistance and sharing of experiences among programme countries. UNFPA should ensure that South-South cooperation initiatives incorporate exchanges on dissemination and use of census-related data.



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