

Building capacity to ensure the continuity of population censuses

A population census is the primary source of information about the number of people in a country and the characteristics of the population. Several features distinguish it from survey-based sources of data. It can achieve complete coverage of the population. It offers possibilities for relating individual characteristics of the population with those of households. It provides details about subnational population groups. And in a postconflict situation, where the national statistical system has often collapsed, a population census provides the foundation for developing democratic institutions and good governance and may also give the people hope for a better future.

From census data, analysts can derive most of the population-based indicators needed for monitoring national and subnational progress towards the Millennium Development Goals. And no other data source allows such comprehensive sex-disaggregated analysis of population-based indicators. Without a recent census, data gaps are inevitable. Even basic

information on the size and age composition of a population will be unavailable or unreliable.

Almost all developing countries have had some experience in census taking in the past several decades, although many still lack the financial and human resources to conduct censuses without at least some external financial or technical assistance. Efforts to build census taking capacity are often impeded by weak national statistical systems, long intervals between censuses and rapid turnover of staff.

Census taking is the most costly data collection activity undertaken by a national statistical system. Rising costs, shrinking public sector budgets and declining aid have all contributed to delays and postponements of censuses in the 2000 round, especially in Sub-Saharan Africa. Without timely and adequate resources, census taking will face an uncertain future. For national statistical systems, partnerships with major stakeholders—civil society, the private sector and bilateral and multilateral organizations—are essential for ensuring the continuity of censuses.