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Conclusions and recommendations

United Nations Regional Workshop on the 2020 World Programme for Population and Housing Censuses for Arabic-speaking Countries

5-8 December 2022
Algiers, Algeria

Prepared by United Nations Statistics Division

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Conclusions and recommendations

1. The workshop was jointly organized by the United Nations Statistics Division (UNSD), the UNFPA Arab States Regional Office (UNFPA ASRO), the Arab Institute for Training and Research on Statistics (AITRS) and the United Nations Economic Commission for Central and Western Asia (ESCWA). The workshop was conducted with the support of the Ministry of Digitization and Statistics of the Republic of Algeria and the UNFPA Algeria Country Office. The workshop was held in Algiers, Algeria from 5 to 8 December 2022 with over 70 participants. Population and housing census managers, methodologists, and experts as well as representatives of UNFPA Country offices from Algeria, Djibouti, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, Palestine, Qatar, Somalia, Sudan, Syria and Tunisia. During the opening session, the workshop was addressed by Honorable Hocine Cherhabil, Minister, Ministry of Digitization and Statistics of the Republic of Algeria.
2. The participants expressed their appreciation to UNSD, UNFPA ASRO, AITRS and ESCWA for organizing the workshop. It was concluded that the workshop is timely, especially taking into consideration that the previous similar workshop was held six years ago and that the workshop offered the platform to present international standards and recommendations, and to learn from the experience of participating countries that already conducted their respective national population and housing censuses, including through the use of electronic data collection technologies and administrative registers.
3. The workshop noted that there is diversity in statistical capacity among Arabic-speaking countries when it comes to census-taking. Some countries have transformed their traditional census operations with the use of advanced technologies including the GIS, satellite imagery and electronic data collection applications. A few have transitioned from the traditional census to approaches involving the use of administrative registers and administrative data sources, while others are in the process of laying the groundwork for the use of administrative registers. On the other hand, nearly a quarter of countries in this group have not conducted a census in decades, mainly due to humanitarian crisis and security issues.
4. The workshop expressed concern about the status of census-taking among those Arabic-speaking countries that have not conducted a census in recent decades. The workshop encouraged such countries to conduct their census as soon as the situation in their countries permits. The workshop recommended for such countries to continue to make preparations especially with regard to developing data collection instruments, data collection methodology, and building statistical capacity in relevant domains in partnership with development partners and international organizations providing technical support, and south-south cooperation.

5. The workshop applauded the extensive cooperation among Arabic-speaking countries in the 2020 Census Round. Numerous study visits were conducted, and technical support was extended by those countries with good practices and success in conducting 2020 round censuses. Support was extended in the use of GIS, electronic data collection technologies and in field operations monitoring and management. Cooperation was also achieved in the sharing of tablet devices for the conduct of census data collection, as well as the transition towards register-based production of census small area statistics. The workshop strongly recommended that these exchange and cooperation is even increased, and requested UNFPA ASRO, AITRS and ESCWA to extend their full support in that respect.

6. The workshop noted with satisfaction that all the countries in the region have engaged in digital mapping, going as far as collecting GPS location of the infrastructure and all housing units. In addition, a number of countries have successfully used Computer Assisted Personal Interviewing (CAPI) in conducting their censuses and many other countries are planning to conduct their 2020 round of censuses using this technology. The participants highlighted the importance of building the capacity and expertise of the national statistical offices and using an incremental approach to the adoption of new data collection technologies thorough first experiencing this technology in surveys and similar statistical activities. The essential motive for the use of CAPI and portable devices lies in the fact that it results in accelerated processing of data, dissemination of census results and improved quality of resulting statistics.

7. Participants expressed the importance of including in census plans the establishment of advanced systems for the monitoring and management of operational activities to ensure census coverage and data quality. Such systems provide capabilities for real-time monitoring, tracking, and communication among field staff. It was also noted that such systems could be efficiently used if they are established as a part of field operation and in an integrated manner with other systems used for data collection, staff recruitment and logistics.

8. It was noted that countries differed in their approaches to the acquisition and/or development of electronic applications for data collection for use in CAPI, CAWI and CATI data collection operations. While some countries relied on freely available solutions, others developed or are in the process of developing their own in-house proprietary solutions, while others outsourced the development of the applications to external software developers. It was noted that every approach has important consequences on budget, schedule and human resources and involve trade-offs, therefore, sufficient time should be allocated during the preparatory stages for the proper consideration of the available options.

9. In cases where IT solutions are outsourced, the workshop cautioned that while outsourcing may appear to be an attractive solution for statistical offices that have only a small IT department or lack prior experience, outsourcing brings its own challenges and problems. Among the many challenges are finding the right partner for outsourcing,

government regulations, knowledge of the global vendors including their business culture and practices, the risk of dependency on external contractor, and maintenance of confidentiality of data. It is important that outsourced projects be carefully monitored against the specification, with a view to early identification of problems. It is also important to regularly meet and communicate with contractors to ensure that expected contract results are achieved in a cost-effective manner.

10. A number of participants raised the difficulty of enumerating nomadic population groups. Because of climate change and life-style changes (for example, growing use of water storage solutions among such groups), the typical seasonal movement patterns of such groups have changed, increasing the difficulty of capturing this population group in the traditional approach of monitoring watering points and seasonal movements. Some countries shared successful experience in this regard with the engagement of nomadic community (tribal) leaders in the data collection exercise. To successfully carry out the enumeration of nomads, it is particularly necessary to pay attention to preparatory work in order to determine suitable enumeration techniques. As elaborated in the UN Principles and Recommendations for Population and Housing Censuses, Revision 3, there is no absolute methodology for the enumeration of nomads, and conditions vary from country to country (para. 3.127). The workshop concluded that all efforts need to be made in order to ensure the full and complete coverage of every person in the country, including nomads, by developing appropriate and efficient strategies to ensure as complete enumeration as possible.

11. The workshop also raised the issue of producing data on disability, based on Washington Group approach as recommended in the UN Principles and Recommendations for Population and Housing Censuses Revision 3, using administrative data sources. The workshop also concluded that a significant effort is needed to harmonize relevant administrative data sources along the lines of functional limitations rather than physical disability.

12. Discussing the significance of the population and housing censuses in terms of measuring international migration in the 2020 round, the participants expressed the interest of including questions not only on immigrants but also for nationals who are living abroad which is not listed as one of the core topics in the UN recommendations. It was pointed out that countries which are planning to include questions for persons living abroad, could consider asking questions for former members of a household who are living or expected to live in another country for one year or more. This question could be important for countries experiencing high level of emigration.

13. Discussing the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on census-taking in the participating countries, the workshop noted that a number of countries conducted their 2020 Round census before the advent of the pandemic, for example Egypt, Jordan and Palestine; yet another number of countries generated census statistics from administrative registers, for example Oman and Qatar. At the same time, countries planning to conduct their census in 2020 and 2021 with the traditional census method had to postpone and conduct their census operations at a later date, for example Algeria. In yet another number

of countries the preparations for conducting the population and housing census in the 2020 round are underway with uncertain outcome, for example Djibouti, Iraq, Libya, Mauritania, Somalia, Sudan and Syria.

14. As few of the countries that are planning to conduct census in the near future plan to modify the question on household death in order to capture cause of death information, including from COVID-19, the workshop took note of the recent UNSD/WHO expert group recommendations that proposed the extension of the reference period for measuring household death to cover the period from the onset of the pandemic to the census reference date.

15. The workshop noted that there is a high interest in the use of administrative registers for producing census information among Arabic-speaking countries, taking into consideration successful implementation of fully register-based censuses as presented by Oman and Qatar. The workshop concluded that transitioning from the traditional census to other types of census methodologies involving the use of registers should be planned carefully, allocating significant time for initial activities, especially for establishing effective communication with register holders, building capacity, assessing the availability and quality of existing administrative registers in order to develop realistic road map for this transformation.

16. The participants also noted the challenges in the use of administrative registers, including discrepancies in definitions and concepts leading to inconsistencies with the data collected in previous censuses and international standards; accuracy of the data; and the completeness of the coverage. The workshop also noted the importance of updating mechanisms, including for changes in address, vital events, and for buildings that are newly constructed, modified and demolished, that should be in place before using registers for census statistics purposes. The workshop recommended that the participating countries should continue to acquire experience and solutions available in the Arabic-speaking countries in respect of the register-based census-taking and to evaluate the feasibility of these solutions for future census rounds.

17. The workshop noted that quality assurance and quality control of all the segments of the population and housing census are prominently displayed and elaborated in international guidelines, including in the UN Principles and Recommendations and the UN Handbook on Census Management. In that context, it recommended that quality measures to ensure high quality of census processes need to be embedded in all population and housing census operations from planning to dissemination. The workshop encouraged all countries that conduct the traditional census to conduct Post Enumeration Survey and compare census outputs with previous census results and other data sources, mainly household surveys and administrative registers, to assess the quality of census data. The workshop stressed that comprehensive census quality assessment reports need to be produced by each country that undertakes a census in 2020 round, following the quality assessment dimensions presented in the UNSD guidelines.

18. The workshop discussed the methodology for estimating population in areas difficult to enumerate due to humanitarian crisis or other man-made or natural calamities. This methodology is based on applying geo-spatial techniques for estimating the population on the ground. While this methodology is not internationally recommended for census purposes, the workshop recommended that it is taken into consideration in severe conditions in the region for acquiring basic information on the size of population for humanitarian purposes.

19. The workshop discussed the issue related to the place of usual residence as defined in international recommendations. It concluded that in certain conditions this concept is challenging and requires the provision of additional metadata that would enable a more comprehensive interpretation of the resulting census statistics.

20. With regard to measuring international migration in population and housing censuses, the workshop noted that the strict implementation of international standards and recommendations for censuses could yield a comprehensive assessment of the stock of international migrants in countries.

21. The workshop noted that the use of internet self-enumeration in population and housing censuses has been seldom effective in the censuses in the 2020 round in participating countries. It also recommended that further testing and experimentation with smaller statistical data collections, such as using this method in surveys, should be initiated in assessing whether this instrument would be useful in the 2030 census round.