

Statistical Commission
Thirty-sixth session
1-4 March 2005
Item 5(a) of the provisional agenda
Population and housing censuses

Background document
Available in English only

Report of the United Nations Symposium on Population and Housing Censuses

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Statistics Division/DESA

**United Nations Symposium on
Population and Housing Censuses**
New York, 13-14 September 2004

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* This document is being issued without formal editing.

A. Introduction

Background and objective of the Meeting

1. The United Nations Symposium on Population and Housing Censuses was convened in New York on 13-14 September 2004. The Symposium was organized by the Demographic and Social Statistics Branch of the United Nations Statistics Division (UNSD), Department of Economic and Social Affairs. The purpose of this Symposium was to set priorities for the upcoming decade round of population and housing censuses (2005-2014) in light of the experience from the previous census decade (1995-2004). The Symposium also aimed at providing inputs for the drafting of a resolution requested by the Statistical Commission at its 35th session, calling on the Secretary-General to proceed with the development of a 2010 World Population and Housing Census Programme¹.
2. The Symposium had three major objectives:
 - i. To identify issues warranting further discussion based on the experiences of the 2000 census decade;
 - ii. To set priorities for the Expert Group Meeting on 2010 World Population and Housing Census Programme in light of national and international experiences from the 2000 World Population and Housing Census Programme;
 - iii. To provide inputs for the drafting of a resolution for consideration by the United Nations Statistical Commission with respect to the development of the 2010 World Population and Housing Census Programme.
3. The meeting was attended by representatives from 17 countries: Australia, Brazil, Canada, Chile, China, Egypt, India, Islamic Republic of Iran, Israel, Jamaica, Japan, Peru, Russian Federation, South Africa, Thailand, United Kingdom, and the United States; four United Nations regional commissions: Economic Commission for Europe (ECE), Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), and Economic and Social Commission for West Asia (ESCWA); and 12 organizations and institutions: Caribbean Community Secretariat (CARICOM), Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), Inter American Development Bank, el Mercado Común del Sur (MERCOSUR), Secretariat of the Pacific Community (SPC), the Statistical Office of the European Communities (EUROSTAT), UNESCO Institute for Statistics, United Nations Population Division, United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), United

¹Official Records of the Economic and Social Council, 2004, Supplement No. 4 (E/2004/24), chap. II. B, para. 2 (a).

Nations Statistics Division, the World Health Organization (WHO), and the World Bank.

Opening Remarks

4. The Symposium was opened by the Director of the United Nations Statistics Division, Mr. Paul Cheung, who focused on: (1) emerging issues in defining and conducting population and housing censuses and optimal ways to address and include them in the 2010 Programme for Population and Housing Censuses (2005-2014); (2) the importance of active involvement of member states in the implementation of the Programme; and (3) identifying critical issues and dimensions to be reflected in the resolution of the 2010 World Programme for Population and Housing Censuses.
5. The Director highlighted some of the emerging issues including the fact that the process of conducting a census is changing due to the emergence of alternative strategies, such as, new census designs and recent developments in information technology.

Structure of the Symposium

6. In setting the scope of the deliberations for the Symposium, the United Nations Statistics Division presented two papers; one on active involvement of Member States authorities as a prerequisite for a successful outcome of the 2010 decade round of population and housing censuses, and the second presenting the framework for the 2010 World Programme for Population and Housing Censuses. The Meeting was divided into three sessions covering the following broad topics:
 - i. Experiences and lessons learned from the 2000 census decade round;
 - ii. Critical issues that have emerged during the 2000 census decade round;
 - iii. Recommendations for the 2010 World Programme on Population and Housing Censuses.
7. Papers contributed by participants were presented under each broad topic followed by the exchange of national experiences that enriched the discussions and raised issues on: the use of alternative census designs; incorporation of new census topics; experiences with using new technology such as those used in scanning questionnaires, handheld devices, and Internet dissemination of data; the importance of public perception of the census; promotion of census data to users and ability to show the value of census information; coordination of technical support at inter-regional, regional and sub-regional levels; the changing definition of a census; non-statistical use of census operations and ensuring data confidentiality; the importance of updating the *Principles and Recommendations for Population and Housing Censuses* in light of emerging experiences; and the ways in which countries have responded to increasing financial constraints. Papers for the meeting are available on the website of

the United Nations Statistics Division at:
<http://unstats.un.org/unsd/demographic/meetings/egm/Symposium04/default.htm>.

8. The first session of the meeting was chaired by Mr. Ian Cope of the United Kingdom, the second session by Mr. Mano Ranjan of India and the third session by Ms. Mary Chamie of the United Nations Statistics Division. The Rapporteur for the meeting was Ms. Rosaline Hirschowitz of South Africa.

Conclusions and Recommendations

In light of the preparation of the 2010 World Programme and the next round of population and housing censuses, the questions listed below require deliberations at the national, regional and international level. The answers and findings are expected to shape approaches to all aspects of census processes:

9. What is a census? The Symposium reviewed the definition of a census as stated in the current version of the *United Nations Principles and Recommendations for Population and Housing Censuses* and in light of experiences from the previous decade round. The current internationally recommended definition consists of four criteria for a census: individual enumeration, universality within defined territory, simultaneity and defined periodicity². While most countries continue to conduct traditional census and some use national registers, new forms such as rolling censuses are emerging which do not necessarily have all of these characteristics. The Symposium recommended revisiting the essential features of a census to determine whether or not—and if so in what way—the definition might be revised. In addition, the Symposium emphasized the importance of having censuses complying in their entirety with the *Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics*³.
10. What is the core set of outputs that is essential to social and economic planning? The Symposium deliberated over the importance of output-based planning for censuses and the overall statistical system. A minimum national dataset was considered as a means to obtain the necessary outputs for planning purposes, improve national and international comparability of data, and facilitate the integration of national statistical systems. The Symposium concluded that output planning is critical and in that context a meaningful core national dataset based on specific outputs would be a useful tool for census planning. The Symposium recommended that the Expert Group on the 2010 World Programme on Population and Housing Censuses provide guidance in the identification of items/topics for a core national dataset while

² *Principles and Recommendations for Population and Housing Censuses, Revision 1*, United Nations Publication Sales No. E.98.XVII.8, United Nations, 1998, page 3. paragraph 1.5.

³ See <http://unstats.un.org/unsd/methods/statorg/FP-English.htm>.

considering the extent to which the current United Nations *Demographic Yearbook* reflects such a set.

11. What should a census include, and how should the content be determined? Changing social conditions and issues have led to a number of new and evolving topics being considered for inclusion and/or revision in national censuses for the forthcoming 2010 census round. Some of the key topics under consideration refer to usual residence, families, international migration, aging, maternal mortality, and human functioning, to name a few. At the same time, the Symposium expressed their concern with the overburdening of the census questionnaire with various topics and the underutilization of collected census data in the current round. The Symposium recommended that the updated *Principles and Recommendations for Population and Housing Censuses* include a comprehensive list of elaborated census topics and provide a set of clear and unambiguous criteria that would guide national census authorities in determining topics that would apply to their national circumstances.
12. How feasible are alternative approaches to censuses? Recognizing that we might be at the beginning of a “census revolution”, the Symposium noted that alternative approaches including a combination of administrative sources, household surveys, satellite imagery, and use of the Internet, are still largely uncharted territories and realized the need to outline advantages and disadvantages of such approaches. The Symposium deliberated at length on the potential drawbacks and benefits of alternative approaches. It noted that approaches based on population registers are not always feasible, given, among other issues, the cost of developing and maintaining these registers. Under many circumstances the traditional method of census enumeration is still an indispensable, reliable option. Therefore, the Symposium recommended that the Expert Group on 2010 World Programme on Population and Housing Censuses outline preconditions and prerequisites for adopting an alternative census design, taking into account the experiences of countries that are implementing such designs in regard to quality and coverage of statistics obtained, costs, and timeliness of census results.
13. How can censuses best be integrated into the national statistical system? The Symposium noted that a lack of integration among various statistical operations may occur at the national level. The Symposium recommended a review of the integration of statistical systems through common frames for population, housing, agricultural and establishment censuses, where relevant, as well as household and other surveys and administrative sources; and to elaborate the role of censuses as part of a fully integrated national statistical system.
14. How can utilization of census data be improved? The Symposium identified several challenges in the area of data utilization. First, there is the challenge of education of users, the public and key stakeholders. Second, there is the challenge of enabling increased access to data such as by making them available free of charge, including on the Internet. Third, there is the significant challenge of improving dissemination by customizing products to fit different needs, including using Geographic Information System (GIS) technology for data dissemination and in planning census

outputs in consultation with stakeholders and users. Along these lines the Symposium recommended that the Expert Group prepare guidelines on dissemination and public relations and possibly the development of brochures encouraging a public dialogue and educating users with regard to what data are available and how they might benefit from its use.

15. How can new technologies best support census operations? The Symposium considered the broad range of new technologies that are being employed in census operations including Global Positioning System(GPS) technology, and handheld devices for enumeration; scanning of census forms, and GIS and thematic maps for dissemination, to name a few. It was pointed out that new technologies are not always more efficient than traditional methods. Sharing of experiences, skills and hardware between national statistical/census authorities has proven to be effective for some countries. The Symposium concluded that it would be useful to examine the conditions under which certain technologies can effectively be adopted and to what extent the updated *Principles and Recommendations* should address new technologies. The Symposium recommended that the use of new technologies be addressed as a priority in the programme of work of the Expert Group on 2010 World Programme on Population and Housing Censuses.
16. What about countries in exceptionally difficult circumstances? The Symposium considered the situation of official statistics in countries with limited statistical capacities and experience in census operations, or emerging from political strife, or facing extreme poverty. They identified a need to assess the most effective ways to support countries in such difficult circumstances, especially those that have not conducted a census in over ten years. Thus, the Symposium emphasized that the census enumeration, processing and dissemination of data in countries in difficult circumstances require more detailed elaboration and priority status in the 2010 World Population and Housing Census Programme.
17. What considerations should be taken when outsourcing all or part of a census operation? The Symposium identified an increasing trend for countries to outsource part of their census operations. This activity poses a challenge for statistical offices for a number of reasons; for example, the interests of suppliers providing services are not always in line with the interests of the statistical office or the government; the need to ensure privacy, confidentiality, data accuracy and maintaining public trust while outsourcing census activities; problems related to preparation of contracts and legal arrangements. The Symposium recommended that the Expert Group on 2010 World Programme on Population and Housing Censuses make the review of issues related to outsourcing census operations a priority in their work. It also recommended that the Expert Group explore the possibility of providing opportunities to countries for exchange of experience in preparing legal frameworks and terms of reference for contracts to outsource census activities.
18. What revisions or updates are necessary in the *Principles and Recommendations for Population and Housing Censuses*? The Symposium considered the implications of their deliberations on the above topics for the *Principles and Recommendations* and

concluded that the document should be reviewed, updated and revised as necessary to reflect the experiences of the 2000 census decade specifically focused on the priorities set above. The Symposium also concluded that the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics be mainstreamed into the revised *Principles and Recommendations for Population and Housing Censuses*.

19. The Symposium addressed the roles and actions of national statistical/census authorities, United Nations Statistical Commission, United Nations Statistics Division and United Nations regional commissions, and other sub-regional organizations in support of the 2010 World Population and Housing Census Programme. In this context, the Symposium recommended that the United Nations Statistical Commission, at its 36th session, in March 2005, adopt a draft of a Resolution on the 2010 World Programme on Population and Housing Censuses for Economic and Social Council consideration and adoption, that would:

- i. Support the 2010 World Programme on Population and Housing Censuses, consisting of a number of activities aimed at ensuring that Member States conduct a population and housing census at least once in the period 2005-2014;
- ii. Urge Member States to carry out a population and housing census and to disseminate census results as an essential source of information for small area, national, regional and international planning and development; and to provide census results to national stakeholders as well as the United Nations and other appropriate intergovernmental organizations to assist in studies on population, environment, and socio-economic development issues and programmes;
- iii. Emphasize the importance of the 2010 World Programme on Population and Housing Censuses for socioeconomic planning and request increased support for this Programme; and
- iv. Ask the Secretary General of the United Nations to implement the 2010 World Programme on Population and Housing Censuses.

20. The Symposium considered the *2010 World Programme on Population and Housing Censuses: A Proposal for Active Involvement for Member States* and expressed strong and unambiguous support for the concept of active involvement of Member States and establishment of a trust fund in support for the World Programme, coordinated by the United Nations Statistics Division/DESA. The active involvement refers, but is not limited, to identifying technical expertise and other resources to be shared by Member States in the conduct of their censuses which may result, for example, in the sharing of IT expertise; the short-term exchange of professionals; sharing of training programmes; and the exchange of census information and data exchange, through a coordinated programme of partnership activities. The active involvement also includes pledging financial contributions to the Population and Housing Census Trust Fund by Member States and by other relevant intergovernmental and nongovernmental organizations.

21. The Trust Fund would be used to bridge the distances between national statistical offices in their exchange of resources and support, by providing the funds needed for travel, consultation, fellowships and advisory work, as well as for research and development of standards and methods necessary for the successful implementation of the *World Programme*. While the trust fund would involve relatively few resources, it would act as a catalyst for members providing assistance and support to each other or for sharing national experiences. The trust fund will be an effective source for facilitating the provision of technical assistance, with the understanding that such trust fund is not meant to be the main source of funds for conducting a national census. The Symposium also recognized that the trust fund would enhance the capacity of the United Nations Statistics Division as a conduit for exchange of relevant information and experience and a major repository of supporting materials and experiences.

22. In this context, United Nations Statistics Division together with the United Nations regional commissions must be a broker of census experiences. A directory of census resources, national practices, experts and other available resources would allow countries to more easily obtain information when they need it. Sharing expertise among countries with mutual interests, within and across regions, such as the example of el Mercado Común del Sur (Mercosur) countries with Bolivia and Chile, should be encouraged and supported by the United Nations Statistics Division. Developing an e-mail list serve is one example of how experiences might be shared.

Annex 1: Participants

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