

Can Ethiopia deliver a credible census?

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Ethiopia is preparing for its 4th population and housing census planned to be held early next month. The past three censuses were conducted in 1984, 1994 and 2007. While the results of the 1984 and 1994 censuses attracted less scrutiny, at least in the public domain, the 2007 census was marred by controversies of omission and miscount of varying degree. Unearthing the magnitude, nature and potential causes of the distortions in the 2007 census is a massive exercise; it requires considerable time and an army of demographers of the highest calibre along with undeterred access to the full unit record data. The immediate question is, can Ethiopia deliver a credible census this time around?

But first why do we need a census, what for?

Simply put, if services and facilities are to be developed in the right location at the right time and for the intended population group, then accurate population number is vital. Moreover, in the era of ‘one man-one vote’, the dominant political philosophy of our era, getting counted is also more than a question of access to services; it is an integral part of one’s fundamental human right. “Leave No One Behind”, the motto of the UN Sustainable Development Goal, means that counting—and accounting for—individuals is also central to achieving a country’s international obligations. Hence, the better a coverage of a census is, the more a nation is able to meet its human right and development obligations and govern its citizens with equity. In short, census is about visibility, representation and rights. In all parts of the globe marginalised individuals are either grossly miscounted or entirely left out. This is why it can be argued that ‘statistical marginalization’ is a good indicator of ‘social marginalization’.

Whilst a census is an administrative exercise, there are well established universal principles governing its conduct. Censuses are expected to be *universal* (meaning each individual and each set of living quarters is enumerated); *periodic* (meaning are to be conducted in regular interval) and *meet the criteria of simultaneity* (meaning each individual and each set of living quarters should be enumerated as of the same well-defined point in time). It is by far among *the most complex and massive peacetime exercise* a nation undertakes.

What are the challenges?

The upcoming census is faced with several challenges among which over politicisation, inadequate preparation, mis-alignment of institutions and the absence of peace and stability stand out the most.

The issue of peace: A successful census requires a peaceful and stable environment to ensure everyone is counted and counted at the same nationally defined point in time. Going by events in the country, this is hardly a time of peace, even by “Ethiopian standards”. Virtually all regions of the country are affected, and there is no guarantee that this will stop before the census date. Over three million citizens are reported to be currently internally displaced. The counting process itself, if not well managed, can instigate tension, generate conflict and may initiate new displacements. Together, these will create coverage related challenges as counting mobile populations has its own technical and logistical challenges. Some places can also become inaccessible and subject to being left out of the census and/or not covered at the same time as the rest of the nation, violating the very principle of universality and simultaneity of the census.

The politics of number: A second and related challenge and source of concern is what may be termed as the ‘politicisation of the census’ and the ‘ethnicity question’ which remains high in the political and public agenda. Ideally, the National Population Commission (NPC) and the Central Statistical Agency (CSA) should be the face of the census operation, and their activity independent from interference. However, this has not been the case in Ethiopia and can partly be seen from the multiple references that the census has received in high level political meetings and from the very fact that the census has been linked to the upcoming election. The situation is further complicated by the politics of identity prevailing in the country. The unintended consequence of identity politics and over politicisation of the census is that they can easily lead to census misconduct as regions and local authorities’ may be tempted to use the opportunity to ‘exaggerate’ their visibility in the national space. Given ongoing ‘land claims’ in almost all regions, it is also plausible that census numbers for some population groups could be manipulated by local authorities to justify continued ‘ownership’ or claim new territories. Even without this, population groups residing in contested areas or ‘outside of their home region’ (for lack of better phrase) could simply choose to misidentify their identity or choose to skip the census altogether for fear of being targeted by local politically vocal groups. The call for boycotting the census made by some quarters and the appointment of political representatives in the Census Commission are evidences of politicisation that may further compromise the credibility of the census.

Census (mis)organization: Census is a massive exercise requiring careful planning and efficient coordination of a nation’s resource. It requires mapping the entire country, mobilising and training an army of census enumerators and conducting a sustained massive public campaign effort led by a lead institution that serves as a focal point for the operation. However, it appears that the prevailing political instability is having further downstream consequences on the census operation itself, which is manifested in the lack of focus and cautious management of the census. There is no better indication for this than the census date being changed three times. The 4th census was originally scheduled for November 2017, which was postponed to February 2017, and then changed to November 2018, and is now scheduled April 2018. There has been limited professional discussion on the causes and implications of these changes as the change of dates were mainly driven by political decisions. There appears to be some positive developments recently, after the appointment of the New national Population Commissioner, but this may be too late and too limited in scope.

The issue of trust, privacy and competence: A successful census, like a successful national or local election, requires public confidence and their full participation in the census. Census experts and students of demography consider confidentiality as a crucial component of any successful census, in line with fundamental principles of official statistics. A personal discussion with persons familiar with census operations at CSA (during my brief visit to the Capital this December) revealed that INSA (the country’s intelligence and security agency) will oversee data management and security related aspects of the census. The rationale for this, as I was told, was that the census exercise is a ‘national security issue’ and not a ‘matter to be left to ‘outsiders’. However, involving INSA in the census operation raises several concerns. For one, in any country—even in those that are democratically advanced—an Intelligence agency is one wing of a nation that has the least connection with census operations because of privacy concerns. Second, in countries like Ethiopia where its security and intelligence agency is marred by credibility and trust concerns, aligning the upcoming census operation with such agency may only fuel further mistrust, and hamper people’s willingness to participate in the census. Third, from what can be seen, there appears to be no mechanism to enforce transparency in the activities of INSA. Fourth, INSA has no prior experience for the kind of exercise that it is now mandated to undertake. As far as the public knows, any remotely related work that the agency may have done was in the allocation of apartments in the capital city, and this has

been stained by controversies to say the least. Finally, the premise and rationale for involving INSA itself is indefensible. Out-sourcing census data collection, management and processing tasks to private companies does happen around the world. For example, more recently, the 2016 fully online Australian census was supported by an independent technology firm.

What can be done?

First things first. Going by practices elsewhere, INSA should have no business in the census process. A step is needed to remove the intelligence agency from the picture and replace it with a private company to handle the technical requirements of the Census operation. The country's census partners such as the US Bureau of the Census, ISTAT (Italian Institute of National Statistics) or the UK Office of National Statistics may be requested either to send experts or to help in identifying private providers as this can bring credibility, restore confidence and maintain transparency in the census operation. The use of a tested private firm will also enable the country to address any technical challenges that may arise during the operation. The country is investing nearly a quarter of a billion dollars to conduct the census and it needs a guaranteed outcome. This is neither the time nor the place for experiment.

Second, census operation should be cushioned from political interference. The CSA and the NPC, supported by the census advisors, should be offered independence and the opportunity to drive census operations. Politicians of all colours should be cautious about statements they make on census matters and offer needed support to NPC. The NPC itself may need to be re-constituted as an independent professional body, more like the way the electoral commission has been. Similarly, it is also important that just as they claim to be committed to free and fair elections, politicians of all 'faith' should commit themselves to positively contribute to a census that is free from all forms of political interference.

The issues around identity and politics and their interface with census operations are complex and there are no easy answers. However, one way to get around this issue is to remove the 'ethnicity' or identity related questions from the census altogether, and there are countries that have taken this route. France and Tanzania are examples of this where asking identity related questions are illegal. Nigeria had included ethnicity and religion in its earlier census but decided to remove it in 1991 and the subsequent census, after its 1973 census, which included these questions lead to unusable results. Some groups disapprove the removal of the questions arguing that identity related questions can help identify marginalisation, help groups to develop their culture and improve representation in national politics. However, given current context in Ethiopia, and the heightened social tension linked to ethnicity, removing the identity questions may help the country generate a credible census than having it in. This can be achieved in two ways: either by modifying the census question (and the application in the tablet) or withholding the result once it is collected using the current instrument. Kenya has followed the second approach in its 2009 census to manage the political crisis following the 2007/2008 post-election violence.

In countries like Ethiopia where identity and the politics of number has the potential to threaten census operations an additional counter measure for restoring census credibility is to invite 'census monitors' into the country. These are more like election monitors only that in this case instead of 'ambassadors', 'OAU' officials and dignitaries, they would be trained demographers with experience and expertise in the science of census operations who will monitor the entire census operation (i.e. staff training, adequacy of tools, accuracy of census maps, census taking during enumeration, quality of census supervision, data reporting back to central station, preliminary census outputs etc.) against international standards and best practices. The country may seek help from the Union of African Population Scientists (UAPS), UNFPA, the

Statistical division of the ECA or its census development partners, to identify relevant individuals or groups for the task. Another approach is for NPC to issue international tender and invite successful groups and companies to undertake the monitoring task. Both approaches have been used in the past in several African countries (including Nigeria) and the involvement of monitors is seen to be vital in improving census credibility in polarised environments as it enhances transparency and accountability.

Hand in hand with the suggested views, CSA should endeavour to implement effective data quality assurance mechanisms during the data collection and processing stages, and at the same time assembling a team of experts to undertake comprehensive post-census data quality validation exercise before results are released to the public. These activities need also to be complemented by a robust post enumeration survey (PES) that would help identify potential coverage and content errors in the main census exercise.

Concluding remarks

The social, political and institutional challenges facing the upcoming census are enormous. However, as alluded to earlier these challenges are addressable. The question is, therefore, not about the scale or nature of the challenges, or the ability and commitment of the leadership of the country to address them. It is about the odds of getting them right and on time so that the country can deliver a credible census that it can use to serve and govern its people better rather than having a census that may as well end up as a source of division. From where I stand, which admittedly is far away from the activity centres, the chance of addressing the concerns before the census night is rather remote. The most sensible way to go about this is therefore to defer the census not for a few months, as this has been attempted before but to extend it to a reasonable future time to be determined by a national expert group. In the meanwhile, the government can make use of carefully generated population estimates that can be undertaken by an independent expert group or use already generated estimates from the United Nations or independent groups such as the Institute of Health Metrics and Evaluation at the University of Washington, which has sub-national disaggregation. These can go a long way to provide required population data for administrative, political and social needs of the country. If the country decides to go ahead with all the outstanding challenges highlighted earlier, and without putting effective remedial measures in place, chances are that the upcoming census could as well be the last census for a long time to come. As the good book says, “there is time for everything.” And taking the census on the declared date—April 7 2019 – does not appear to be one for Ethiopia.

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