Counting Forcibly Displaced Populations: 
Census and Registration Issues

UNHCR
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1. Counting, registering and documenting refugees and other forcibly displaced populations is a core activity of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to protect, assist and find durable solutions for these groups. The 1951 United Nations convention relating to the status of refugees makes various references to the importance of these processes for the protection of refugees. Without an adequate numerical basis, the provision of assistance is not possible and international protection cannot be assured.

2. In the first part, this note describes refugee census and registration activities. After stressing the importance of these activities for refugee protection and assistance and the different forms that registration may take, it discusses the main features of refugee registration and compares them with the national population census. The second part of this note focuses on recent experiences in dealing with refugee matters in the context of population census activities.

A. Refugee registration

1. Registration and the “refugee cycle”

3. Refugee enumeration is important, if not critical, at every stage of the “refugee cycle”, from initial displacement to voluntary repatriation, local integration or resettlement. In every “new” refugee situation, the call for a comprehensive census or registration is made early on by all UNHCR operational partners, including governments and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Although not possible during the first stages of an emergency, the census becomes a critical operational requirement once the situation has stabilized. During the course of the refugee situation, the refugee registration or census is often periodically repeated and forms the basis for many of the services extended to refugees. Once repatriation becomes feasible, refugee enumeration gains new momentum with a view to planning and implementing return and reintegration activities.

2. Refugee registration: a continuum

4. Refugee enumeration activities may take different forms, depending on the needs, the conditions, resources, the capacity of the host country and so forth. As such, it is difficult to describe the basic characteristics of a refugee registration. A critical factor determining the data-collection process is host-country capacity. In countries with limited national capacity, UNHCR may be de facto responsible for the enumeration process, whereas in countries with more developed statistical systems, UNHCR’s role may be limited to co-funding, advice or covering only a portion of the refugee population.

5. The possible shape of a refugee registration can be illustrated by the following diagram. The vertical axis represents the capacity of the host country, whereas the horizontal axis indicates the nature of the registration process, ranging from a purely census-type activity to a full-fledged registration system. Registrations in refugee camps located in sub-Saharan Africa countries are typically located in the lower right quadrant. Conversely, industrialized countries covering refugees in their national census are located in the upper right quadrant.
6. Although this note focuses on census and registration, it should be stressed that other mechanisms are used to collect information on refugees. For instance, if the sex and age distribution of the refugee population cannot be derived from the registration, a sample survey is often carried out to establish the basic demographic composition. Indeed, surveys often represent a cheap alternative data-collection mechanism for planning purposes. If, however, individual data are required, surveys are not an appropriate method of data collection.

3. A typical refugee registration scenario

7. One of the main UNHCR activities is to register refugees on an individual basis. Recording the names and basic characteristics ensures that refugees are known to UNHCR and thus can benefit from international protection and assistance. During a typical registration, a registration form is filled out for each refugee family and a refugee card is distributed. As registration information is automated, an increasing amount of refugee data, statistics and information is becoming available from UNHCR offices across the world. Whereas records of individual refugees are protected, aggregate data can be tabulated much more easily once available in electronic form.

8. Identification is an important component of refugee registration. Without some form of screening or identification, it is not possible to issue refugee cards, a process referred to as documentation. The refugee card is used for protection (the card bearer has been identified by the government or UNHCR as a refugee) and assistance (the card provides access to benefits and services) purposes. The refugee registration data are used for many purposes, including planning (aggregate data) and implementing (individual and aggregate data) programmes.

9. The main challenge of any refugee registration is to keep the records up to date, reflecting all increases and decreases in the population. Once the individual data have been collected, it is essential that demographic (births, deaths, arrivals, departures) and legal (cessation, naturalization, etc.) changes are reflected. In view of the high mobility of refugee populations, it is often not possible to reflect all changes. Indeed, a large new influx of refugees may require a complete overhaul of the existing registration system. Registration also becomes less accurate over time because of the fact that additions to the population (births, new arrivals) are much better reflected than decreases (deaths, departures). In many refugee camps, where the registration is directly linked to individual benefits, the registration system also becomes more inflated over time. In short, a refugee registration needs to be repeated periodically.

4. Comparing refugee registration and a population census

10. The above description indicates that a refugee registration contains both census and registration elements. The following table summarizes some major differences and commonalities between a population...
census and refugee registration.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Population census</th>
<th>Refugee registration</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Subject/purpose</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coverage</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scale</td>
<td>Nationwide</td>
<td>Generally &lt;500,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Criteria for inclusion</td>
<td>Presence</td>
<td>Identified as a refugee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frequency</td>
<td>Once per 5-10 yr.</td>
<td>Often annually</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data-collection period</td>
<td>One day</td>
<td>Often one day</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Updating of data</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes/partial</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Issuance of documentation</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual data created/used</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aggregate data created/used</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

a. Coverage
11. In principle, a refugee census covers all refugees. To ensure the fullest possible coverage, information campaigns are essential. Considering the important benefits (protection and assistance), refugees are generally interested in registering. In fact, there is strong pressure on the registration system for multiple registration.

b. Scale
12. The target refugee population is often below half a million persons, although a larger population is possible.

c. Criteria for inclusion
13. To be included in the registration, a refugee should be identified as being a refugee. This process is often referred to as screening: to the extent possible, local residents and others who are not eligible are screened out during the registration process. The screening process is often rather rudimentary considering that both refugees and local residents in developing countries often lack identity documents. This difficulty is further compounded if refugees are of the same ethnic origin as the local population. Although refugee status determination is, in principle, based on an individual screening process, refugees fleeing “en masse” are generally considered refugees on a group or prima facie basis. Until individual screening becomes possible, such persons are assumed to be refugees on the basis of purely objective criteria, such as having left the country as part of a group, during the same period and because of the same events.

d. Frequency
14. Because of the rapidly changing nature of refugee populations combined with the pressures on the system for individual registration, a refugee registration often has to be repeated. Although a standard frequency does not exist, major refugee camps are often re-registered once a year.

e. Data-collection period
15. While smaller refugee registration systems, such as in urban areas, are maintained and updated on a continuous basis, larger populations are generally registered during a very limited time period, often one day. At this occasion, all previously issued refugee documents are cancelled and new documents are distributed. This is a major incentive for refugees to come forward and to re-register. Depending on the quality of the existing registration system, a re-registration may either “start from scratch” or consist of a verification of existing records and a “revalidation” of refugee cards.

f. Updating of data

16. This is a very important aspect of any refugee registration. Considering that one of the main purposes of registration is to create individual records, the maintenance of such records is essential to retain their credibility.

g. Issuance of documentation

17. During the registration process, when the individual data are recorded, a card is often issued to the refugee or his/her family. The link between the record and card is ensured through the registration card number. Documentation is critical for refugees to demonstrate to the authorities in the asylum country that they are refugees and to protect them against “refoulement” or forcible return to their own country. The card also provides refugees access to essential services. As such, refugee identification (ID) cards represent a considerable value and are subject to illegal transfers.

h. Individual data created/used

18. The creation of an individual record which can be used subsequently is one of the main purposes of refugee registration. This is one of the key differences between refugee registration and a population census, where the creation of an individual record for future use is legally prohibited.

i. Aggregate data created/used

19. The creation of statistical tabulations is the main objective of a population census, to be used for planning and resource allocation purposes. However, this is generally considered less important during a refugee registration, mainly because refugee data become quickly outdated. Consequently, the planning of international assistance to refugees is often not only based on the results of the registration, but also takes into account assumptions with regard to new arrivals or departures during the planning period. In the absence of registration—e.g., during emergencies—planning assumptions are generally based on population estimates. In this context, it should be stressed that planning of refugee services requires two sets of data. First, the total size of the population is needed and second, basic population characteristics should be available.

5. Registering internally displaced

20. While, in principle, the above considerations also apply to the registration of internally displaced persons (IDP), in reality IDP registration occurs much less frequently and the results are often contested. One of the few regions where IDP registration is carried out fairly regularly is in the countries of the former Yugoslavia and in the Commonwealth of Independent States. In these countries, the national IDP registration is based on national legislation and linked to provision of (limited) state benefits. In other countries, IDP registration figures are either highly disputed (e.g., Colombia or Sri Lanka) or non-existent (sub-Saharan Africa).
There are a number of reasons for the qualitative differences between the registration of refugees and internally displaced. First, IDPs have much less motivation to register. From the viewpoint of international protection, refugees have significantly more rights than internally displaced persons. Both legally and in practice, it is much more difficult to provide protection to IDPs within their own country as compared with refugees who have crossed an international border. From the viewpoint of assistance, refugee programmes generally offer regular benefits and services whereas aid to IDPs tends to be more ad hoc. Second, internal displacement tends to be more dynamic than international displacement. Whereas refugee situations become stable following a crisis situation, IDPs tend to return to their place of origin much earlier. Third, by crossing an international border, refugees become of interest to the asylum country. Registration and documentation are essential tools for the receiving country to control immigration. Internally displaced persons, who by definition have not crossed an international border, are not subject to any migration controls. Registration requirements for the purpose of movement within a country are significantly less than for the purpose of immigration.

B. Refugees in the national census: recent experiences

1. Refugees excluded from current census recommendations

In countries with a sizeable refugee population, the census constitutes a unique opportunity to validate existing refugee enumeration systems. At present, however, no international recommendations exist for governments to deal with asylum-seekers or refugees in the national population census. While a proposal to this end was made by UNHCR to the Statistical Commission in the mid-1990s, this has yet to be reflected in the UN census recommendations.

During the 2000 round of censuses, a number of countries have planned or implemented a refugee question in the national population census, including Uganda, Zambia, countries of the Commonwealth of Independent States, countries in former Yugoslavia, Sri Lanka and Switzerland. Generally, countries interested in including refugees in the census approach UNHCR for advice and support.

The pressure to identify and enumerate refugees is not limited to the context of the national population census, however. The past few years have witnessed a strong increase in official registration activities of nationals and non-nationals and the issuance of identity documents by governments in developing countries. The introduction of such systems requires the proper identification of all foreigners, including refugees. Countries which have approached UNHCR for assistance in the national registration of refugees as part of the introduction of a national ID card system include Kenya and the Islamic Republic of Iran.

2. Including refugee questions in the census

There are two major issues when providing guidance and support to countries interested in including refugee and asylum issues in the national population census. First, refugees should in principle be counted during the census. If the census is to cover the total de facto resident population in the country, refugees should also be included. Too often, refugees are not counted in the census because they form a “special category”. Second, countries should be encouraged to add a question for foreigners regarding the reason for staying in the host country. Currently, population censuses establish only the number of non-nationals and/or foreign-born persons in the country, not whether these foreigners have entered for the purpose of labour migration, immigration/settlement, study, refugee protection/asylum, as dependants or for family reunification/formation purposes.

In this context, it should be recalled that one of the main reasons for issuing the new UN recommendations on international migration statistics was precisely to elucidate the reason for stay. As traditional international migration statistics often do not reveal the types of migrant, the purpose or reason for
stay became one of the main organizing principles of the new statistical recommendations. By adding a question on the reason for stay, the census will be able to help bridge this important gap in international migration data.

27. Using the national population census to elucidate the reason for staying in the country is particularly relevant in Europe, where data by type of migration are mostly lacking. Policy makers at the national and the international level consider the absence of comparable information on the reason to stay as one of the biggest limitations of currently available population statistics. Considering the importance of population registers in this part of the world, this type of information should also be made available from the national population registers and included in any international recommendations governing these systems.

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