



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

5-8 December 2022

Algiers, Algeria

CONCEPT NOTE

I. BACKGROUND

The census is one of the primary sources of data on a nation's population and its socio-economic characteristics. Many of the most important decisions made in both the public and private sectors are based on the information provided by the census. Census data are used to determine political representation, allocate government funds, inform business development and investment, and estimate the gross domestic product (GDP) and other leading socio-economic indicators. Census data are also essential for effective administration and to monitor the performance of socio-economic programmes. The consequences of census data being of poor quality can severely diminish the usefulness of the results and may be detrimental to policy decisions and ultimately call into question the credibility of the entire census, and the competency of the national statistical system. Such concerns may also damage public trust. Hence, the importance of a comprehensive and systematic quality assurance programme can never be over-emphasized.

A census operation must include a quality assurance and improvement programme to measure the quality of each stage. Such a quality assurance and improvement system should be developed as part of the overall census programme and integrated with other census plans, schedules and procedures. Since quality is the outcome of processes, the key to quality assurance and improvement is continuous monitoring and measurement of the cost, timeliness and accuracy of a given process so that the process can be improved when a decline in quality is observed. It is important that a complete evaluation takes place and is documented at the end of each phase of the census. This should be done particularly for phases such as enumeration, so that the organizational learning is carried forward to the next census.

The economic and social disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and other crisis situations has adversely impacted the implementation of 2020 round censuses. The pandemic has challenged the plans of national statistical offices to conduct 2020 round censuses as scheduled and to produce timely, accurate and reliable census statistics. Particularly, countries conducting their census with the traditional method or with the combined census methodology are under pressure to develop actions plans to reduce the impact of COVID-19 on census operations and on data quality.

Since WHO's declaration in March 2020 of the coronavirus outbreak as a pandemic, UNSD, as part of its monitoring activities, convened two expert group meetings and conducted two rounds of survey in order to assess the impact of the pandemic on census-taking. Based on the extensive discussions held in the meetings and the information compiled from the surveys, it is evident that in the majority of countries the pandemic is having a significant adverse impact on multiple levels, including on the overall quality and comparability of census results. The major findings include:

- Censuses are being postponed and enumeration periods are being extended.

- Census costs have increased in the majority of countries. Measures to protect enumerators and respondents from the spread of the virus has increased costs. The postponement of planned activities, such as field work, meant that the costs of field staff and storing census materials and devices would be much higher than initially planned. The switch to data collection techniques that do not require direct contact with respondents requires meticulous and extended testing and enhanced publicity campaigns to inform the public and educate field staff on new modes of data collection, all activities which may not have been included in the original census budget. Furthermore, the implementation of such techniques requires significant additional investment, for example, in developing detailed geographical frames, as address registers are not readily available in many countries.
- The pandemic has made some segments of the population more difficult to enumerate. Periods of lockdown, travel restrictions and mandatory quarantines have prompted changes to the expected location of some population groups such as students and workers, which is likely to negatively impact the quality of census statistics.
- The late adoption of data collection methods that minimize face-to-face interviewing (such as Internet and mail self-enumeration or telephone interviewing) could potentially affect the overall quality of the census. Applying these methods at a late stage may pose challenges in designing, testing and operationalizing these instruments.

In response to the challenges posed by the pandemic, UNFPA, in collaboration with UNSD, developed the *Guidance Note on Personal Protection Equipment (PPE)* for countries proceeding with the population and housing census during the COVID-19 pandemic. The guidance aims to reduce the risk of transmission of COVID-19 to census personnel and to the general public. UNFPA also developed the *Technical Brief on the Implications of COVID-19 on Census* (Update No. 1, March 25, 2020). Key recommendations and resources were included in the brief to assist UNFPA Country Offices in supporting governments with contingency planning, technical guidance, capacity strengthening, and advocacy for pandemic preparedness and response and for the importance of the census for development.

Several countries have succeeded in adapting to the circumstances of the pandemic. Such countries have implemented a number of changes in their methods and procedures of data collection, publicity campaigns and engagement with data users and stakeholders. Some countries have adjusted their questionnaires and the applicable instructions to provide additional clarification and guidance to enumerators and respondents necessitated by the pandemic circumstances, while others have succeeded in using administrative data sources to reduce contact with respondents as well as to improve the quality of the census operation.

In the context of the obstacles of census-taking owing to the COVID-19 pandemic, interest in exploiting administrative registers to enhance census data collection has become more urgent. An increasing number of countries are exploring the possibility of transitioning to a registers-based census, especially for the forthcoming 2030 census round and beyond. In response to this demand, UNSD has drafted the *Handbook on Registers-based Population and Housing Censuses*. The purpose of the handbook is to strengthen the capacity of national statistical offices and census agencies on the process of transitioning from the traditional census methodology to other approaches involving the use of administrative registers and/or sources. The handbook also aims to elaborate on the key considerations and requirements for transitioning from the traditional census to other census methodologies involving the use of administrative registers, and on the importance of building institutional capacity and infrastructure for maintaining statistical registers. Once adopted by the Statistical Commission, the handbook will become a component of the United Nations methodological framework for population and housing censuses, anchored by the United Nations

Principles and Recommendations for Population and Housing Censuses, and consisting of the accompanying handbooks and manuals on specific census topics.

II. ORGANIZATION

The workshop is organized by UNSD in collaboration with the UNFPA Arab States Regional Office, the United Nations Economic Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA), and the Arab Institute for Training and Research on Statistics (AITRS).

The 4-day workshop is planned to be held from 5 to 8 December 2022 in Algiers, Algeria. The workshop will be held as a physical meeting. Participants are expected to take the necessary precautions and preventive measures due to COVID-19.

The workshop will be held in English. Simultaneous interpretation in Arabic and vice-versa will be provided.

III. OBJECTIVES

The workshop aims to help Arabic-speaking countries in achieving a common and enhanced understanding of international recommendations and standards on quality assurance in population and housing censuses, the impact and challenges of conducting a population and housing census during the COVID-19 pandemic and other crisis situations, and the necessary preconditions and the challenges of transitioning to a registers-based census. The workshop will also provide a platform to discuss the experience, challenges and good practices available among Arabic-speaking countries in census-taking during the 2020 census round.

The specific and interrelated objectives of the workshop are to:

- i) Review the current international recommendations and standards on quality assurance in population and housing censuses, and discuss national census quality assurance programmes in Arabic-speaking countries, with focus on the challenges of assuring quality in all phases of the census;
- ii) Discuss the impact of COVID-19 on census-taking in Arabic-speaking countries, focusing on potential adjustments to census questionnaires and census methodology as well as on assessment of the adverse impact of the pandemic on the quality and comparability of census data;
- iii) Review the necessary preconditions and the challenges of transitioning from the traditional census to that relying on data from administrative registers, and discuss national plans and experience in Arabic-speaking countries in transforming administrative data into census data.

The Workshop will bring together census managers and experts from national statistical offices, census agencies, international and regional organizations to exchange views and experience on the three interrelated themes of the workshop.