

# BUSINESSREPORT

## Service and integrity play a major role

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Stats SA launched Census 2011 last Sunday, the 10th day of the 10th month in the 10th year of this millennium. In getting ready for this very important task, bean counters in South Africa kicked off with a dress rehearsal in preparation for the big one on October 10 next year.

October appears to be not only an important month in South Africa due to it being a census month - for Census 1996, Census 2001 and now Census 2011 - but this year October also hosts a date declared World Statistics Day 2010.

UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has declared October 20 World Statistics Day. He chose the themes of service, professionalism and integrity as key areas for reflection on the contribution statistics have made to the world.

Nurse of repute Florence Nightingale made the important statistical observation that more soldiers died in hospitals than in the field of war. This startling discovery led to improved medical care in hospitals with the introduction of antibiotics in the treatment of wounds. Statistics provide evidence for making proper decisions.

I cannot celebrate World Statistics Day without recalling my formative years in official statistics in former homeland Bophuthatswana. I encountered well-informed people deliberately ignoring statistical evidence in their decisions. A study was conducted for redesigning Mafikeng's commuter transport facility to enable commuters to access transport more easily.

Data from Census 1985, the first census I led, showed Mafikeng and surrounds had a population of about 160 000. In 1986, Professor Cowley of the University of Bophuthatswana, consultant to a transport-planning company, decided to ignore census results and supported the notion the 1985 was a gross undercount.

In their "science", they decided to double the figures. Their "findings" suggested the entire Mafikeng square should be allocated to BTH buses to facilitate a better commuter service.

Motale Phirwa and I advised against their "science" and suggested they accept the census figures' evidence - but to no avail. So, all four sides of the Mafikeng square were lined with exclusive parking for buses to pick up and drop off commuters.

Week after week the buses came and left half full. For at least three months in 1986, this persisted. Finally the Mafikeng Council decided to retain only two sides of the square and it worked. Only in about 1992 did the buses occupy the entire square and this corresponded with the doubling of the population of Mafikeng and its surrounds, due mainly to migration.

This case study is one of many municipalities may experience.

Another case was in the post-election period of 1994. South Africa was reconstructing its socio-economic space and creating provinces. In reconfiguring the geographic space, the pre-1994 population figures of South Africa and its homelands had to be added together to give a notion of the newly constructed provinces' numerical size.

The North West Province was part of this reconstruction. Everyone was eager to assist the new political formation with figures. The Central Statistics Service (CSS), HSRC, DBSA, Bophuthatswana Statistics, Bureau of Market Research (Unisa), and private consultants were tumbling over one another in this ugly beauty contest to get the attention of the powers that be.

It was a sad moment to see how the dearth of information led to uninformed enthusiasm that bore the potential to mislead rather than inform authority.

The powers that remained standing after this disorderly contest were the DBSA and Bophuthatswana Statistics. A DBSA official encouraged premier Popo Molefe and director-general Job Mokgoro not to believe the statistics office's figures, arguing they put the North West Province at a disadvantage. He said the North West population should be 3.6 million and not 2.8 million, as established by the then North West Statistics.

Premier Molefe and director general Mokgoro accepted the information from North West Statistics and decided against the DBSA's advice. The figure by Census 96 was only 2.9 million, vastly different to the 3.6 million the DBSA claimed.

So, as we celebrate World Statistics Day, we should remember we serve, do so with professionalism and integrity, and use the spectrum of statistical resources across the country which, in terms of statute, is led by the statistician-general.

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