

Accurate Demographic Data Needed

Accurate Census Data Are Key to Decisionmaking

Despite the international community's focus on recent major education initiatives—Education for All, the Fast Track Initiative, and G8 commitments—support for population census work has seriously deteriorated. In many sub-Saharan African countries, the population census and supporting information about household characteristics and schooling are on 11- or 12-year cycles rather than 10-year cycles. In some countries, population estimates are based on data 8–10 years old and are seriously wrong. Data from provinces, regions, or districts—where most education intervention takes place—are even more inaccurate. Similar problems are occurring in the Middle East and the Asian subcontinent.

Virtually every governmental ministry and supporting organization requires accurate census data to judge demand for services. This is particularly true of health and education ministries, which require good population data by single age, gender, and location. Schools need to know how many children are not served, drop out, or move away. Schools also need data on growth trends of school-age populations. Virtually all of these data depend upon accurate and timely census enumeration. This is now all the more critical because the effects of HIV/AIDS remain in dispute.

Consequences of Bad Data

Because of poor support and inattention to consistent, accurate, and timely census data, ministries make up their own information. Most are reluctant to do so, but the result is clearly inaccurate population data and nonsensical education indicators. Ministry officials spend a great deal of time explaining anomalies caused by these inaccuracies.

Countries are increasingly grouped according to their performance on population-dependent indicators that often lack consistency and accuracy. International comparisons will be further skewed, often for countries most in need of international assistance. For example, net enrollment rates (NERs)—the number of school-age children who are attending school divided by the school-age population—far exceed 100 percent in several African countries.

Key Conditions for Success

1. Understanding and acknowledgment that good decision making requires accurate data
2. Commitments from many sources—especially the country leadership—to solving the problem of inaccurate data
3. Consistent funding to gather and analyze data
4. Involvement of knowledgeable persons early in the process of data collection
5. Careful linkage of data to important educational outcomes

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The critical dependence of educational planning units on accurate population information has not been well communicated to decision makers. Some people holding political office and within the international donor community are losing faith in the value of population data. This results in anecdotal analysis, development of alternate projections by unskilled demographic analysts, or rejection of requests.

Often, ministries experience the consequences of poor population data in isolation and at the last minute. Seldom do task forces or organized groups across social-sector ministries band together to resolve data issues. The tradition of isolated and fragmented responsibility prevails, resulting in the central statistical office or group carrying the sole burden of finding solutions. Donors also often respond at the last minute, just before a major policy session or a budgetary crisis involving the next annual census. Donors who want the country to support its own census play a kind of budget brinkmanship, withholding commitments to force the country to find census support funds.

Many countries do not set aside funds for even a 10-year census, claiming that their budgets will not allow it. Others note that census results take so long to process that they are of marginal use. The claim is that census results are useful primarily to donors, who have the time and funds for analyses. The fact remains, however, that if data are not gathered, they will not be monitored. And even when data are available, busy and stressed officials often do not possess the background to fully understand them.

Some Steps Toward a Solution

Generating accurate population statistics is a full-time enterprise that requires recognition and consistent support. Officials in key social-sector ministries also need to be more knowledgeable about population trends and details on a monitored, annual basis. This might be included as part of the normally required PRSP (Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper). Ministry officials require ongoing training, which should not be limited to staff in central statistical offices.

Leaders at district or equivalent levels need to be aware of the status and educational performance of their populations. Further, information gathered should be disseminated widely to sensitize people to what is known.

Key Questions

- Are key officials aware of the state of country's population data?
- What do they expect of their central statistical office?
- What do these key officials least understand about the importance of gathering and analyzing accurate demographic data?
- What might be the best way to improve their understanding of the use and importance of accurate demographic data?

Joint efforts, sector-wide approaches, or coordinated donor efforts should establish minimum data requirements, beginning with population data. These efforts should be funded over the life of an intervention. At a minimum, population-dependent education indicators should be fully identified. These should be monitored for accuracy and consistency by a special group, along the lines of NER committees established by some countries to resolve district rates exceeding 100 percent. Prior to any international donor meeting, sufficient time should be allowed to discuss the implications of discovered data or trends and thoroughly vet the information.

Countries need to establish special committees to ensure that sufficient technical assistance is available and country personnel are skilled and knowledgeable. This may be achieved by involving selected personnel from U.S. Bureau of the Census or the OECD. Through FHI 360, other contributions might be made by the Population Reference Bureau, or with CD- or online-based training for ministry personnel.

Donors and countries also need to establish alternatives for judging the accuracy of indicators and population estimates. Values can be checked by using the Demographic and Health Surveys or EdData surveys at periodic intervals. In addition, tracking or follow-up surveys should be used, particularly for critical populations.

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