

The Impact of Census on National Development: An Appraisal of Nigerian Past Censuses

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Abstract

Since Nigeria attained political independence in 1960, all efforts at conducting population census have met with serious problems. Consequently, planning for socio-economic development of the nation has been adversely affected by the inadequacy, obsolescence and unreliability of available demographic data. Past national development plans have failed partly because of lack of demographic data for planning. Hence, there is the need for an accurate, reliable and acceptable population census for the country. This concern has become of even greater significance in the face of the dynamism of modern day socio-economic planning both at the macro and micro levels. Thus, this paper assessed the conduct of past population censuses in the country, identified the challenges of conducting an acceptable reliable census in the country and proffered solutions for the challenges. The aim is to x-ray the importance of population census on national development and as a clarion call on Nigerian government for a successful census that will generate acceptable demographic data for planning to ensure even development of every sector of the country. The paper relied on secondary data and content analysis of the data.

Keywords: *census; development; demographic; unreliability and dynamism*

Introduction

The need for an accurate, reliable and acceptable population census in Nigeria cannot be over emphasized. This concern has become of even greater significance in the face of the dynamism of modern day socio-economic planning both at the macro and micro levels. In Nigeria, planning for socio-economic development has been adversely affected by the inadequacy, obsolescence and unreliability of available demographic data. Past national development plans in Nigeria have failed simply because of lack of demographic data for planning. Demographic data derived from population censuses are useful to every government for planning.

The urgency of Nigeria's development needs has generated concern not only in Nigeria itself but also throughout the world. Nigeria presently ranks as the capital of poverty of the world. Thus, efforts at self reliant growth must proceed at a very rapid pace if the welfare of Nigerian citizens is to be improved (Neiraland 2019). However, the basic ingredients for planning for development, that is, population data, including the actual number of the population and its composition according to age, sex among others remain largely unknown. Available estimates of the total population in the country, in each state and in each local government areas are mainly guesses.

Planning for development without the most fundamental fact i.e. the number and characteristics of the people whose welfare is to be improved and those among this number who must work in all sectors of the economy to bring about the much needed development is tantamount to groping in the dark (Ugwu, 1993).

Successive Nigerian governments during both the colonial and post colonial periods understood the importance of an accurate census as the basic tool for development planning. Consequently, censuses of parts and the whole of Nigeria have been conducted since 1866. However, since Nigeria attained political independence in 1960, all efforts at conducting a national census have met with serious problems. Among the several reasons for unsuccessful attempts at census taking is inadequate education about the census and general ignorance regarding population census in general and the use of census data in particular.

It has been noted that the importance of population as a factor in national planning development is now generally regarded as a major concern all over the world including Nigeria and the rest of Africa. In recent years, most African development plans have noted the importance of population size and on development. In Nigeria for example, this demographic factor was given full recognition in all the national development plans formulated since independence. Unfortunately some of the national development plans like the fourth national development plan, 1981-1985 devoted a chapter to the issue of population but made no attempt to integrate population to actual planning process (Ugwu 1993).

According to, United Nations Population Fund "the information generated by a population and housing census i.e. numbers of people, their distribution, their living conditions and other key data is critical for development." This is because this type of data is essential for policymakers so that they know where to invest. Unfortunately, many countries have outdated or inaccurate data about their populations and thus have difficulty in addressing the needs of the population.

UNFPA Notes that:

The unique advantage of the census is that it represents the entire statistical universe, down to the smallest geographical units, of a country or region. Planners need this information for all kinds of development work, including: assessing demographic trends; analyzing socio-economic conditions; designing evidence-based poverty-reduction strategies; monitoring and evaluating the effectiveness of policies; and tracking progress toward national and internationally agreed development goals (UNFPA 2016).

In addition to making policymakers aware of population issues, census is also an important tool for identifying forms of social, demographic or economic exclusions, such as inequalities relating to race, ethnicity and religion as well as disadvantaged groups such as those with disabilities and the poor. An accurate census can empower local communities by providing them

with the necessary information to participate in local decision-making and ensuring they are represented. This article therefore reviewed the conduct of past censuses in Nigeria and the impact of census on national development. It is also, an attempt to draw the attention of the policy makers/planners to the close relationship between population and development.

Conceptual Clarifications

Population

The word population is from the Latin word *populare*. Strictly speaking, a population is a group or collection of items. However, to a demographer, a population is a group or collection of people. Preston, Heuveline, and Guillot (2001) have distinguished between a specific population or group of actual people alive at a given period of time and the population that persists over time even though its actual members may change. But as McNicoll (2003) has noted the more common use of the term population by demographers and in modern English usage is with regard to a “well-defined set, with clear-cut membership criteria”.

Census

A census is the procedure of systematically acquiring and recording information about the members of a given population. Population census is the process of collecting, compiling, evaluating, analyzing and publishing or otherwise disseminating demographic, economic and social data pertaining, at a specified time to all persons in a country or in a well delimited part of a country. Census in other words is a purely a statistical exercise. A census is a count, an enumeration and the publication, after careful checks of results of that exercise. This term is used mostly in connection with national population and housing censuses; other common censuses include traditional culture, business supplies, agricultural, and traffic censuses (United Nations 2008).

Population Census

The idea of population census is that, everybody is counted, but the fact remains that everybody cannot be counted; that is, a complete and accurate population census in any part of the world is impossible. However, in spite of this inherent difficulty, population census is necessary. Afolayan (1982) once pointed out that Population constitutes a vital component of the resource base and the development potential of any country. This is because according to Fred (1988) ‘there is growing recognition of the complexity of the relationship between development and population’. Former President of Nigeria, Chief Olusegun Obasanjo in 2006 in the like manner stressed and noted that census is indispensable to the nation’s quest of sustainable development’ (Obasanjo, 2006). From the foregoing therefore, population census becomes a vital aspect of any nation, developed or developing. On the account of the increasing realization that population is a factor for planning and development, the Nigerian Government has over the years expended and exerted much in order to achieve a reliable census (Bamgbose, 2009).

The United Nations defines the essential features of population censuses as "individual enumeration, universality within a defined territory, simultaneity and defined periodicity", and

recommends that population censuses be taken at least every ten years. United Nations recommendations also cover census topics to be collected, official definitions, classifications and other useful information to co-ordinate international practices(United Nations 2008).

Trendsof Nigerian Censuses

Under the census ordinance of 1863, the first census recorded in Nigeria took place in 1866 and covered only the Lagos area. The next census was in 1871 and marked the beginning of decennial census in Nigeria. Nigeria being a British colony followed the British tradition of taking censuses in years ending with '1'. Other censuses of the Lagos colony and its surrounding areas followed in 1881, 1891, and 1901. These early attempts to conduct the census of the population of Lagos colony were mainly unsuccessful. In 1906 Lagos was merged with the then protectorate of Sothern Nigeria. Consequently, the census of 1911 covered the whole of the then Southern Nigeria. It was organized from the Government House Zungeru to fulfill the desire of Great Britain to have an idea of the population of her empire. Unfortunately insurrections in the North and hostility in the south marred the census exercise (Ugwu 1993).

It was the 1921 census that covered the whole country following the amalgamation of Nigeria in 1914. Three years after the amalgamation a census ordinance was passed on October 25, 1917 under which the 1921 census was conducted. Dr. P. Amaury Talbet conducted the census in Southern Nigeria. It was conducted in two parts: one for the towns called the township census, and the other for the rest of the country called the provincial census. It was hindered by several difficulties, two of which were the intervention of world war which led to shortage of European assistants and the antagonism of natives. It yielded rather inaccurate results. Meek who conducted the census of Northern Nigeria in 1921 also pointed out the inaccuracy of the figures.

In 1931, there was an attempt to take another census of the whole country. Unfortunately, due to economic depression at the time, locust invasion in the North and tax riots in Aba, Onitsha and Owerri during 1929-30, the census did not again cover the whole country. Rather, actual counting of persons took place only in Lagos and other five townships, in two hundred and one villages in Northern Nigeria, and for all foreign population in the country at the time. The other persons and places, an estimate of the population was derived from existing tax returns and records. These difficulties made the census of 1931 a very difficult and unsuccessful exercise.

The two censuses (those of 1921 and 1931) which followed the amalgamation fall far short for various reasons, of being true census. They fell far short of universal coverage, and only in a few places were actual enumeration conducted. Census figures were derived from ethnological and historical enquiries and from tax records. Additional drawbacks of these censuses were of administrative and financial nature. The colonial administrators lacked expertise in census-taking thus, the colonial censuses were poorly financed.

Hence, from 1866to 1931, the censuses were largely inaccurate as they did not meet all the accepted characteristics of a census which are individual enumeration, universality, simultaneity and defined periodicity. The second world war interrupted the series of decennial censuses conducted in years ending with '1'. The 1951/53 census was therefore been acclaimed as the first modern, national and carefully planned census in Nigeria. But in-order to allow the department

of statistics to handle the great volume of data generated, the principle of simultaneous counting of population was abandoned and the census period was staggered to take place at various times between 1950 and 1953.

The census of Lagos was the first to be conducted between 1950 and 1951 and was used as a trial, to test the suitability of the new method to be used. The census of Northern Nigeria was taken between May and July 1952. Census of persons resident in the West and the Mid-West were conducted in December 1952 and January 1953, while the census was conducted in the East in May, June and August 1953. In all the exercises was a great improvement on previous censuses in that it covered the whole country.

The 1952/53 census also suffered a lot of other inadequacies. Although the country was more developed economically and socially than in the years before the Second World War, many Nigerians still remained suspicious of the motives for the census. Many persons did not readily agree to have their wives and children counted since the number of wives and children, at the time was a measure of a man's wealth. It was suspected that the census would enable the tax collectors to demand heavier taxes from persons who have many wives and children and some persons regarded the census as a means of providing the names of persons to be conscripted into the army.

In preparation for elections into the Federal House of Representatives, the data from the 1952//53 censuses were used as the basis for allocating 50% representation to the North. This action by the colonial administrators was fiercely contested by politicians from the Southern regions (East and West). They argued that the colonial government had deliberately and falsely increased the number of people in the North in-order to ensure that the political control in the country remained with the Northern politicians who favored the British colonialists. As a result, gradually, from 1952, the people became aware that political power arising from the number of elected members of parliament or local councils as well as the allocation of government amenities, such as schools, hospitals, pipe-born water and electricity depended largely on the size of the population. Since Nigeria attained Independence in 1960 the population of each region or state has become the yardstick for deciding how much of the country's annual earnings are allocated to the region or state.

The recorded size of the population of each state according to census data is a crucial factor in determining, in political and economic terms, the relative importance of each state. This made more literate persons as well as political leaders become very interested in and enthusiastic about the political and monetary value of population census. Hence, in subsequent censuses after 1952/53 census exercise, the elites in each political unit tried to ensure not only that all their own people are counted, but also that they were counted two or more times, if possible, in order record as high a figure as could be achieved. The unfortunate mixture and confusion of political issues with population count was mainly responsible for the problems encountered in the 1962/63, 1973 and 1991 censuses.

The 1962 census covered the whole country and was taken simultaneously in May 1962. A great deal of publicity was given to the census in order to educate the public about the importance of

census in National development. In 1962, Nigeria was a federation of three regions governed by three political parties each of which drew its support largely from one ethnic group. Consequently, a shift in the distribution of population was vital importance in the balance of political and economic power among the regions. Given this lack of social integration and the fear of ethnic domination, there were rumors, long before the census results were made public, that the census totals had been inflated in certain regions. In the end, the controversies led to the cancellation of the census. Another census followed in 1963 and the Federal Government accepted the results without further reference to the regional governments. Despite better preparations and the hiring of more moderators, the 1962 census figures were more accurate than the figures hurriedly executed 1963 count.

The 1973 census was conducted from 25th November to 2nd December by the then National Census Board which was specifically set up for the purpose. A great deal of preparation work was carried out in order to reduce or avoid altogether the short comings of 1962 and 1963 censuses and to ensure that the census figures could be acceptable to the federal and state governments. Unfortunately, there were reports that the figures were inflated in some states. Eventually, the census was also cancelled after enumeration stage and no data were published.

On April, 22, 1988 the National Population Commission was inaugurated with a three year mandate to conduct an acceptable census. Hopes were raised for improved and more efficient conduct of census in Nigeria. The hope culminated in the conduct of the 1991 census between November 27 and 30th 1991 and the acceptable of a population figure of 88,514,501 by the Armed Forces Ruling Council as a confirmed population of the nation on March 19, 1992. The great improvements in transport and accessibility of most areas, in technological capability, and in the level of education throughout the country, as well as the generalized acceptance of national coherence and legitimacy, favored the success of the 1991 census. It was conducted in about 250,000 enumeration areas by the National Population Commission, with offices in each of the country's Local Government Areas (Wikipedia Online).

The 1991, census has been claimed by the Federal Government, the National Population Commission (NPC) and some groups of people to be most accurate census figure in the nation's history. This claim was made even though the final figures were not released. But the figures were not as controversial as the pessimists have claimed. Some commentators have denounced the figures as either under-estimates or over-estimates of the true population of the country. The pronouncements coming from the supporters and opposes of the figures at governmental level are the type that derailed 1953 census and cast doubt on the census.

Of all National census conducted in Nigeria between 1952 and 1973 only the 1952/53 result was accepted, the result of the 1963 count was controversial while that of 1973 census was rejected on the grounds of over-enumeration and gross manipulation of figures. The consequence was that the past National development planning and projection had been based on estimates which did not augur well for a proper and accurate national planning.

Despite these problems and failures of past censuses, the government is still committed to having a census because of immeasurable gains of census. Census statistics are the basic data required for planning administrative and research strategies. The greatest asset of any nation is her population in that it is the population that works to develop the wealth of the nation. No government, be it federal or state that can claim to adequately cater for its population unless, it has a clear idea not only of the size but also of the characteristics of the population; hence, the commitment to having a reliable census.

The last census in the country was held in 2006 during the time of former President Olusegun Obasanjo. This was over 15 years after the last one was held. The population was announced to have grown by more than 50% to 140 million. Thus, showing implausibly, each Nigerian state managed to maintain its exact share of the population across two censuses, 15 years apart. But like the ones before it; it met with criticisms from different quarters, leaving the questions about when the country would get its census right.

In what would appear to be a punchy verdict on all the past censuses in the country, a former chairman of the NPC, Chief Festus Odimegwu, had maintained that no census has been credible in Nigeria since 1863. *He noted:*

No census in Nigeria had been credible; even the one conducted in 2006 is not credible. I have the records and evidence produced by scholars and professors of repute. This is not my report. If the current laws are not amended, the planned 2016 census will not succeed (Bamgbose, 2009).

Though that position appeared to have led to his exit as NPC boss in 2013, political observers have maintained that his view still rankles and that the self-same question on when the country will get things right with census must begin to agitate the minds of well-meaning Nigerians. From the forgoing, it is obvious that the results of Nigerian censuses had been controversial. In the case of 1963 census the result was accepted more as a compromise. The effect of this is the failure of most of the well thought out development plans in Nigeria especially after independence.

The Challenges of Population Census in Nigeria

The British Government that colonized Nigeria thought it necessary to introduce population Census in Nigeria but attitudinal dispositions of many Nigerians and politicization of population censuses have been resulting into a series of undercounts and unnecessary data falsification. From the inception therefore, censuses in Nigeria have been experiencing credibility crises. A number of disagreements have arisen over the conduct of population censuses which have been threatening Nigerian unity.

The Political Bureau appointed by the Babangida administration was aware of the problematic nature of Nigeria's population census when it remarked that:

An overview of the Nigerian political experiences since independence in 1960 shows clearly that among the many

issues that have created great anxiety and brought the country to the brink of collapse has been the attempt at obtaining an accurate count of the country's population. The potency of the issue as a source of confusion and a national discord is underscored by the fact that attempts made by civilians (1962 - 1963) and the military (1973) were greeted with the same degree of cynicism, suspicion and controversies and had to be cancelled (Political Bureau Report, 1987)

Thus while the Bureau's report actually described the situation with Nigeria's census from 1960, the problem goes beyond 1960. Beginning with 1789 population census which was the first census in Nigeria and other population censuses that followed such as those of 1815, 1855, 1861, 1866 and 1868, 1871, 1881, and 1891 were restricted to Lagos. Such head counts were not extended to other parts of the country. Many methods were used for enumeration; besides, enumerators in 1881 were paid by the head count that is, according to the number of people each of them recorded (Ugwu, 1993).

The main factor militating against a successful and acceptable census in the country has been identified as over politicization. It is a general opinion that too many things are tied to population. For example, revenue allocation, legislative representation, location of industries and the provision of other social amenities have so far been based on population which resulted in officials and indigenes inflating figures in favour of their place of origin. Other problems include selfish sectional interest, dishonesty on the part of census officials.

Most Nigerians are ignorant of the nature of a census, its basic elements, its execution and its position as the cornerstone for social and economic planning for overall development of a country. The result of such general ignorance is that citizens who are to be counted in a census have been suspicious of enumerators, and in some cases have been uncooperative or openly hostile. Wrong assumptions about the use to which census data are put are mainly responsible for some spurious information given to enumerators or attempts by some to be counted several times.

The Gains of a Reliable Census

Many academicians have written books on the unfortunate history of census in Nigeria. From the census taken in 1963, a year after the founding of the colony of Lagos, Nigeria has so far recorded many censuses but none of them could be considered as being accurate or reliable. Whereas part of the pre-independence censuses were marred by problems such as inaccessibility, lack of communication and transportation facilities, as well as uncooperative attitudes of the people which led to under-enumeration, the post-independence on the other hand were plagued by political influence, which resulted in the over-enumeration of the population.

Despite the failure of past censuses, the government had continued to undertake census due to the gain the country stands to gain from such gigantic task. Census is the main source of population statistics in many countries of the world. It is also seen as a social photograph of

certain conditions expressible in a population of a country at a given moment. According to the United Nation's recommendation census could determine the following;

- a. Total population, sex, age and status.
- b. Place of birth, citizenship or nationality
- c. Mother tongue, literacy and educational qualifications.
- d. Economic characteristics.
- e. Urban or rural domicile.
- f. Household or family structure.
- g. fertility pattern.

Also census, statistics are the basic data required for planning administrative and research strategies. The greatest asset of any nation is her population in that it is the population that works to develop the wealth of the nation. There is no government that can claim to adequately cater for its population unless it has a clear idea not only of the size but also of the characteristics of the population, hence the commitment to having a reliable population census by nations of the world.

There are two ways in which population components derived from the process of conducting a census can proceed to the planning process. First, they are useful in the distribution of goods and services and secondly for the supply of the required man-power to administer them. Therefore, population data are needed by the government to plan for the services to be provided for the people. These services include education, health, housing, employment, transportation etc.

In Nigeria, during the first republic (1960-1966) census figure was used as a basis for revenue allocation for various regions. The population of each region determines the amount of revenue to be allocated to the region. The use of census figure has therefore created a lot of controversy then and even now, which at times ended in litigation in courts. An example is the 1963 census that was contested in the law court by the eastern region. However, the Supreme Court entered judgment in favour of the federal government (Ugwu, 1993). The 1991 census was also challenged by some states like Oyo, Osun, Ogun, and Ondo states at the Census Tribunal Courtsoon after the release of the census claiming that the census figure in respect of their states do not represent the actual figure of their states. These cases serve as an illustration of the importance attached to the conduct of census and the census figure by states.

Another important benefit that can be derived from a reliable census is the ability to produce an accurate population based on sex, age, marriage, family, occupation etc. Sex and age composition and the size of the family have more standing effect upon housing, education and medical facilities and many other features of the cultural land space. From the census figure, government would be able to study the age structure in relation to economic and social activities, military services, political propensities, social attitudes and mobility. In fact, it comprises all aspects of an individual on communal life.

Sex composition is also important information that can be derived from census enumeration. The study of the number of males and females are only possible in countries where census data are reliable. The above are the major benefits that can be derived from census. It is certain that no country in the world with serious intentions to plan for its citizens can afford to toy with census. It is in realization of this, that the federal government of Nigeria is making preparation and budgeting for another census in Nigeria in 2021.

Conclusion and Recommendations

In Nigeria, censuses have been controversial, from the 1866 census conducted by the British to the 2006 census conducted by Nigerians; all the censuses ended in controversy. However, it should be noted that Nigeria surely cannot plan if she does not know how many people live and earn in Nigeria and in every state of the federation. It is an established fact that without a national census, there can be no national plan and without a national plan, no nation can develop in real sense.

For a country which population data remained largely inaccurate, with different figures being bandied as the population of the country, there is, indeed, the need for a thorough census that will not only put to rest the controversies regarding the country's population but also avail the different government agencies the much-need development data for planning. This is the whole essence of census, according to the United Nations Population Fund (UNPF), as it is critical for development. According to the agency "the information generated by a population census – numbers of people, their distribution, their living conditions and other key data – is critical for development. Without accurate data, policymakers do not know where to invest in schools, hospitals and roads as those most in need remain invisible.

To reduce possible controversy; religious and ethnic identification should be excluded from the census forms, and verification of state results would be handled by supervisors from outside the state. Some analysts believe that the effort to carry out a reliable census with perceived legitimacy might become an unexpectedly positive exercise, reinforcing a sense of shared nationhood and providing a model for the attempt to overcome regional and ethnic differences.

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