

REPUBLIC OF THE UNION OF MYANMAR

CENSUS OBSERVATION MISSION REPORT 2014 POPULATION AND HOUSING CENSUS



May 2014

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Census Observation Mission Report
2014 Population and Housing Census

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Acknowledgement

This observation report is a result of a collaborative effort by the Myanmar Census Observation Team. The Observation mission was led by Nancy Stiegler, Census Observation Mission Coordinator, who compiled this report based on the state- and region-level reports of the observers: Ronnie Andersson, Aung Kyaw Phyto, Aristide Bado, Jayant Banthia, Clement Bula Basuayi, Rick Baxter, Roberto Bianchini, Bart de Bruijn, Hafedh Chekir, Garnett Compton, Theresa Devasahayam, Judith Donang, Roberta Fontana, Margarita Guerrero, Werner Haug, Johan Dawt Lian, Khin Ma Ma Swe, Khin Thu Zar Win, Kyaw Lin Thant, Maung Maung Toe, May Thwet Hlaing, Nobuko Mizoguchi, Myo Oo, Nang Mo Hom, Naw Mar Moora, Ricardo Neupert, Nyan Win, Nyana Soe, Nyein Chan, Nyi Nyi Aung, Kanayo Ogujiuba, Eleonora Rojas Cabrera, Lantona Sado, Sai Mein, Omas Samosir, Shwe Yee Win, Swe Swe Win, Thida Oo, Toe Myint, Tun Tun Win, U Than Sein, Wanna More, Ian White, Win Thein, Helio Xavier and Ye Thaung Htut.

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Executive summary

After three decades without a Population and Housing Census, a census enumeration was conducted throughout most of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar from 30 March to 10 April 2014. To vouch for transparency of the census and to better understand the way data were collected, the Department of Population within the Ministry of Immigration and Population (MOIP) put in place an independent Census Observation Mission. United Nations Population Fund and the donor countries were highly supportive of this initiative.

Throughout the data collection, teams consisting of one international and one national expert independently observed the enumeration process across the country (except the inaccessible areas¹ and the few areas that conducted an 'Early Census': Pan Hseng and Mine Lar in the Wa area; Puta-O in Kachin State and Co-Co Island in Yangon Region). One or two observer teams were deployed to each state and region depending on the size of the area. The experts are statisticians, demographers or social scientists; the international experts have previous experience with censuses and/or large-scale surveys in similar environments.

In total, the observer teams visited 121 townships (36.6 percent of the total) and 901 Enumeration Areas (1.1 percent of the total) and followed 2,193 interviews (2,177 fully observed interviews, or 99.3 percent, and 16 partially observed interviews, or 0.7 percent). The sample of observed areas was randomly selected, except in Rakhine State where the sample was purposely selected to represent all the different settings and populations of the area.

Objectives of the Census Observation Mission

The Census Observation Mission was not conducted as a judgemental exercise; neither was it a monitoring nor an auditing assignment. The point of the mission was to objectively collect factual information on the way the enumeration was conducted in the field to ultimately understand the challenges and successes of the data collection phase of Myanmar's first census in 30 years.

The specific objectives of the observation mission were: document the census process and data collection in selected number of townships and Enumeration Areas; objectively observe the census against international standards and national legislation to increase the credibility and transparency of the census process; to provide regular feedback to the Government during census enumeration; and to document lessons learned and good practices for building capacity in future censuses.

The observation mission was based on a methodology tested in several countries but specifically designed for the Myanmar census. The observers were trained on tools that they were to use for making their observations and collecting data. The observers conducted their respective assignments freely but with the essential help of MOIP personnel.

¹ Parts of Kachin State controlled by the Kachin Independence Organization and some other areas controlled by armed groups were inaccessible for enumeration due to security reasons.

Observers' general conclusions

Overall, the observers characterized the data collection in the areas they visited a success, with the exception of the areas inhabited by Rohingya/Bengalis, especially in Rakhine State.

Some of the observers, who have experience in developing and/or post-conflict countries (such as Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Ghana, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Montenegro, Nigeria, Sudan and Timor-Leste), said they had never witnessed such a good data collection exercise — from the publicity and advocacy campaign to the dedication of the census personnel and the positive attitude of the respondents to the logistical organization and the quality of enumerators to the enumeration itself.

Strengths of the observed process

The communication, publicity and advocacy campaign was considered effective in general because various publicity materials were seen throughout the visited areas. The observers noticed posters, billboards, audio messaging, community meetings, pamphlets, letters of information and hand fans even in villages and remote places. Several observers thought that such a good publicity and awareness campaign was rare in a census process and that it was the best census communication campaign they had seen as observers (excluding the situation in Rakhine State). The general atmosphere around the enumeration exercise was positive, and the mobilization of communities around the census was impressive.

Most of the observers also thought that the population was well aware of the census exercise and that people wanted to be counted and to participate in the census. In no instance did the observers encounter a household or a respondent who refused to be counted due to lack of understanding of the census process.

The organization of the subnational Census Offices varied from one area to the next; but overall, the observers thought that the data collection proceeded smoothly. The mobilization of the Census Officers was impressive, and they appeared to exert, together with communities, volunteers and non-government organizations, every effort to make the census a success.

Language never appeared an issue, which is an achievement considering how multilingual Myanmar is. Having the privilege of deploying local enumerators (school teachers mostly and mostly women) to conduct the census in their own communities helped to overcome the potential issues associated with the co-existence of dialects. In most cases, the enumerators and respondents communicated in a common language.

In all visited enumeration areas, the enumerators were present and actively working. In no instance did an observer notice any missing enumerator. The pre-census distribution of material did not seem to have any problematic issues; in all areas under observation, the field workers (enumerators and supervisors) were equipped with the necessary census materials; no serious shortage of census materials was noticed. Also, the enumerators all received the census outfit; the majority of them

wore the complete uniform (the hat was less used by the enumerators), making them easily recognizable.

The observed enumerators generally conducted their interviews with diligence, patience and professionalism. The observers noticed that the enumerators were very capable; all the observers commended their dedication to the census survey.

Overall, the observed enumerators paid good attention to completing the questionnaire as instructed, using the 2B pencil and making sure that their handwriting was legible. The enumerators took good care of the questionnaires to ensure they remained clean, dry and flat. This is encouraging for the successful scanning of the census forms in the next phase of the census.

The observers did not witness any data manipulation by any enumerator, such as not counting households or household members — except for the specific case of Rakhine State where the Rohingya/Bengali population had not been enumerated — or by adding households or household members.

The data collection finished before the official census end date in numerous areas observed. Such a case is rare for a census, especially in countries that have not conducted a population and housing census for years. This situation is commendable, especially knowing that the observers rarely witnessed enumerators working in a hurry.

Shortcomings of the observed process

Despite the overall good impression they left on the observers, the enumerators failed to refer to three essential census components. First, they seldom explained the census when starting the enumeration (possibly because people had been made aware of the data collection beforehand). Second, an important proportion of the enumerators did not explain the concept of confidentiality of response (only about 29 percent of enumerators explained the census and the confidentiality of data at the beginning of the interview). Third and most importantly, a large portion (31 percent) of the enumerators did not systematically refer to the census night to determine who was in the household on that reference night, which is a core concept of a de facto census.

The enumerators sometimes inferred or directed responses, but it seemed to the observers that it was based on obvious criteria than on the will to manipulate the response. Questions on religion, ethnicity, education and household characteristics and assets were sometimes inferred or directed from what the enumerator could observe (for instance, after asking the ethnicity of the head of household and spouse, the enumerator filled in the ethnicity of their biological children without asking).

Additionally and even though most respondents could self-identify their ethnicity, the observers noticed that most enumerators only recorded the main ethnicity rather than the sub-ethnicities.

Some questions seemed more problematic than others to the enumerators; the questions on disability, labour force and occupation and the modules on migration and births to married women were not always correctly completed, as is often observed in censuses around the world.

The observed enumerators seldom referred to their Enumeration Area map and/or structure listing after the second and subsequent days of enumeration, and they rarely checked the questionnaire at the end of each interview.

Enumerators were sometimes accompanied by members of the community whose presence was at times considered by the observers as intrusive; at the same time, the observers noted that the respondents did not seem bothered by the presence of external people.

The observers also noted that no clear plan for retrieving the completed questionnaires was in place at the time of the enumeration. The Township Officers could not say exactly when and how the completed forms were to be sent to the Data Processing Centre in Nay Pyi Taw. This lack of preparation at a key point of the census, together with the fact that completed questionnaires were to be stored for a long time in local offices, which were not always adequate to store sensitive census data, raised some concerns for the security (and thus integrity) of the questionnaires and the confidentiality of the information.

The exclusion of the Rohingya/Bengali population from the census enumeration poses serious methodological problems. In a de facto census, all persons present during the reference night of the census must be included in the headcount. This was not the case for an important part of the population in Rakhine State and in other areas inhabited by Rohingyas/Bengalis. By not allowing these specific subpopulations to self-identify and be counted, the census in these areas fell short of international standards. If the missing populations are not included, based on a proper count or estimation, the resulting undercount will have a negative impact on the census results at the State and Region level and the national level.

For nearly all minorities, the observers witnessed that they were well counted and that respondents could freely report on their ethnicity and religion, including the Muslim community — as long as they did not belong to or did not declare themselves as Rohingya.

Based on the conclusions of the observers, the report includes recommendations for the data analysis and to resolve issues with the 2014 Myanmar Population and Housing Census and recommendations for future censuses.

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