

COUNTING THE PEOPLE

CONSTRAINING CENSUS COSTS AND
ASSESSING ALTERNATIVE APPROACHES

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FOREWORD

UNFPA working in partnerships, especially with the United Nations Statistics Division, has led worldwide support for population and housing censuses since its inception in 1969 and continues to play a leadership role. A census is the primary source of information about the number, distribution and characteristics of the population. It provides data on disadvantaged regions and vulnerable populations, such as the poor, the young, the old, and especially the female population. Only a census can provide the level of resolution and the accuracy of data that allows analysts and policy makers the requisite detailed population and development information.

Census information establishes an objective evidence base on which to formulate development strategies. Thus with census data many of the population-based indicators required for monitoring the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and the agenda of the international conferences of the 1990s, notably the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) and ICPD+5, can be obtained. No other data source allows for such a comprehensive gender analysis of population-based indicators.

As the number of countries in the world has grown and the cost of conducting censuses has risen, it has become increasingly difficult for donors, including UNFPA, to support governments in their aspirations to conduct a first, or subsequent census. Yet, for example, in a post-conflict situation, where the national statistical system has often collapsed, a census not only provides basic planning data, but crucially also provides the foundation for the development of democratic institutions and good governance.

Almost all developing countries have had some experience in census taking over the past several decades, although many still lack the financial and human resources to conduct regular censuses without at least some external technical and/or financial assistance. For countries that cannot afford the full cost to undertake a census, international support is critical. The scale of demand far exceeds the capacity of any single organization. And so UNFPA frequently assists in mobilizing support for censuses from a wide range of bilateral and multilateral donors.

The time is rapidly approaching when the ever-growing costs of funding a census will no longer be able to be met, even from the combined available resources of developing and transition countries, United Nations agencies and other donors. It is therefore prudent, and indeed increasingly essential, to identify and develop alternate strategies that will enable countries to maintain and improve their capacity for *Counting the People*.

The papers in this report are based on an edited selection of presentations made at two meetings on population censuses. The first was the *UNFPA/PARIS21 International Expert Group Meeting on Mechanisms for Ensuring Continuity of 10-Year Population Censuses: Strategies for Reducing Census Costs* held in Pretoria on 26-29 November 2001 and generously hosted by the Government of South Africa. The main purpose was, in the light of funding constraints experienced by developing countries in the 2000 round of censuses, to review census funding issues, and to help map the way for achieving stability and cost effectiveness in the future funding of censuses. Summaries of all the presentations made at that meeting are contained in UNFPA (2002a), and at <http://www.unfpa.org>.

The second meeting was a UNFPA *In-House Capacity Building Workshop on Population Censuses: New Directions and Cost Saving Strategies* held in Princeton, New Jersey, on 21-23 October 2002. The main purpose of that meeting was to review the strategic guidance on UNFPA support for population and housing censuses.

Census taking is the most costly data collection activity that a national statistical system undertakes. Unless timely and sufficient resources are available census taking will have an uncertain future. Partnerships with major stakeholders, including bilateral and multilateral system part-

ners, civil society and the private sector, are essential for ensuring continuity of censuses. This report provides some of the new ideas for reducing census costs and for assessing some alternative census-taking approaches that were presented at the two meetings.

On behalf of UNFPA, I would like to take this opportunity to thank PARIS21, EUROSTAT and the United States Bureau of the Census for their support of the Pretoria Meeting, as well as to Statistics South Africa for hosting that meeting. Thanks are also due to all the participants who attended the meetings mentioned above for sharing their expertise and wisdom in the area of population censuses. I would like also to thank my colleagues from the Geographical Divisions at UNFPA Headquarters, especially Africa Division, and the census experts in the UNFPA Country Technical Services Teams (CSTs) for their good support. Finally, I would especially like to thank members of the report team and paper contributors ([Page vi](#)) for their hard work and commitment in contributing to this report.

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April 2003

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