

# POPULATION AND HOUSING CENSUSES

STRATEGIES FOR REDUCING COSTS

POPULATION AND  
DEVELOPMENT  
STRATEGIES

NUMBER **4**





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**NOTES:**

The views and opinions expressed in this report are those of the experts who attended 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, South africa on 26-29 November, 2001 , and do not necessarily reflect those of the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA).

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## FOREWORD

**F**or any country, the population census is the primary source of information about the size of population, its geographic distribution and the social, demographic and economic characteristics of its people. The strengths and distinctiveness of a census compared with most alternative sources of statistical information arise from its complete geographic coverage and the continuity and comparability of statistics from census to census. Thus the possibilities provided by the census to generate statistics about all the people living in any local or defined area or belonging to any defined sub-group of the population distinguishes it from other data sources. As a result it permits, for example, the analysis of migrant populations, persons living in disadvantaged areas or circumstances, or female-headed households and other gender-related issues. Together with the housing census, invariably conducted in tandem, the population census provides an important part of the foundation for good governance and development.

For more than three decades UNFPA, working in partnership with other international technical and donor agencies, especially the United Nations Statistics Division (UNSD) and the United Nations Regional Commissions, has played a leading role in supporting censuses in developing countries throughout the world. UNFPA technical and financial assistance to developing countries has contributed to the rich census histories in many countries and their strengthened capacities to conduct modern censuses.

The 2000 census round has been marked by a funding crisis throughout the developing world, but especially in sub-Saharan Africa. Rising costs,

shrinking public sector budgets and reductions in overseas development assistance have all contributed to the problem. Several countries, mostly low-income countries, have been compelled to take drastic action, such as the postponement or delay in conducting the census because of persistent financial uncertainties and/or late government approval. In some cases, as countries searched for external sources to support their censuses, the problems inherent in working with new partners contributed to delays in the release of funds and in some instances had unintended effects on the quality and consistency of censuses over time. The hope that after three decades of support, countries would have developed the capacity to conduct their censuses and be in a position to finance census activities has proved overly optimistic.

Given all these problems and constraints, the time is ripe to consider cost-saving strategies and approaches, extending beyond national boundaries. While the scale of some recent approaches is still small, some promising initiatives have been tried with encouraging results. These include the standardisation of census methodologies and concepts, encouraged through the work of the UNSD (especially through the publication and distribution of *Principles and Recommendations for Population and Housing Censuses*) and the UNFPA advisory services provided through the regional Country Support Teams. These have been well-supported by regional and international census symposia and conferences, of which the meeting in Pretoria on which this report is based is a good example. Another approach has been the sharing of experiences between countries, often facilitated by the existence of regional institutions, leading to greater rationalization in the design of census instruments, in processing technologies and in the sharing of resources.

UNFPA, in partnership with the PARIS21 Census Task Team, and with additional support provided by EUROSTAT and the United States Bureau of the Census, took the lead in organising an international conference to review census funding issues, and to help map the way for achieving stability and cost-effectiveness in the future funding of censuses - the *UNFPA/PARIS21 International Expert Group Meeting on Mechanisms for Ensuring Continuity of 10-Year Population Censuses: Strategies for Reducing Census Costs* was held in Pretoria, on 26-29 November 2001 and was hosted by the Government of South Africa.

The meeting was attended by experts from 41 countries and territories, comprising mainly developing countries, especially from Africa and

including China, India and Palestine, as well as developed countries, donors and multilateral agencies. In all, there were some 60 international participants and some 40 national participants to share their experiences and help in creating a better understanding of the common problems that all countries have in census taking.

Presentations were given on technical issues related to ensuring continuity of censuses, maintaining the reliability of census results and reducing census costs. These covered a range of technical topics from different regions, raising many valuable pointers to how cost savings could effectively be achieved. The discussions that followed the presentations demonstrated the rich experience of participants and the importance of seeking solutions to the more fundamental funding problems identified, crucial if censuses as we now know them are to continue. This report contains a summary of the papers presented and the discussions that followed, along with a summary of conclusions and recommendations – the complete papers can be obtained on: [http://www.paris21.org/html/TT\\_census.htm](http://www.paris21.org/html/TT_census.htm) and [http://www.unfpa.org/population/data\\_papers.htm](http://www.unfpa.org/population/data_papers.htm). To help ensure momentum, the meeting also proposed important steps that needed to be taken.

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 for the meeting. Special thanks go to Statistics South Africa for hosting the meeting, for providing a convivial and hospitable setting, and for demonstrating a high level of political commitment from the Government of South Africa. I would also like to thank all the participants at the Expert Group Meeting for sharing their expertise in the area of population censuses.

Finally, I would like to thank my colleagues from the Geographical Divisions at UNFPA Headquarters, especially Africa Division, as well as the UNFPA Country Office in Pretoria, South Africa. I would especially like to thank members of the report team (see page vii) for their hard work and commitment in organising the meeting and preparing this report.

Mari Simonen



Director  
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August 2002



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