UNFPA/ PARIS 21 International
Expert Group Seminar on
Population Census Data
Dissemination and Use

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Honorable, Mandisi Mpahlwa, Deputy Minister of Finance, South Africa, Mr. Pali Lehohla, Statistician-General South Africa, Ms Mary Strode, PARIS 21 Secretariat of the OECD-DAC, and Colleagues

It is really a privilege and great pleasure for me to welcome you, on behalf of the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), to this International Expert Group Meeting on Population Census Data Dissemination and Use. I would especially like to thank the Government of South Africa, and in particular Mr. Pali Lehohla, for hosting this meeting in this interesting city of Pretoria – 2 years after we met to discuss the mechanisms to ensure the continuity of decennial censuses. UNFPA together with many partners has championed worldwide support for population and housing censuses for over 30 years. Today such leadership continues to be critical.

I am pleased that in this spirit of partnership, this meeting is also a true initiative of collaboration. In addition to the support of the South African government and PARIS 21, UNFPA has also received very good support in organising this meeting from the US Bureau of the Census, Statistics Canada and the Department for International Development (DfID).
I would like to take this opportunity to welcome all participants from near and far who have accepted the invitation to participate in this meeting. You are all experts in the broad area of census dissemination and use, and I am confident that you will be able to share your individual expertise and experience with everybody here so that we can all benefit collectively and can go home enriched by the combined knowledge assets that we have created during the next few days.

**Value and Use of Censuses**

A population census provides an important part of the foundation for good governance, decentralization and development. Census data and information support policy-making and planning across a broad range of sectors, and provide the basis for evidence-based policy dialogue. Population-based data are crucial for national, sub-national and sectoral policies and plans, for development frameworks, such as CCAs/UNDAFs and PRSPs, as well as for tracking progress towards ICPD goals and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

The value of a population census for a country should be self-evident, and despite the large costs involved, the industrialised countries have conducted censuses every decade for more than 200 years. A census is the primary source
of information about the number and characteristics of the population. It provides, for example, considerable potential for gender analysis of socio-economic issues through the use of sex-disaggregated data. Further, in many countries census counts provide a crucial input for sub-national resource allocation. A lack of census data seriously hampers planning across a broad range of sectors in many countries, especially the measurement of progress towards national and international development goals.

Despite the obvious importance of census data for many aspects of policy, planning and programme implementation, we are concerned that fewer countries participated in the 2000 round of censuses, compared with the 1990 round. For example, several countries postponed their censuses thereby increasing the interval of time since the previous census to more than 10 years. Some countries secured funding at a very late stage in their census preparations, thereby forcing compromises in decision making, while others are experiencing funding gaps that are slowing post-enumeration activities and curtailing plans for the dissemination and use of census results. In extreme situations, some countries could not find enough resources to participate in the 2000 census round.

The participation of post-conflict countries in census programmes is a critical part of peace building, reconstruction and establishment of the infrastructure for civil society. One of the immediate tasks confronting a nation in a post-conflict
situation is to establish, or strengthen its national statistical infrastructure, which in many cases is likely to be in a state of collapse, or near collapse. Together with our partners, UNFPA has played an important role in supporting census programmes in Afghanistan, Cambodia, East Timor and Rwanda as they emerged from conflict.

**Census Funding**

Data collection is costly and UNFPA’s approach to supporting national censuses is to work in partnership with other major national and external stakeholders, including bilateral and UN system partners, civil society and the private sector. In generating support for the census, UNFPA emphasises national ownership and maximum participation from civil society at national and local levels with the aim of ensuring greater transparency in the census process and increased credibility in census results. UNFPA uses its resources and influence strategically to maximise national and external census funding and technical support.

Over time countries have absorbed an increasing amount of the census costs as they have developed national capacity. The high and rising costs of censuses, coupled with shrinking public sector budgets in many developing countries, have put a serious question mark over their future. Cutbacks in funding for
international development assistance, which, in the past, has been a major source of funding for censuses, has exacerbated the situation.

For these reasons, we need to increase our efforts to mobilise resources from all sources, including Foundations and the private sector, for census programmes for the success of the 2010 round of censuses. This requires active advocacy, within countries and outside, and public information programmes on the value of census data. We also need to focus well on strategies that lead to reducing census costs without compromising the integrity of the census.

There is an urgent need for much more national and international advocacy about the value of a census. Advocacy should target parliamentarians, policy-makers and other key stakeholders, such as civil society and private sector representatives, placing emphasis on the image building for the census as an important source of quality information, and the many potential uses of census data, especially in relation to national poverty reduction strategies, as well as for monitoring and evaluation purposes.

Concluding Remarks

One of the major shortcomings of the current census programmes is the limited dissemination and use of census data. We know from experience that unless sufficient resources are available for the preparation of a range of census
products, the benefits of the census are seriously diminished. Yet among the key ingredients of a successful population census are (i) strong commitment at all levels of government to use census data, and to provide ready access to them for other key stakeholders; (ii) transparency in sharing census meta-data; and (iii) dissemination of a comprehensive range of census products tailored to the needs of key users. Building a sense of “ownership” of census operations and outcomes nationally and locally is also an essential component of successful census programmes.

In closing, I would like to reiterate how much UNFPA looks forward to learning from this meeting about innovative approaches countries are adopting in disseminating and using their population censuses results. UNFPA is fully committed to partnerships with countries, PARIS 21, the US Census Bureau and other census offices, bilateral donors and agencies within the UN system, based on comparative advantages, to support the conduct of censuses and to ensure the good use of census data.
We trust that among the outcomes of this important meeting is a further reaffirmation of our collective will to working together to help all countries build capacity for their census programmes. We must commit ourselves, whether we are technical agencies, funders, or program countries to renew national, regional and international attention to census programmes. We must put this at the front and centre of high-level dialogues and secure the necessary support.

I thank you all again most sincerely and wish you a successful meeting.