

CULTURE AND DATA COLLECTION CONTROVERSY: AN ALBATROSS TO ACCURATE CENSUS IN NIGERIA

Undelikwo, Veronica Akwenabuaye¹ & Enang, Ebingha Erena²

Department of Sociology, University of Calabar,
NIGERIA.

¹vundelikwo@unical.edu.ng, ²eebingha@unical.edu.ng

ABSTRACT

Census in Nigeria has been trailed with controversies, crises and lack of confidence in the delineation, conduct, and outcome of the census data. The conduct of acceptable census, which fundamentally is to generate basic information for planning purposes, based on reliable, accurate and detailed demographic, economic and social data is a major challenge in Nigeria. This has been attributed variously to the polarization of the country on ethnic and religious lines, historical antecedents of doubts and suspicion with the conduct, outcome, and the utilization of census figures for economic and political bargains which reward conscious inflation of figures and lack of patriotism among others. The paper however seeks a more critical understanding of the problem from the influence of culture on census data collection process and utilization in terms of reluctance to disclose key demographic variables such as number of children, ages of persons, dates of birth, number of wives, etc. The paper advocate for a conscious and deliberate community engagement for building a culture of community based and focused data collection with feedback using birth and death registration, school enrollment, disease burden and health facility utilization involving community institutions. This will begin a micro level appreciation and utilization of data and ultimately census exercises in communities and the Country.

Keywords: Population, culture, census, crises, data collection, utilization

INTRODUCTION

Census is the process of collecting, compiling and publishing demographic, economic and social data pertaining at a specified time to all persons in a country or delineated territory. Census is conducted to generate demographic, economic and social data for planning purposes. Censuses have been conducted in Nigeria before the amalgamation of the Country, during the colonial period, and in the post-independence era, census has been carried out in 1962, 1963, 1973, 1991 and 2006 (Adam and Dan, 2015). The conduct and release of census data has been trailed with controversies and crises in Nigeria over the years. To support this assertion, Idike and Eme (2015) averred that in Nigeria, the manipulation of national census figures has generated controversies, intense debate and ethnic antagonism than any other issue in the country. On his part, Okereka (2015:36) citing Shangodoyin and Oluwayemisi (2008:83) opined that “it should be noted that the history of census in Nigeria has never been devoid of controversy and each successive attempt has often been replete with sensitive reaction ranging from culture, religious and ethnic reasons”. There has been an apparent lack of confidence in the delineation, conduct and outcome of the census exercises. Several protest, demonstrations, petitions and outright rejection have trailed the country following the release of census figures. Conducting an acceptable census to generate basic data for planning purposes based on reliable, accurate and detailed demographic, economic and social data is a major challenge in the country. This failure is attributed to the polarization of the country on ethnic and religious divide, historical antecedents of doubts and suspicion with the conduct

and outcome, the utilization of census figures for economic and political bargains which reward conscious inflation of figures and lack of patriotism in the country favouring regional, ethnic and religious sentiments against national interest.

Census is about people and meant for planning and development of people and communities. This presupposes that the communities need to appreciate the essence of census exercise, own the outcome and utilize census figures. While the focus has been on the national census, there is however other demographic data that are collected at the community, facility, sub national, local government level that play a significant role in the life of the people e.g. data on birth, death, disease, school enrolment, school dropout, influx of people etc. It is not too clear the extent to which the data collected is appreciated or if the people in the community understand its importance and utilization.

Historically, the extent to which the people appreciate data collected in census is doubtful because in some communities people do not count the number of children. Edewor (2006) reported that in certain cultures in Nigeria, example among the Yorubas, it is a taboo to count people especially children. It is believed that if they were counted they would die. He stated further that a belief that people or children should not be counted is a serious impediment in achieving a successful census operation if there is no awareness creation, education or enlightenment campaign. There are some myths and taboos associated with this. In some communities, a man is not asked about the number of wives he has nor talking about the death. People are not considered migrated settlers in period of peaceful co-existence except when there is conflict. The limited appreciation of census exercise and data by the people ultimately blurs the community perception whenever census is conducted. The heavy investment in census publicity and community mobilization during the course of the exercise is an acknowledgement of the challenges.

Census result or demographic data collected is essentially seen as being made for government or government agencies and are not what the community own or utilized. The community ownership is lacking and constitute a gap in conducting a seamless census exercise. This need to be emphasized since it is the starting point for community development, planning, and empowerment. Okolo (1999:321) observed that, “the needs for the information available from a census extend beyond the Federal Government to State and Local governments, private providers and third-party payers. Each one needs reliable, timely, and comparable data and analyses which describe the ethnic composition, literacy levels, number of children ever born, number of children living, occupation, sex, age, presence and durability of disability and so on”.

A society that does not have and or have not made conscious effort to cultivate a culture of collection and utilization of data at the various levels of governance will ultimately not appreciate the value of participation in national census exercise and ultimately stand a chance of not accepting its outcome. The consequences of this is the huge investment on Census awareness creation, public enlightenment and community mobilization prior to a National Census exercise which still witnessed poor turnout in some instances and ultimate rejection of census figures.

The study intends to underscore the influence of the absence of a culture of data collection and utilization on census processes and how the reluctance to disclose key demographic variables affects community appreciation of data, their response and participation in National census.

OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY

This paper aim at contributing to the discourse on limiting census related crises and controversies in Nigeria and supporting efforts to achieve acceptable census figures in the Country. It also hopes to draw attention to the need to strengthen a culture of data collection and utilization to buttress the National census exercise.

The paper is purely a theoretical expose and relies heavily on review of relevant literature on the issues under consideration.

SOURCES OF DATA COLLECTION IN NIGERIA

Data is an indispensable tool for economic transformation, growth and development. Lack of reliable data can impede or limit the planning and development efforts of a country. According to Ajakaiye (2012:140) “the quality, frequency, timeliness and comprehensiveness of data are of paramount importance for effective development planning, plan implementation and plan outcome.” Data is collected in Nigeria through census, sample surveys, and vital registration. Over the years, data collected through these various means have provided evidence and the basis for planning and decision-making. However, the collection of data has also been confronted with challenges, difficulties and sometimes conflicts have arisen from the outcomes. The various methods of data collection are expected to be complementary, helping to fill in the gaps where a method is deficient. Mba (2007:3) capture it thus

“As sources of fertility and mortality data, population censuses, civil registration and surveys are complementary. However, civil registration is the preferred method for collecting basic data on births and deaths and data on cause of death once complete registration has been achieved. It should be noted that fertility and mortality data typically derive from more than one data source. When numbers of births and deaths are derived from civil registration, for example, corresponding numbers of persons required for the calculation of rates and summary measures are usually estimated from population census data. When population censuses are used to collect data on numbers of births and deaths, they are often supplemented by surveys of various kinds, which may provide more detailed and timely data.”

Vital registration according to Okereka (2015:36) is “the formal recording of vital events such as births, deaths, marriages, divorce, migration and host of others.” He went further to state that vital statistics in developed societies constitute an instrument for upgrading census figures on a continuous basis. Many developing countries including Nigeria do not have a system of continuous registration of vital events such as births, deaths, marriages etc. The system of vital registration is still far from achieving its objectives in Nigeria in spite of various legal provisions and other International conventions ratified by the country. From the inception of vital registration system in Nigeria until date, the conduct and outcome have contradicted its essence (Okafor, 2016).

As reported by UNICEF (2007), in Nigeria about 70 % of the 5 million annual births are not registered implying that these children have no birth certificates and therefore in legal terms do not exist. The UNICEF (2007) outlined a number of limitations and challenges militating against effective birth registration in Nigeria. These include: insufficient registration centres which are mostly located in the urban centres, limited financial support, lack of awareness of the importance of birth registration, ignorance and illiteracy especially by the rural populace, distance to birth registration centres due to bad roads and poor means of transportation from the rural areas etc.

The National Population Commission (NPC) has also conducted sample surveys on regular or adhoc basis to generate data to guide policy decision-making. These include: the Nigerian Fertility Survey conducted to study the fertility pattern of women ever married (aged between 15 and 49 years), the Demographic and Health Surveys to study fertility, mortality, child bearing and family planning technique used, the National Demographic Sample Surveys to study household composition, mortality, fertility and migration pattern, and the Pilot Sentinel Survey carried out to study women aged 12 to 49 years in respect of pregnancy state, number of children and use of family planning techniques. (NPC, nd). The NPC (nd) stated further that the National Bureau of Statistics conducts three surveys, which include: the Survey of Internal Migration to provide information on the magnitude and direction of migration and the characteristics of migrants, the General Household Survey aimed at gathering demographic data such as households size and distribution of population by marital status, and the Nigeria Demographic and Health Survey which is an adhoc survey to assess the demographic situation in the country and to generate data to help in the evaluation of family planning and health programmes. The demographic data derived from the various surveys are of high priority since these are meant to complement the national census that is usually conducted at long interval but the funds needed to conduct these surveys at expected intervals usually impede their conduct.

The National census exercise as one of the sources of data collection in Nigeria over the years have remained a source of controversy and conflict due to the politicization of census exercise, accusation and counter accusation of over enumeration of certain regions, the antecedents of doubts and suspicion that have characterized the census exercise in the country over the years as well as the use of census figures for economic benefits and revenue allocation. The various regions in the country have tried to tilt the result to their advantage since in Nigeria; census data is a major determinant of resources allocation, political delineation of wards, and allocation of seats in the National Assembly etc. This has resulted in the deliberate manipulation, inflation and falsification of census data to the detriment of the national interest.

“Since independence, Nigeria had conducted several census exercises that produced figures though accepted for planning, remain contentious” (Okereka 2015:36). Citing Shangodoyin and Oluwayemisi (2008:83), Okereka (2015:36) averred that “it should be noted that the history of census in Nigeria has never been devoid of controversy and each successive attempt has often been replete with very sensitive reaction ranging from culture, religious to ethnic reasons”. Ezeah, Iyanda and Nwangwu (2013) observed that population census in Nigeria has become a sensitive and controversial issue due to the fact that it shapes the geopolitical, state and ethnic relations and balance of power. The elite and political class realize the importance of population in shaping the political landscape in Nigeria and hence make concerted efforts to take advantage of census exercise and have figures that fit within their sectional and primordial interest.

Adam and Dan (2015) on their part attributed the unacceptability of the 2006 census to over enumeration of population that was widespread in the country and the omission of certain settlements in earlier censuses, which was still found due to technical failure to control it. The conduct of the National Census exercise has unfortunately been a major cause of population related conflicts in the country, which has led to outright rejection, accusations and counter accusation, as well as violent conflicts whenever census results are released. The Country needs to make a deliberate effort to make the National Census exercise scientific and devoid of recurrent controversy to significantly guide effective planning and development in the country.

CULTURE OF NON-DISCLOSURE OF PERSONAL INFORMATION

Culture as defined by Edward Taylor (1871) is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society. A people's way of life is influenced by the socialization process, their belief system that shapes their thought, action and response to things within and outside their community. Part of the problem of the peoples response to census in Nigeria stems from the use of census during the colonial days for taxation which became ingrained in their mindset and has subsequently led to the non response to census. This created a wrong notion about census, which has given rise to suspicion and non-disclosure of basic information to census officials. As noted by Idike and Eme (2015), due to the ignorant of the nature of census by most Nigerians, citizens have been suspicious of enumerators and in some cases, have been uncooperative and hostile. This ignorance has led to spurious information given to enumerators or attempts by some to be counted several times. A society that does not have and have not made conscious effort to cultivate a culture of collection and utilization of data at the various levels of governance will ultimately not appreciate the value of participation in national census exercise and ultimately stand a chance of not accepting its outcome. Data about school enrolment, disease, number of houses, death etc. are suppose to act as input in planning for infrastructure, school building etc. If the habit of utilizing data is not cultivated, then it will be difficult for people to appreciate and participate in data generation. Edewor (2006:86) captures it succinctly when he stipulated that

“Be it in economic or political spheres, it is undeniable that culture plays an important role. The values that people hold and their beliefs may influence their receptivity of enumerators or census officials. In certain cultures in Nigeria for example, among the Yorubas, the counting of people especially children, is considered a taboo. It is believed that children should not be counted for their owners. The belief is that when children are counted, they would die. A belief that people or children should not be counted certainly serves as a serious impediment to a successful census operation if there is no education and awareness or enlightenment campaign”.

According to Adeyemi (2010:246), “in some African cultures, reliable data on these variables may be difficult to come by simply because of traditional practices. Apart from the fact that many older generations do not know exactly when they were born, culture may frown at asking questions on dates of births, surnames, causes of death of relatives and other “no-go” data of elders.” Adeyemi (2010:246) averred “for instance, census and other research instruments may require some bibliographic data such as dates of birth, surnames, and numbers of wives and children of subjects in selected samples”. Adeyemi (2010:247) stated further “in the same vein, a final year social studies student in Nigeria submitted the response of a subject in her area of study when questioned on his family size “it is forbidden for you to enter my compound to count the number of wives and children inside here. We are 88 people living here. No more, no less.”

“While the cultural influences inhibiting data collection in the field may not be problematic in certain cultures of the world, they still persist to a large extent in some developing world” Adeyemi (2010:248). According to Okafor (2016:67) “ due to lack of proper information and conviction among the citizens from the inception of vital registration (1863) and population census (1866), the activities were avoided by a significant number of persons owing to the fact that traditional African culture in different contexts, avoided certain level of exposure of private information”.

Okafor (2016:67) citing Okeiburnor, 2000) observed that until recently, many Africans (Nigerians) avoided divulging information about a new born baby, dead person or even marital affairs to unknown person for the fear of spiritual attack such as witchcraft". He stated further that similarly, death was seen as a sacred matter, which ought not to be talked about especially, with a stranger.

COMMUNITY LEVEL DATA COLLECTION, RESEARCH AND EMERGING ISSUES

Several data sets are available in a country for collection and utilization for effective planning which can serve as a boost to census data, which is usually carried out at intervals. Community level data guides micro level planning, infrastructure development and social action. The appreciation of this fact promotes participation in data generation. Without continuous, conscious efforts at reliable data collection a nation will be challenged in terms of proper planning and measuring the impact of the implementation of developmental activities. According to Mahapatra etal (2007) cited by Okafor (2016), Nigeria is one of the countries in Africa where vital registration is unreliable and may not be used as a basis for population projection. The Nigerian Demographic and Health survey and numerous other surveys are done at regular intervals to bridge the data gap while awaiting the conduct of census.

At health centres and health post, numerous health data are collected such as birth, death, disease prevalence etc. Marriages are conducted at the various marriage registries that can help abridge any data gap. These various data collected are not appreciated nor utilized at the community levels because they are not analyzed and shared. When immunization is carried out within the community for example, the members do not try to get information on the number of children immunized and the coverage to enable them take informed decisions. Data about school enrolment, disease, number of houses, death etc. act as input for planning, disease prevention and infrastructure development at community level. When a given community for example plans to build or expand a school, market or health facility, they will need to know the number of people that will utilize the services to guide against under utilization or avoiding wastages when some facilities are developed due to prestige.

The lack of interest in data collection, collation and utilization ultimately affects the turn out, interest and appreciation of census exercise. Idike and Eme (2015) observed that most Nigerians are ignorant of the nature of a census and this has created wrong assumptions on the use of census data and this is mainly responsible for some wrong information given to enumerators as well as attempts by some people to be counted several times. Government spends huge investment on census awareness creation due to poor response and turn out for census and ultimately rejection of census figures. To develop a positive data and census consciousness, the people will need to cultivate the culture of collecting data, and appreciating the community demographic indicators.

Several persons and institutions often conduct community level research to enrich knowledge, provide information to guide services and actions etc. The results of research and the information derive thereof empowers communities with a better understanding of their situations and empowers them to play active role in influencing and advocating for specific responses. Unfortunately just as applicable with data collected at the communities, most research findings and outcome are not shared with the people as they are mostly published in peer journals, books and thesis that the community members have little or no access to reading or appreciating. The meaningful engagement of affected communities in research should be inclusive of sharing the outcome with them. This will assist the community to develop a deeper interest in analyzed data and cultivate an appreciation of Census exercise.

DEVELOPING A CULTURE OF DATA COLLECTION AND UTILIZATION TO ENHANCE NATIONAL CENSUS

The culture of data implies that every member of the country should value data and engage in the utilization of data. The value of data collection and utilization begins at the birth of a child. Demographic information of an individual will begin at the birth of the person. If communities begin to appreciate the need to register the vital events of an individual's life the gap in demographic information will be bridged. Communities and Countries whose cultures and ways of life effectively utilise data in creating new knowledge and integrating it into the organization have norms and practices that demand broad participation in knowledge gathering and distribution.

Mba (2007) posited that the solution in remedying demographic data situation in Nigeria is the improvement and strengthening the registration of births and deaths. Nnorom (2017) averred that the government of Nigeria cannot expect the citizenry to respond to its call for the registration of births and death in a culture where the discussions of such events are a taboo especially in the rural areas where the majority of Nigerians reside and are illiterate who do not appreciate the importance of these data to their lives. For the controversies, doubts and suspicions associated with the collection and release of census data to abet, the culture of data collection and utilization must be cultivated in the citizenry through the registration of vital statistics or event since this is usually a continuous exercise compared with the periodic nature of census.

Okereka (2015:37) upholds that "since population census is conducted once every ten years, actual population figures for planning can only be obtained by ensuring that all vital events within the country are properly recorded". With a reliable, trustworthy and effective vital registration system developed through a culture of data collection, there will be community appreciation and ownership of census result which is expected to mirror the data collected from the community through vital registration. Okafor (2016:65) stated that, "vital registration is one of the most important and reliable document, which enables any government operate efficiently to accommodate different categories of the citizens if properly harness". Citing Mahapatra et al (2007) Okafor (2016) observed that vital registration is important because census usually take several years to be conducted with certain levels of errors that might not be noticeable in vital registration that produces comprehensive and consistent information on a particular population if properly documented.

According to Nnorom (2017), Government should empower its workers to scout for information on vital registration until the exercise becomes internalized by the people and with proper conscientization of the people implementation will be a part of the people and there will be prompt response whenever such information are required. The continuous nature of data collection through civil registration provides a more up-to-date and less expensive means of addressing the need for population information than a population census performed once a decade (Peters, 2016).

CONCLUSIONS

The appreciation of the importance of data and the significance of National population census exercises is a prerequisite for participation and a conscious effort to ensure its success. This consciousness needs to be cultivated, nurtured and inculcated in the people starting at the community level. People need to see how accurate data directly affect their lives, contribute to their wellbeing and enhances their socio economic development. National Census is meant for the people, for their planning and development and ultimately the acceptance of the census exercise is dependent on the people. They determine to a large extent the credibility of

the exercise and the figures. It needs to be demonstrated to them how wrong planning based on inaccurate data is detrimental to their development. When population figures are disputed, it can be easily collaborated with the data the community has been routinely collecting and utilizing. There should be a conscious and deliberate community engagement for building a culture of community based and focused data collection with feedback using birth and death registration, school enrolment, disease burden and health facility utilization involving community institutions. This will begin a micro level appreciation and utilization of data and ultimately census exercises in communities and the country.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In the light of the above importance of culture of data collection and utilization as core challenges in population conflict in Nigeria, the following recommendations are made:

1. There is need to address the issue of mistrust and non-disclosure through community dialogue and sustained enlightenment.
2. Build Community ownership and appreciation of data collection and utilization by creating a platform for sharing community related data and research findings to build data and census consciousness. Communities should actively encourage participation in vital registration with sanctions on defaulters.
3. Communities need to be guided to keep the statistics of its community members in terms of birth, death, members of each age grade and other vital statistics. This assist them know when census figures is not a reflection of the community unlike when communities reject census figures because others are rejecting theirs.
4. The Government should foster a development agenda driven by equity with even distribution of benefits to make falsification of census data unattractive.

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