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SPOTLIGHT

CENSUS DATA IS NEEDED FOR FAIR POLITICAL REPRESENTATION AND DISTRIBUTION OF RESOURCES

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Key Points

- The census is authorised under the Papua New Guinea's (PNG) *Statistical Services Act, 1980*, and is required by law that all Papua New Guineans including foreigners are recorded, regardless of their age or citizenship status after every 10 years.
- Population census is critical because it shapes PNG's democracy, public policy and economy and ensures that government funds are equally distributed to areas that need it.
- Population census is the foundation of fair political representation since the population count serves as the basis for allocating seats in the Local, Provincial and National Parliament and drawing district or electoral boundaries.

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CENSUS DATA IS NEEDED FOR FAIR POLITICAL REPRESENTATION AND DISTRIBUTION OF RESOURCES

By Peter Michael Magury

By law, Papua New Guinea (PNG) is supposed to conduct a Population and Household Census (“The Census”) every ten years (i.e. Decennial Census) with the goal of determining the distribution of resources and political representation by counting every person in the country where they live, on a given day during the Census year. The census is a complicated operation to collect vital demographic, social, and economic information. But it serves as the country’s official source for reliable national, provincial, district, Local Level Government (LLG), and community-level data. The census is authorised under the *Statistical Services Act*, 1980, and it is required by law that all persons living in PNG (men, women and children), both citizens and non-citizens, are counted and recorded, every 10 years. The last National Census in PNG was in 2011 but it appeared not to be well run (Laveil, 2021). The data from the 2011 National Census is also outdated. The next census in the country should have been in 2021. However, to date it is not clear when the census will be conducted. Getting the next population census count right is critical, as it will shape PNG’s democracy, public policy and economy.

However, key decisions about the deferral of the 2020 Census, and poor choices made has critical impacts on Papua New Guineans, including the recently concluded 2022 National General Election. The task was on the PNG Electoral Commission (PNGEC) to conduct a fair election using the voters’ enrolment they have for fair political representation (PNGEC, 2018). But according to Anere and When (2009), the voter registration remains vulnerable to manipulation and administrative inaccuracy at every stage of the enrolment and verification process. The total population census data also determines the allocation of National Government funds to communities across PNG for health, education, social services, and infrastructure projects such as schools, hospitals, police stations and fire departments.

The significance of the population census data

The Population Census is the building block for fair political representation since the population count serves as the basis

for allocating seats in the local, provincial and National Parliament and drawing district or electoral boundaries to agree with the Electoral Boundary Commission requirement of equal population (Electoral Boundaries Commission, 2022). Similarly, the Population Census data is used also to draw district boundary lines for electoral seats in the National Parliament, including city councils, schools, health centers, public library, sports facilities, and public offices. As the basic part of the district or electoral process, it is the way by which the people of PNG are linked to representatives in different levels of government.

The Population Census also forms the basis for equal distribution and accountability of taxpayers’ funds. The government uses population census data and data from the National Statistics Office (NSO), which provides data on key social and economic characteristics for every community in PNG, to distribute funds for LLG, district and provincial grants, including grants for highways (e.g., Highlands Highway) and transportation projects, rural electrification, natural disaster recovery, education, and public health services.

Apart from distribution of National Government’s budget, population census data are used by government agencies like the Department of National Planning and Monitoring (DNPM) to ensure that programs are implemented as planned, monitor program performance, and encourage effective management of public funds. The national, provincial and local governments rely on population census data to plan services and direct resources to communities, provide national and local emergency services, and develop evacuation and response plans for use in the event of a natural disaster in PNG (NSO, 2021).

An accurate, reliable, robust, and complete population census in PNG is important to ensure that government funds are fairly distributed to areas that need it most and will have the great impact on local investments in schools, infrastructure, public health, and public institutions and services. PNG’s local farmers, local businessmen, ordinary people, workers, and businesses pay their fair share of taxes. They should

receive their fair share of the benefits government offers in return. The fairness of this exchange between the government and local communities and their voters depends on the accuracy of the census (Laveil, 2021).

Representation and redistricting

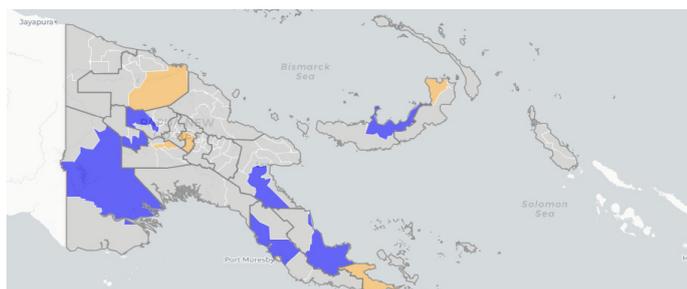
The PNG Electoral Boundary Commission redistricting requires the use of the decennial census to record changes in population at the national, provincial, district and LLG levels to adjust the number of parliamentary and LLG seats to reflect changes in population (PNGEC, 2018). Without an accurate count, establishment of new electorates cannot be achieved in a meaningful and transparent way. The population data is used also to draw district boundary lines for new electoral seats in the National Parliament. As the basic part of the district or electoral process, it is the way by which people of PNG are linked to representatives in different levels of government. We cannot realise PNG's Constitution of equal representation without it.

In 2011, Parliament enacted a law to allocate provincial status to Hela and Jiwaka provinces for redistricting population equality purposes. Again, in 2022, the Parliament successfully passed a law to allocate district status to seven new electorates, and a further six will be established in 2027.

The new electorates include Delta Fly, Hiri-Koiari, Popondetta, Nakanai, Wau-Waria, Komo-Hulia and Porgera-Paiela.

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Figure 1: Redistricting of new electorates by province, 2022



Source: Ben Raue, 2022

The districts must have roughly equal population size and must not discriminate based on race or ethnicity to ensure fair representation. Every individual, regardless of their age, race, citizenship status, or ability to vote, must be counted so national parliament can allocate seats based on each province's total population. According to the PNG Constitution, total population is to be used to determine redistricting within the province (PNGEC, 2018).

Total provincial and district population determines allocation of funds

Each year, the national government allocates millions of Kina across all government departments, provinces, and local level governments. Population size and distribution, demographic data, and location data derived from the census determines the allocation of national government funds to communities across the country for health, education, social services, and infrastructure projects such as roads, hospitals, police stations and fire departments. Districts with larger populations are therefore entitled to a larger portion of national funding for many programs. Every person should care about the total count, not just the count in their electorate.

The DNPM provides an overview of the amount of money each province, district and LLG receives from the national government based on population census data from the NSO (NSO, 2021). For PNG, the most recently published census data is from the 2011 National Population Census, about 12 years ago. This data will be utilised until the next census is conducted for funding distributions.

Significance of undercount

When local level governments compete for national funds with less than their exact entire population, they will always lose money to which they would otherwise be entitled to, to other areas in their province or district. The undercounting of population, especially of the people most likely in need of basic services, also reduces the amount of national budget distributed to provinces for programs including education, health, and infrastructures. A proper count assures that every province and locality receive a fair and equitable share of national funding.

The official 2011 census reported an undercount as the major limitation of the census. Various populations are undercounted. While overcounting occurs much less frequently, continued undercounting affects people in rural areas. This disparity deprives underserved communities of political power, government resources, and private sector investment. According to Laveil (2021), undercounting affects how new political electorate or district will be made that can result in unequal representation in the National Parliament.

Next Census

According to the NSO, the national census was scheduled for 2020 but was postponed to 2021 due to the COVID-19 pandemic (NSO, 2021). Bourke and Allen (2021) reported that limited preparations had taken place for the census

in 2021, which has not taken place. This leaves us with the 2011 census, which was not conducted well (Bourke & Allen, 2021). The data could also be outdated. Getting the next population census count right is critical, as it will shape PNG's democracy, public policy and economy moving forward.

The impact of delaying the next National Census

Census data is important because in budgeting, the budgeting framework requires that population be considered in arriving at budget allocations. The government relies on statistics developed out of the population census. The statistical estimates, however, may not reflect the exact situation at the national level. Further, between 2011 and 2022, there is a duration gap of 11 years, therefore, the population estimates may not represent the real scenario.

The national population census is one of the crucial exercise that provides a huge set of data which is a vital information source for development, monitoring and evaluation of various socioeconomic policies, strategies, and development plans at the national, sub-national and department levels. Without information on census data and distribution, the Government cannot implement important basic service delivery that rely in part on accurate and reliable information.

Conclusion

The national population census is the main source of data on the PNG's population and economy. Census data are vital because they are used to control our system of political representation, enlighten business development and investment, and distribute government funds to where they are most needed, especially in rural areas of PNG. The delay of the National Census may affect budget allocations and implementation of important basic service delivery which depends on accurate and updated information.

Recommendations

The Government should ensure that Population Census should be conducted as authorised under the PNG's Constitution to collect accurate, reliable and complete population census data that is vital to:

- ensure fair political representation at the local, provincial, and national levels and drawing electoral

boundaries to agree with the EBC requirement of equal population; and,

- ensure that government funds are equally distributed to areas that needed it most and will have the greatest impact on local investments in schools, infrastructure, public health, public institutions, and services.

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