

On the political economy of data collection: lessons from the unaccomplished population census (DRC, 2006-2018)

Briefing
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Bukavu, capital of South Kivu province, RDC.
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Research question

In 2018, twelve years after a working group began to prepare a population census in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), the census project has still not been implemented. This briefing note - a summary of an SLRC working paper of the same name - asks, 'How have different stakeholders shaped the census project since 2006?' The full research report can be downloaded from the SLRC website.

Approach

The latest census in the DRC dates back to 1984. The administrative records are in poor condition, so surveys and evaluations since are increasingly imprecise. The need for a new census is thus uncontested. The unaccomplished census, as we understand it, is a large project carried out by a complex group of national and international public and private decision-makers. In this document, we try to reconstruct the history of the unaccomplished census. We analyse the project in light of low domestic capacities, a politicisation of the census, unmet funding promises by the government, and fragmented and inconsistent donor activities. Conceptually, our analysis draws on the ethnography of development interventions (Li, 2005, 2007b; Mosse, 2004; Mosse and Lewis, 2006). The concept of assemblage (Li, 2007a: 265) helps us to explore how the census project was kept together over time and space. Ultimately, the question is not so much why the project has failed (or, more precisely, why it has still not been accomplished after

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12 years); rather it is to understand how it actually unfolded and whether things could have gone differently. What were the missed opportunities?

Methods

This study is based on several months of qualitative fieldwork conducted in 2018: analysing census news reported on the internet (e.g. Radio Okapi); carrying out 39 semi-structured interviews – including repeated interviews with key stakeholders; and gathering and scrutinising laws, government and donor project documents, and PowerPoint presentations.

Main findings

Different and sometimes contradictory forces have shaped the census project over time. Various Congolese ministerial departments, bilateral and multilateral donors, and private companies were involved at different periods. Of the 21 stakeholders, no national-level actor was present throughout. There is, we conclude, no mastermind behind the slow progress; no single actor stands out as particularly malevolent. Rather, too many cooks spoiled the broth.

The census project has continuously enrolled supporters despite contradictory forces and little evidence of its success. We found that donor projects disregarded risks revealed by their own analyses. Project documents discursively constructed an environment that seemed open for interventions, which has not been the case. Furthermore, donors hardly sanctioned non-compliance with conditions. Regarding donors, we conclude that ‘future positive’ thinking (Mosse, 2004), hope and enthusiasm are at least equally important drivers of development interventions as evidence and results. As for domestic actors, the *Institute National de la Statistique* (INS, National Institute of Statistics) has undoubtedly benefitted from census activities. Its portfolio has grown, and new forms of rent-seeking have emerged. The INS has become a broker of the global developmental urge for data and benefits from international projects, successful or not.

There has been major tension around technology with little domestic ownership. The tension has been between an alliance of international actors who quasi-imposed the global standards of a digital census and the census office’s core team in 2011, who had never organised a census, let alone a digital one. Ultimately, this tension also explains the participation of

a private international company whose involvement created a series of other problems. *There is no easy solution to this tension, but simply recognising that would perhaps be helpful.*

It is difficult to implement projects in which donors need the state as much as the state needs them. Donors require knowledge from the census not only to build state capacities but for their own organisational purposes, such as evaluating their programmes. The census would also play a major role in making the election process more transparent. However, formally speaking, the state remains sovereign over its population and a census cannot be conducted without its agreement.

Implications

Based on these findings, the paper suggests three implications for international actors who are, in particular, supporting census activities and, more generally, involved in activities to strengthen partner countries’ statistical systems.

- **When you need to work with government actors, take the value of the partnership seriously and learn how to deal with your partner.** Imposing a fully-fledged, ambitious digital census on a poorly resourced and funded INS, habituated to surviving on externally-financed projects (Thontwa et al., 2017), is unlikely to produce positive results. Your ‘partner’ is not only dependent on your funding and expertise, it is also a heterogeneous entity with varying interests that can change over time. International organisations are also a multiplicity; they operate with high staff-turnover, which increases the challenges of learning the tacit skills needed to negotiate a workable arrangement.
- **A census can only be successful if it keeps a degree of distance from the political process, yet stays close enough to garner sufficient support.** Keeping an eye on the timing is thus crucial. The census project was seriously disturbed every time the DRC passed through an election phase.
- **If the census is too big to succeed, try a good-enough census.** The World Bank’s idea to use the cartography phase for a nearly complete enumeration can be seen as a good-enough census. In the meantime, it is possible to use all currently existing sources and databases to narrow down the margin of imprecision about population figures (Marivoet and De Herdt, 2017).

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