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Future of the Population Census in India

noticed. This methodology of direct data capture has exciting implications for the future of Census in India.

The next round of Housing and Population Census in India, due in 2010-21 is sure to draw lessons from these two exercises. Elements from the register based approach and the use of electronic data capture are slated to figure high in the methodology of the next Census in India. Some of the key challenges and how they can be overcome are outlined below.

a. Coverage:The complete coverage of the population has always been a major concern for Census takers. With rising urbanization, increased mobility and growing density of population, complete coverage has become a casualty in Censuses all over the world. Coverage of population living in far-flung and difficult to access areas is also a concern. Similarly, there are difficult to access persons like nomads and the homeless. Enumerating certain vulnerable sections among the population, like members of certain ethnic communities, the elderly and even women who don't figure in the Census counts on account of social, religious and gender prejudices, are additional areas of serious concern. Yet another challenge is the coverage of areas that have disturbed civil conditions. The concerns of privacy and non-co-operation from the respondent have made the task even more difficult. Digital mapping and geographical information systems have contributed to enhance coverage substantially. The electronic register and unique identification number is likely to improve it manifold.

b. Manpower: In Census 2011, 2.7 million functionaries were engaged for enumeration. Primary School Teachers comprised a bulk of this work force. The use of electronic data capture devices would enable the pruning of such a large workforce. The experience of the SECC is that the workforce could be reduced to a quarter of this number.

c. Training: Imparting uniform and standardized training to the Enumerators/Supervisors so that they are able to understand the different concepts and definitions and are in a position to collect quality data is a major challenge. The use of ICT with e learning and self-learning tools has been tried with great success and can be further fine-tuned for greater efficiency.

d. Indifference: General apathy among the Census takers as well as the general public towards the Census is a matter of great concern. Modern performance metrics are inbuilt in the electronic data capture software. This would enhance accountability of the enumerator and consequently improve performance. The database of residents in the Population Register will now enable contact with the general public through mail, telephone and internet.

e. Cost: Comparatively speaking, the Indian Census is already among the most cost-effective Censuses in the world. The per capita cost for the Housing and Population Census was only USD 0.4. The National Population Register is estimated to cost USD 1.2 per capita and the SECC around USD 0.6 per person. Given the economies of electronic data capture and the advantages of a dynamic electronic population register, costs of the future census are likely to be further optimized.

f. Time: At present, the provisional result of the Census is released in three weeks. The major data sets are released in one year and almost all data sets are released within three years. Electronic data capture would reduce this time lag and allow the release of substantial amounts of data within a short period of time.

g. **Validation and Quality of data**: As quality assurance measures can be introduced on a real time basis and validation done quickly, the quality of the results of the Census could be enhanced several fold.

Conclusion

Technology is the key driver of change. However, mere technology without process re-engineering will not deliver results. Appropriate technology blended with processes would hold the key to the future. Appropriate changes in the legal environment would also have to be considered to address diverse concerns of privacy, confidentiality and the like. India has taken a giant leap during the census round of 2010-11, harnessing technology and bringing in extensive process re-engineering. Though it is still work in progress, the gains have been substantial and lessons learnt tremendous. The way forward is to consolidate these gains.