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ETHNIC CHARACTERISTICS AS TOPICS IN THE POPULATION CENSUSES

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Background

1. The issue of ethnic characteristics as topics in population censuses is not represented in the international meetings like this one in a scale as it is represented in some countries. First, this is due to the fact that all the countries (for different reasons) do not have the same interest in discussing this issue.
2. Second, it is very difficult to discuss the issue of representation of topics on ethnic characteristic in the population censuses without mixing statistics and policy, or at least mentioning policy.
3. Still, there is a need for such discussions. Motivations may differ, but the questions are numerous:
 - Who demands these data
 - Which countries collect these data in the population census
 - Why all countries do not obtain these data even when they are relevant for them and the demands refer them too
 - What are the influences of the representation of ethnic characteristics in the census on the whole census operation
 - What if the official statistics does not provide these data...

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4. The answers of these questions should be very comprehensive. But the question is can these answers and explanations tell the users, policy makers and all other involved parties in the process of defining census content what is the best solution: to have ethnic topics in the census or not.

5. The statisticians will create the methodology by using defined legal procedures, but they cannot influence the socioeconomic situation and cultural and historical circumstances in the countries.

6. Thus, this working paper does not pretend to provoke any discussions in the direction of changing or not changing the provisions referring these topics in the next set of Census Recommendation, but aims just to raise the awareness between statisticians about the questions mentioned above.

Who Demands These Data

7. It is very natural and very obvious that in countries with multiethnic composition of the population or (for those who are not using this term) in countries with diverse population in terms of culture or origin, the need for these data and demands from different users exist. The use of data can be for different purposes, but in general data should be used for the measurement of the socioeconomic status of the given ethnic group and for creating appropriate socioeconomic plans and following the implementation of those plans:

“...Considering that a pluralist and genuinely democratic society should not only respect the ethnic, cultural, linguistic and religious identity of each person belonging to a national minority, but also create appropriate conditions enabling them to express, preserve and develop this identity...”¹

8. States signatories of different convention dealing with human rights- individual and collective, (“Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms”, “Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities”, “International pact for civil and political rights” ...) undertake to submit reports on the measures they have adopted which give effect to the rights recognized in those conventions and on the progress made in the enjoyment of those rights.

Which countries collect ethnic data in the population census?

Why all countries do not obtain ethnic data even when they are relevant for them and the demands refer them too?

9. Ethnic characteristics are in the group of non-core topics in the Census Recommendations:² “Some countries may wish to collect information on the ethnic and/or national composition of their population. Ethnic groups (and/or national groups) are made up of persons who consider themselves as having a same origin and/or culture, which may appear in linguistic and/or religious and/or other characteristics that differ from those of the rest of the population. It depends on the historical and political circumstances whether

¹ “Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities”

² UN/ECE and EUROSTAT: *Recommendations For The 2000 Censuses Of Population And Housing In The Ece Region*, Statistical Standards And Studies - No. 49, UN 1998

countries consider such groups as ethnic groups and/or national groups.” The same provision, “Some countries may wish to collect information on...”, about the decision on topics is given for “language” and ”religion” (non-core topic 10 and 11).

10. In the population censuses taken in Europe around 2000,³ a question on ethnic group was asked in countries in Central and Eastern Europe as well as the United Kingdom. The question was not asked in Western Europe. In the Balkans (in geographical sense) the countries that don't have this topic are Albania, Greece and Turkey.

What are the reasons for differences between the countries with same conditions regarding the needs and demand of ethnic data?

11. This is a difficult question, which cannot be answered by a statistician. An assumption⁴ can be made that:

- some countries have overcome the time when these questions were relevant and important for them;
- for some countries maybe these topics are still relevant and important, but because of some reasons they are not willing to include them in the census, and
- the third group are countries for which these questions are relevant and important for them and they are including them in the census.

12. The decision whether or not to have questions on ethnic characteristics in the population census is an internal affair of given country that depends on the historical and political circumstances and on the level of socioeconomic development.

What are the influences of the representation of ethnic characteristic in the census on the whole operation?

13. Ethnic characteristic are not simple topics in the census. Having ethnic characteristic in the census means giving an additional burden to the activity that is already too complicated, too complex and expensive one. The additional burden is present in each stage of the census⁵:

- In preparation phase, during the process of determination of coverage and content of census, as well as determination of topics to be investigated in the census, there are consultations with different users, governmental officials, scientific institutions, political parties and so on. Some of the parties included in the consultation process are paying attention only to the ethnic characteristic and are considering the census only as an exercise for counting people by ethnic belonging. Starting from that point they are giving wrong proposals or directions in creating census methodology and legal bases for census. So, the statisticians have to cope with them and to ensure determent of most appropriate methodology for the country that will correspond with international standard and Recommendations.
- In the phase of field organization, aiming to have better contribution for its own ethnic group and better monitoring of the census activities, all ethnic groups are making efforts

³ Appendix: Results from the “Survey on ethnic characteristic as topics in population census”

⁴ Personal view of the author

⁵ Based on experiences from 1994 and 2002 Macedonian Population Census

and most often disputes, about the ethnic structure of census bodies and participants: census commissions (for district or municipality), instructors and enumerators.

- During the field data collection may appear different problems as: attempts for cheating, attempts for making influence on persons how to declare or refusals of participation in the census.
- Further more, considering ethnic questions as the most important one in the census by the majority (or some) of census participants, the quality of other collected data can be neglected.

14. Finally when all census activities are over and the results are published, new problems are starting: disputes of the figures on population ethnic composition from different parties, usually not official institutions or organizations.

And very often in the countries with the multiethnic structure of the population the disputes are coming without real reason i.e. there are no discrepancies in the figures, but the origin of disputes are wishes of separate ethnic groups to have a larger share of population or their spatial and improvised estimations.

International Census Observation Missions

15. International Census Observation Missions can contribute to the building of confidence in the census and ensuring broad participation of the population. Such missions have objective to verify the fair and impartial enumeration and post enumeration of the population in accordance with the international census standards and in accordance with standards with data protection and confidentiality. The missions also aim to evaluate the methodology, to follow the data processing and to evaluate the final results. Missions of this kind were organized in 1994 and 2002 Population Census in FYR of Macedonia and in 2004 Population Census in Republic of Moldova. The role of the international Expert group in 1994 was wider; this group helped the preparation of the census legal bases and census methodology.

16. These missions organized by Council of Europe and European Commission were really very successful and they fulfilled their objective. But is it possible to have such mission in each census collecting ethnic data?

What if the official statistics does not provide ethnic data?

Appearances of surveys or other activities, which are dealing with defining the number of certain ethnic group

17. Different organizations, agencies and institutions are performing different projects for which they are demanding data on ethnic characteristic. Very often there are overlaps between several organizations and agencies.

18. Some of the projects as a target group have a separate social or ethnic group and are demanding a data referring that particular group.

There are cases, where the official census data are disputed and instead of using the official census data, the projects attempt to collect data within the project by delivering this task to some agency (not the official statistical institutions). The problems that appear are in regard to applied methodology and way of data collection. There are cases where estimations on ethnic belonging of the enumerated persons were done by persons who were collecting data based on their judgments made on a base of set of questions.

19. Regardless of the benefits that the certain ethnic groups can obtain from the given project/s, it is humiliating and contradictory to many international declarations and conventions to make estimations in that way.

20. “Every person belonging to a national minority shall have the right freely to choose to be treated or not to be treated as such and no disadvantage shall result from this choice or from the exercise of the rights which are connected to that choice”⁶

Conclusions:

21. The need for data on ethnic characteristics exists and that cannot be denied. Still, the decision on whether or not to have questions on the ethnic characteristic in the population census is internal affair of given country that depends on the historical and political circumstances and on the level of socioeconomic development.

-If these topics are going to be investigated in the census (or in some similar exercise), the answers should be collected from the persons on the base of free self-declaration.

22. The statisticians should create all methodology and legal acts for self declaration for these topics and the policy makers should work on creating circumstances in the country for real free declaration in order to obtain realistic data in official census operations and to avoid disputes of the figures and not allow for opportunities for parallel exercises by other groups.

- The statisticians should be aware of all the influences that can have these topics on the census operation and be prepared to cope the situation and not let the census operation to be turn into simple counting of population by ethnic affiliation.

⁶ Article 3 “Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities”