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The Problem with Counting Nigerians

How large is the Nigerian population really? Nobody knows for sure.

By [Guy Pfeffermann](#), October 30, 2016



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Here's a startling fact: Nobody knows how many people live in Nigeria.

The entire world community takes the statistics issued by the United Nations Population Division essentially at face value. What we aren't really told is that even the UNPD can hardly pinpoint the current and future population of Nigeria with any accuracy. This is due to the fact that the underlying data on the ground are so suspect and erratic.

So how did that situation come to be? For one thing, **according to UNICEF**, about 70% of the children born annually in Nigeria are not being registered at birth.

This failure to track the biggest source of population growth – babies – makes it **“difficult to verify the information on census forms”** later on.

For another, Nigeria's census results are a loaded issue because they largely determine the distribution of public funding and power between states – and in particular between the predominantly Muslim North and the oil-rich South.

The higher a state's population, the more money it gets from the federal government.

Allocation of some government posts also reflects different states' populations. Indeed, **as the BBC has reported**, “Nigerians must wait until the president, state governors and former heads of states have met to consider and agree to these figures.”

Four failed attempts and a fraud

It is no surprise, therefore that **four censuses have been aborted** since Independence in 1960 “due to logistical difficulties and allegations that ethnic or religious groups had sought to inflate their numbers”

Results of the first post-independence census conducted in 1962 were withdrawn. The reliability of the 1963 census has been questioned. The results of the 1973 census were discredited and never saw the light of day, and no census was conducted in 1981.

Takeaways

Nobody, including the UN, is sure if even rough estimates of Nigeria's population are correct.

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The politics around the consequences of censuses in Nigeria has made it tricky to conduct them.

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Four of Nigeria's census attempts since independence have been canceled outright.

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The 1991 census was marred by **allegations of cheating** when some states showed every household in the state having exactly the number of members as the census form provided lines to list people.

The last Nigerian census

In a report on the 2006 census process – the last published census – the Chairman of the National Population Commission **observed** “that even before the census was conducted, highly placed individuals and organizations in several states had already determined to the decimal point the population of a particular area or region.”

This last census was also **marred by** abductions of census officials, abandonment by enumerators, shortages of materials and violence.

A census was supposed to be conducted this year, ten years after the last one, but this hasn't happened.

The National Population Commission through its chairman officially declared that the commission was not prepared to conduct Nigeria's anticipated national population census scheduled for 2016.

The population boss attributed this failure to unpreparedness, lack of facilities and technicalities.

The upshot

When one is **relying upon** international agency population projections for analyses of countries such as Nigeria (**and thus the world**), it is worth taking it all with a grain of salt.

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About Guy Pfeffermann

Guy Pfeffermann is the Founder and CEO of the Global Business School Network. He was formerly the chief economist of the IFC. Follow him [@GPfeffermann](#)

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