

The 2014 Population and Housing Census of Myanmar

Findings of the Census Observation Mission:

An Overview



Myanmar 2014

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Introduction

After three decades without a Population and Housing Census, a census enumeration was conducted in the Republic of the Union of Myanmar from 30 March to 10 April 2014. To support transparency of the census and to better understand the way data was collected, the Ministry of Immigration and Population invited an independent Census Observation Mission to observe the census. The Mission was made up of 47 experienced observers; 23 international and 24 Myanmar nationals. These experts were statisticians, census experts, demographers or social scientists.

This document is a summary of the findings of the Observation Mission. Additional information, not from the Observation Mission, has been included to provide readers with a clearer understanding of information that may need further explanation.

The specific objectives of the Observation Mission were to: objectively observe the census process in a select number of townships and Enumeration Areas against international standards and national legislation; to increase the credibility and transparency of the census process; to provide regular feedback to the Government during census enumeration; and to document lessons learned and good practices for building capacity for future censuses in Myanmar.

In total, the Observers visited all the 15 States/Regions of Myanmar, 41 districts (55% of the total), 121 Townships (37% of the total) and 901 Enumeration Areas (1.1% of the total). They observed 2,193 interviews across the country (2,177 in full and 16 partially). The Mission acknowledged that this was a relatively "large sample for a census observation/monitoring," which may make the findings useful for subsequent stages of the census process, particularly data analysis, which requires an understanding of the different factors that may have affected (positively or negatively) the quality of the data collected.

Ultimately, the findings of the Mission played an important part in providing regular feedback to the Government during the census enumeration so that remedial action could be taken where needed; and in documenting lessons learned and good practices for building capacity for future censuses and large-scale data collection exercises in Myanmar.

The Mission adapted and used a methodology that was already tested and successfully utilised in several countries with similar contexts to Myanmar, including Timor-Leste, Sudan, Kosovo, Macedonia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Nigeria and Ghana. The observers used standardised tools which enabled objectivity of the observation across all teams, harmonisation of the minimum aspects to be observed, comparability of findings from different areas, and ease of reporting by the different teams.



Findings of the Observation Mission

The Mission described the Myanmar Census as successful on the whole and in line with international standards, except in Rakhine, where almost all communities that wanted to self-identify as “Rohingya” (who the Government call Bengali) were not counted. At the time of the observation, it was noted that some parts of Kachin State, controlled by the Kachin Independence Organisation were not enumerated.

The International Technical Advisory Board (ITAB), a group of 15 experts from different countries and institutions involved in censuses and statistics internationally, will work with the Department of Population (DoP) to find ways of credibly estimating the population of the areas that were left out of the enumeration.



The Mission comprised 47 experienced observers, 23 international and 24 Myanmar nationals. These teams of experts were composed of statisticians, census experts, demographers and social scientists. ©UNFPA/ITAB March 2014

An independent evaluation of the census process itself has been planned. An assessment on the quality of the data on variables that may be difficult to collect, for example, age, disability and migration, will be conducted in order to correct any errors that may be observed during data analysis. This process will use internationally accepted demographic techniques.

Some of the key findings of the Mission are detailed below:

1. Census advocacy, communications and publicity



- The Mission found the communication and publicity campaign for the census impressive in terms of outreach, with around 92% of the areas visited registering availability of publicity materials and/or activities. Materials such as posters, billboards and pamphlets were widely available, visible and accessible (posters on trees and public places; banners and billboards along busy roads).
- To cater for populations that could not easily be targeted through printed material (due to terrain or low literacy levels), publicity was also widely organised through radio, television, and public announcements. A “Celebrity’s Bus Tour” was also organised that visited towns and villages across the country to sensitise the population about the census. The tour gathered large interest beyond the visited areas, due to daily broadcasts on TV. Celebrity comedians and singers were on the bus tour to entertain the audience with songs, quizzes and gifts.
- Whether the publicity and awareness campaign actually translated into an understanding by the general public of the census, could not be directly evaluated by the observers. However, it was observed that most people willingly and enthusiastically responded to the questions during enumeration, a fact which may be attributed to the publicity campaign. In places such as Ayeyarwady, for example, some households had prepared notes in advance to be able to respond more accurately to the interview. Observers for Ayeyarwady considered this as a sign of engagement and participation by the public.
- While publicity was reported to be less widespread in rural villages of Rakhine State, particularly in the areas where Muslim populations live, the Mission observed that remote areas in other States/Regions, such as Bago Region, Mandalay Region and Shan State, had the census publicity materials visibly displayed and distributed.



2. Census understanding, awareness and attitude of the population



- Overall the population was positive about the census and wanted to be counted.
- In Chin State and in Ayeyarwady Region, for example, the Mission reported that most of the households had prepared notes ahead of the visit by the enumerator, so that they could respond better to the enumeration.
- It was reported that some households in Chin State were not comfortable with the question on household members living abroad. This discomfort may not be due to a lack of understanding about the census, but rather a history of non-disclosure of information about migration by family members.
- While some members of the Chin National Front refused to be counted (more for political reasons than through a lack of understanding), the Mission observed that the situation in other States such as Kayah was different, where despite political tensions in some townships, the census was allowed to proceed unhindered. This may imply that people in most areas understood the value of the census for themselves and their communities.

3. The Census Offices (handling, storage and return of materials)



- The Mission observed that State/Region Immigration Offices were well organised and prepared for the support/facilitation they were expected to provide to the Townships and to the fieldwork (monitoring, supervising and mobilising supplementary materials from one area to another, where necessary). Good monitoring and supervision by the Immigration Offices was an important component in quality assurance of field work.
- At the Township level, the Mission noted that the offices efficiently handled the distribution of materials and management of field workers. This was important to ensure that all the necessary supplies were available for field workers, and that the quality of the field work was monitored.
- The Mission observed that the infrastructure and preparations for storage of questionnaires at the township level, after returning them from the field, were not adequate. Exceptions to this were Tanintharyi, northern Rakhine, Sagaing, Nay Pyi Taw, Shan, Kachin and Mandalay, where most of the storage facilities were ready with sufficient shelving and good security. Limitations in storage and facility capacity are a challenge that characterise censuses in other developing countries.
- The Mission noted that in cases where Township Offices lacked secure storage facilities, arrangements were made to use other available institutions such as police stations, religious institutions or wards/village tracts that had such facilities (for example Kayin and Kayah). This indicates that Township Officers made efforts to treat the materials responsibly, with respect and pride, although no extra resources were made available for organising storage.
- It is important to note that all census reports and questionnaires were returned from the Townships to the DoP Census Offices by 6 May 2014. Given the long holiday period at this time, getting all the materials back in such a relatively short time was considered critical to reduce the risk of damage or tampering in the field. The census reports and questionnaires were delivered by the Township Officers, in the company of security and through a hired professional transport company. Most questionnaires were not damaged while in storage at the Township Offices, and there is no sign to date that they may have been tampered with (a situation that can easily be detected and addressed during data analysis). This addresses the concern that the Mission had regarding security of the questionnaires at the Township level and the importance of having a detailed plan to return questionnaires to the Census Office. A few questionnaires were torn and some were damaged in transit to the Census Office when the vehicle carrying them from Shan South caught fire. However as the fire was put out quickly, the questionnaires could be transcribed and can still be processed.

4. Profile of enumerators



- The Mission found that a large majority of the enumerators and supervisors were primary and secondary school teachers and that 94% were female. Teachers were selected by the Government because of their capacity to explain concepts clearly, their presence in each township, their knowledge of the language and local culture, their attention to detail, and clarity of handwriting. As most primary and secondary school teachers are females, most enumerators were also females.
- The Mission observed that 99% of the enumerators were polite when entering households and asking questions. It was further noted that most of the enumerators were patient, diligent, and hardworking, dedicated to the enumeration and wore the census uniform that was provided to them (identity card, cap, vest, t-shirt, and bag). These behavioural qualities may have been due to the fact that most of them were teachers, welcomed by respondents and able to facilitate cooperation. The use of the census uniform made the enumerators easily identifiable, hence reducing the possibility of respondents being suspicious of potential bogus data collectors.
- In most cases, enumerators were deployed to cover the Ward/Village Tract where they lived. They were, therefore, familiar with the geography and the people of their area, their customs and language. This facilitated both coverage of all households in the Enumeration Area and communication with the respondents in line with local norms. The fact that respondents were also likely to be familiar to the enumerators may also have enhanced the trust that respondents had in the census, hence the higher likelihood of giving credible responses.
- In several cases the enumerators were helped by local volunteers from the community or from NGOs. The help involved, in some cases such as Yangon, accompanying the enumerator even during enumeration, a practice that is discouraged. The Observers noted that this may have compromised confidentiality, although they acknowledged that they did not notice any discomfort on the part of the respondents due to the presence of the helpers.

5. Availability and use of census materials



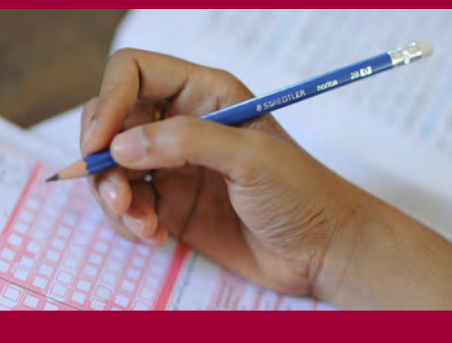
- The Mission observed that, everywhere they visited, enumerators were properly equipped with a set of materials to facilitate their work. The materials included questionnaires, pencils, instruction manuals, codebooks, Enumeration Area (EA) maps, structure listing forms, erasers, notebooks and clipboards. UNFPA and the DoP had ensured that the materials reached all the townships before the end of the training of enumerators. Delivery of materials to the townships began one month before, allowing at least six days before the commencement of the enumeration.

a) Use of EA Maps and Structure Listing Forms



- Enumerators and supervisors were advised to familiarise themselves with their Enumeration Areas (EAs) and update the maps and Structure Listing Forms at least two days before commencement of the enumeration. Structure Listing Forms provided a complete list of all buildings, dwellings and housing structures within defined boundaries for each enumeration area. The Mission observed that fewer enumerators were making reference to the EA Maps (32%) than to the Structure Listing Forms (65%) during the enumeration exercise itself.
- The Mission acknowledged that they did not witness any obvious skipping of households or problems of understanding of the EA boundaries by the enumerators. This was attributed to their knowledge of the area and the support by village officials and volunteers.
- The general public was advised to report to the village leader or the Township Officer if their household was not visited by the enumerator by the eighth day of the enumeration. This communication was made through leaflets that were widely distributed in all areas, as acknowledged by the Mission. This reduced the possibility of any households being omitted during the enumeration.

b) Pencils



- The use of No. 2B pencils was recommended by the company that supplied the questionnaires and the scanning equipment, based on their colour quality, smear resistance and the fact they would not damage the questionnaire. These were used by the enumerators.
- There were reports that enumerators were running low on pencils during the latter stages of the enumeration. When reports of potential shortages of pencils were relayed to the DoP and UNFPA (by the Township Officers and Observers, respectively), UNFPA procured additional pencils within two days and immediately dispatched them to all townships. Each enumerator was allocated at least two additional pencils.

c) Clipboards



- All enumerators were provided with A3 size clipboards so that they could complete the questionnaire on a firm surface. However, the Mission noted that only 77% of the enumerators used the clipboards. The rest preferred to use the questionnaire box or a table.
- The questionnaires scanned so far at the DoP, including those from Mandalay and Shan, where low use of clipboards was registered, have not caused any problems. This may demonstrate that the questionnaire boxes served the purpose of keeping the questionnaires flat, just as well as the clipboards.

d) Census Manual

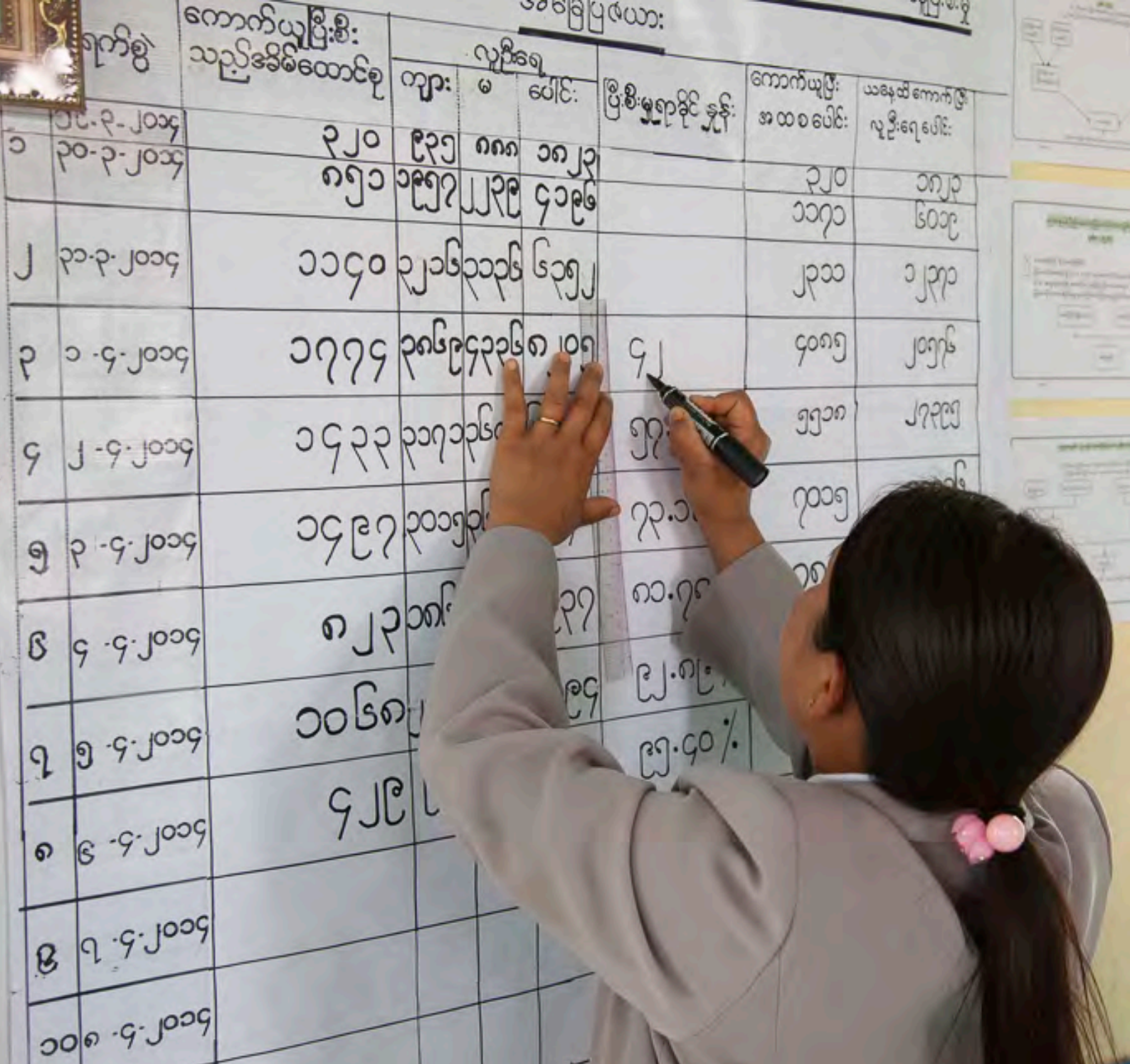


- The Field Instruction Manual was made available to all field staff on the first day of training, i.e. at least 10 days before the enumeration. Field staff were advised to study the manual extensively during their spare time, as it was the main reference document for their enumeration work for the census. The observers noticed that 36% of the enumerators referred to the instruction manual during the enumeration.

e) Summary Sheets



- The Enumeration Area Summary Sheet is a summary of the total population for an enumeration area, by household, and by males and females. This was completed by Enumerators after all the households in their Enumeration Area had been enumerated and was not supposed to be filled in during the interview. It is, therefore, not surprising that the Mission did not observe enumerators completing the Summary Sheet during the interviews.



f) Notebooks



- The Enumerators were provided with notebooks so that they could make notes on issues that needed follow up, such as issues for discussion with their supervisor, households that required call-backs, etc. Where there were no issues to record, enumerators were not obliged to use their notebooks. The Mission noted that 54% of the enumerators used the notebooks.

6. Handling of questionnaires



- The Mission deduced from the careful and quality handling of the questionnaires, and the diligence given to the census by the enumerators, that this may be an indication of the value that was attached to the census. By extension therefore, this contributed to the high quality of the process of the enumeration and data collection. All observers reported that the enumerators were careful in handling the questionnaires and followed instructions on keeping them flat and clean, which are key prerequisites for efficient scanning. On average, 98% of the questionnaires were kept clean, dry and flat. In Tanintharyi, for example, the observers noted that some enumerators were using rulers to ensure that the questionnaires and their writing were clear and neat. They also used the eraser carefully in order not to tear the questionnaire. This level of care by the enumerators is reflected in the fact that there have been no problems during the scanning of the questionnaires at the DoP to date. However, a few questionnaires were damaged or torn and some from Shan South were damaged in transit to the Census Office when the vehicle carrying them caught fire. However as the fire was put out quickly, the questionnaires were transcribed and can still be processed.



- The Observation Report mentions that careful handling of questionnaires and neat writing is quite uncommon in most developing countries. The report attributes the positive traits in Myanmar to solid training and the strong motivation and discipline of the enumerators.

7. Language Issues



- The Mission observed that language did not pose a problem to the enumeration, as the enumerators were mostly residents of their own enumeration areas and spoke the same language as the respondents (some were tri-lingual, e.g., in Bago). In 97% of the cases, the enumerators and respondents spoke the same language. This is important as it minimises the chances of either the questions or responses being misrepresented during the interview. This, in turn, increases the reliability of the responses.
- In most cases, Myanmar was commonly spoken. In 86% of cases, the enumerator did not have to translate into a local language. The questionnaire was also in Myanmar, so the enumerators did not have to translate the questions into a second or third language, thereby avoiding the risk of distorting the questions. However, in a few cases where enumerators and respondents spoke different dialects, local help was on hand to provide translation, as was observed in Magway, Kayin and Rakhine. The Mission observed that, except in isolated cases in Kayah, the translations were accurate in all other cases. Local helpers ensured that questions asked to the respondents and then translated for the enumerators, were accurate.
- It is worth pointing out that UNFPA and the DoP took into account the diversity of the country in terms of language when the communication and publicity materials were being developed. The main communication materials (posters, Q&As and enumerators' handbook, for example) were available in 11 different languages; while other communication materials such as the census pamphlet were printed in 17 languages (including English and Myanmar). The materials were distributed in advance to the areas where the respective languages were spoken to help respondents understand the census before the enumeration.



8. Overall quality of the enumeration process



- The Mission rated the overall quality of the enumerators as 8/10, while the quality of the enumeration itself was given a rating of 7.5/10. A few observers even cited this as one of the best enumeration exercises they had seen in their observation of censuses. This high rating may have been a result of the effort invested in ensuring good quality training according to the report of the Observation Mission, which noted the discipline and dedication of the staff and teachers, and the keenness of many respondents to be part of the first census in more than 30 years. On numerous occasions the Mission acknowledged that the enumerators presented themselves well. Observers noted that there was consistency in the way the enumerators undertook procedures, and explained concepts and content. This shows a high level of knowledge and understanding about the census, which the Observers cited as important for obtaining a high quality in the data being collected.
- Despite an overall impressive census enumeration, several observations and concerns were noted on the quality of the enumeration. These are summarised under the following main areas: explaining the census at the start of the enumeration; confidentiality; reference to the Census Night; census stickers; and call-back cards.

a) Introducing the census before commencement of the enumeration



- The Mission noted that in only about 29% of cases did the enumerator explain the census to the respondent(s). It is worth mentioning that this step was not very clear in the instruction manual, as the enumerators were only told to explain the purpose of their visit, not to define/explain the census.
- In some areas such as Chin and Kayin, the Observers got the strong impression that someone had already explained the census to the households before the start of the census itself and before the arrival of the enumerator. Observers found that some respondents had prepared some written notes with information on potential questions (for example birth dates, etc.).

b) Reference to confidentiality



- The Mission noted that, except in some States/Regions such as Mandalay, Ayeyarwady and Bago, most of the enumerators did not explain the concept of confidentiality to the respondents.
- The issue of confidentiality of information given during the census was highlighted extensively in the publicity materials that were produced. The main message was that the information obtained would not be traced back to individual respondents; hence it would not be possible for the census data to be used against anyone at an individual level.

c) Reference to Census Night



- The Mission observed that reference to the Census Night (the night of 29 March 2014) was not made in a considerable number of cases. This, they pointed out, may affect the application of the de-facto census methodology, which was applied in Myanmar. About 70% of the areas observed made reference to the Census Night. Despite this, some areas, for example Bago, Nay Pyi Taw and Ayeyarwady, observed the procedure 100%, while places like Kayin registered as low as 44%.
- Non-reference to the Census Night usually has an impact on the quality of data in places where there is high mobility of the population. This has to be taken into account during data analysis to see if there are significant deviations from the expected numbers. Demographic analysis techniques do exist, and will be utilised, to correct the data if necessary.

d) Census stickers



- The census project procured and distributed 12.5 million self-adhesive enumeration stickers, which were to be pasted or hung (strings were provided for enumerators who were hanging stickers) outside each household that had been enumerated. The purpose was to assist the enumerator and other census personnel to easily identify which households had been enumerated and which ones had not. This would minimise potential double-enumeration or omissions.
- The Mission observed that most enumerators (92% of the cases observed) appropriately pasted the enumeration stickers after completing the enumeration, (for example in Ayeyarwady, Bago, Kayah, Kayin, Nay Pyi Taw, Sagaing and Shan State). However, in some areas such as Rakhine (71%) and Mandalay (81%) the use of stickers was not consistent. It was also noted, although inconsequential, that some enumerators pasted the stickers prior to commencing the interview. This was probably done as a precaution not to forget to paste the sticker after the interview.
- Any possible omissions could be spotted when reviewing the work of enumerators by supervisors at the end of each day by matching the number of questionnaires with the number of households in the structure listing.
- The Mission observed a case in Shan State, where one township had run out of stickers and had to make photocopies and pasted them on households with glue. This improvisation serves the intended purpose of the stickers, it shows also that the enumerators and other census personnel recognised the value of the stickers and took the requirement for the pasting of the stickers seriously.

e) Appointment/call-back cards



- The Mission observed that the enumerators “rarely” had to use appointment cards. In most cases respondents were at home. In those cases when they were not, enumerators left an appointment card.
- The Mission noted that, where necessary, the enumerator left the call-back card in 99% of cases.

f) Length of Interview



- The Mission observed that enumerators were efficient in administering the questionnaire without rushing the process. On average, the length of the interview was 18 minutes, which was adequate to cover all the questions. This observation offers assurance on the completeness of the interviews and recording of the responses.

9. Quality of Data



- The Mission made several observations that have the potential to affect (both positively and negatively) the quality of data which are listed below. However, the Mission observed that most of these shortcomings can easily be addressed at the data analysis/editing stage.

Some of the main observations included:

a) Presence of village heads and Township Immigration staff during enumeration

- The Mission noted that in some cases enumerators were accompanied by village heads and, in a few cases, Township Immigration staff. It is an internationally recognised practice that any assisting staff/officer remains outside the household when the enumeration takes place, to ensure the confidentiality of the information being collected. The Observers indicated that although these third parties were present, the respondents did not seem disturbed by their presence. In cases, for example, in Shan State and northern Rakhine, these third parties were instrumental in translating questions and responses if the enumerator and respondent spoke different languages.
- In almost all cases where third parties were present, the Observers noted that they did not interfere with the interview (except in the case of Chin and of Nay Pyi Taw). The quality of the recording of the responses may therefore be trusted as an accurate account of what was said. There were no indications of duress or coercion during the interview. Ideally, however, and for the sake of confidentiality, it is not advisable to include third parties during interviews.
- In Chin State and certain other States/Regions, the Observers noticed that third parties (e.g., neighbours or the village head) would answer some of the questions for the respondent. This could have the potential to affect the quality of responses, even if done with the best intent.

b) Refusal to answer questions

- The Mission noted that the response rate was almost universal, with up to 99.6% of households observed willingly agreeing to be interviewed and responding to all questions. This is paramount for the completeness of the data.

c) Inference of responses

- The Observers reported that in some cases the enumerators inferred responses where answers may have been considered particularly obvious or evident, for example sex, household amenities, religion (where religious symbols were displayed in the household), ethnicity and household characteristics (for example Chin State and Kayin State). The Mission considered that these inferences were not motivated by the intention to manipulate data, but rather because the responses were quite evident to the enumerators.
- For most questions inference has a marginal impact on the quality of data, for example questions on household characteristics (roofing, wall, floor etc.), but for more significant questions, for example disability, it may impact on the quality of data.

d) Leading questions

- The Observers noted that in the majority of cases enumerators asked questions as worded in the questionnaire. In cases where they had to re-word the questions, they maintained the meaning of the question. The re-wording, the Observers noted, was for purposes of clarification, especially when the question had to be repeated. However, it was also observed that in some cases the enumerator rephrased the question in a leading way, such as "Are you Buddhist?" or "Are you Chin?", where the respondent showed difficulty in understanding the term," Ethnicity."
- The Observers concluded that it is highly unlikely that the rephrasing of the question will have an impact on the quality of responses, as the meaning of the question was largely maintained.

e) Checking of questionnaire before leaving the household

- The enumerators were under instructions to check the questionnaires before leaving the household. However, the Mission observed that this was not the case in 38.5% of the cases. The implications were two-fold. Firstly, the supervisor had to send the enumerator back to the household to collect more or correct information, which lost valuable time. Secondly, by not doing an immediate check, the enumerator may have missed the chance to correct or confirm some of the information from the household. This may affect the quality of the information collected.
- The incidence of this omission varied by State/Region, with Bago registering 100% compliance with the instructions, while Nay Pyi Taw was as low as 9%. The Mission noted that enumerators and their supervisors would check the questionnaires at the end of the day, at the Township or Ward/Village Tract census office. This checking, albeit after leaving the household, may have helped to identify any inconsistencies in the responses, giving a chance for the enumerators/supervisors to return to the household to verify the information the following day.
- Supervisors were obliged to randomly select at least three households (or more, depending on the quality of the enumerator) per enumerator per day and do re-interviews. This quality control mechanism provided a further opportunity for information to be corrected in instances where it had been recorded inaccurately.

f) Problematic questions

- A key observation of the Mission, amongst others, relates to a number of questions. For example, about disability, migration, occupation and industry, presented challenges to both enumerators and respondents. This indicates that respondents would have benefitted from more explanation about such questions from civil society organisations and local NGOs. They concluded that, although similar difficulties are encountered for such questions in many country censuses, this would need attention during data analysis. Therefore, where questions have been problematic, it will be necessary for subject matter specialists to assess the extent of any under/over reporting. This will be done using appropriate statistical methods to address any potential distortions.

10. Enumeration in Rakhine State



- The Mission observed that the census enumeration progressed well in the southern part of Rakhine, which is predominantly Buddhist.
- However, the situation in areas occupied by specific Muslim populations was different. Enumerators moved in teams and under the escort of assistants and police/military. This compromised confidentiality of the respondents.
- According to the Observers, no household refused to be enumerated. However, three scenarios were observed among specific Muslim populations. Firstly, enumerators would begin by asking the ethnicity question. If the respondent self-identified as “Rohingya,” the enumerator would leave. Secondly, the interview would start in the standard format and sequence up to the ethnicity question (question number 8). If the respondent self-identified as “Rohingya,” then the interview would be stopped. Thirdly, the enumerator would skip the question on ethnicity, but would ask the rest of the questions.
- The Observers highlighted the need to find a solution to the failure of enumeration in the northern area of Rakhine.

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