



International experience with civil service censuses

Civil service censuses have often failed to deliver lasting improvements in developing countries. To be more effective, such censuses should have clearer objectives, use more appropriate methodologies, and pursue long-term improvements in payroll and personnel systems.

Since the early 1980s many developing countries have tried to count and contain the number of civil servants as part of public sector reforms—including reforms funded by the World Bank. These initiatives, variously described as censuses, enumerations, headcounts, staff audits, payroll verifications, and payroll reconciliations, have been conducted in widely varying contexts, pursuing many different objectives and using a range of methodologies. But a recent survey by the World Bank and the International Records Management Trust shows that many such exercises have had limited success. How can these efforts be made more effective?

Regional distribution of censuses

The survey reviewed 31 civil service censuses conducted between 1978 and 2000—19 in Africa, 5 in Europe and Central Asia, 3 in South Asia, 2 in the Middle East, 1 in East Asia, and 1 in Latin America (table 1). Although the survey was not comprehensive, this selection is considered representative of the regional distribution of such exercises, which in recent decades have been concentrated in Africa.

Almost everywhere, there appears to be an inverse correlation between the frequency of such censuses and the quality of public administration. (A possible exception is Europe and Central Asia, where such

censuses have been conducted to define the scope and scale of the civil service as part of the transition to a market economy.) Africa, with the majority of such exercises, has the weakest civil service controls. Many censuses were conducted in Latin America in the 1960s and 1970s, but they have become far less common as civil service controls have improved and governments have been able to rely on management information systems for data on the size and composition of the civil service.

Census objectives

Civil service censuses have been conducted for a variety of reasons, but three objectives are common:

- *Cutting costs.* Some of the earliest censuses were conducted to reduce the number of “ghost” workers (fictitious, duplicate, or otherwise erroneous payroll entries) and so quickly and relatively painlessly cut payroll costs. Such exercises were also conducted to provide rough data for downsizing exercises—typically voluntary retirement schemes. Cutting costs was the primary objective of the censuses in Cameroon, Chad, and Nigeria, for example.
- *Restructuring.* Later civil service censuses were conducted not just to cut costs but also to enhance productivity by restructuring departments and functions, rede-

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TABLE 1 A SAMPLE OF CIVIL SERVICE CENSUSES BY REGION, 1978–2000

<i>Africa</i>	<i>Europe and Central Asia</i>	<i>South Asia</i>	<i>Middle East</i>	<i>East Asia</i>	<i>Latin America</i>
Benin	Georgia	Nepal	Lebanon	Cambodia	Argentina
Burkina Faso	Kazakhstan	Orissa (India)	Yemen		
Cameroon	Kosovo	Pakistan			
Central African Rep.	Lithuania				
Chad	Romania				
Ethiopia					
Gambia, The					
Ghana					
Guinea					
Kenya					
Niger					
Nigeria					
Rwanda					
Senegal					
Sierra Leone					
Tanzania					
Uganda					
Zambia					
Zimbabwe					

Source: Survey by the World Bank and International Records Management Trust.

Civil service censuses are conducted for different reasons and using various approaches

ploying staff, building capacity, and improving human resource management. Such censuses focused on establishing a detailed profile of public employees—such as data on the mix of skills, ages, and genders—to facilitate departmental or functional reviews. This approach reflects the shift in civil service reforms from simple downsizing toward enhancing public sector productivity. Such censuses have been conducted in Guinea, Romania, and Sierra Leone.

- *Establishing a baseline as part of transition.* Some recent censuses have been conducted to establish a baseline profile of the civil service in transition economies, to facilitate planning and budgeting. Typically, the focus is on defining the scope and scale of the civil service and of functions within the civil service in systems where the distinction between public and private sectors and social and commercial activities has not previously been clear. Such censuses have been conducted in Georgia, Kazakhstan, and Kosovo.

A further distinction can be made between censuses designed to obtain “snap-

shot” data, which is more accurate than the data in payroll and personnel records or can be used to cross-check such data, and censuses designed to lay the foundations for a new, regularly updated, permanent system for collecting data and setting controls.

Methodologies used

The survey found that three main approaches were used to conduct censuses.

Physical headcounts

A physical headcount, sometimes called a staff audit, focuses on determining the number of staff employed (as opposed to the number of positions established) and on whether the names on a payroll belong to genuine employees. This approach is used most often when the goal is to cut costs by eliminating ghost workers. A headcount typically involves trained teams traveling to various parts of the census area, where individual employees are required to present themselves, often with identification and sometimes with documentation (such as photocopies of letters of appointment or birth records). These data are then checked off, usually against the payroll. In some cases

photographs or fingerprints are taken. Physical headcounts have been used in Cambodia, Cameroon, and Zambia.

Headcounts can involve significant costs and logistical challenges, and the quality of the data is often challenged. Case studies suggest that consultants and government officials tend to greatly underestimate the logistical challenges, particularly in remote or rural areas. In Uganda, for example, early censuses required that civil servants appear with photocopies of key documents—even though copying facilities were unavailable in many areas.

Questionnaires

A questionnaire is the main alternative to a physical headcount and is used most often when more detailed data on human resources are needed for restructuring or baselining efforts. This approach typically involves the distribution of questionnaires to employees or employers, who must submit information back up the line, taking responsibility for its accuracy. The data are then compiled in some type of database. Questionnaire-based censuses have been used in Georgia, Tanzania, and the Indian state of Orissa.

Questionnaire-based censuses are often akin to a decentralized headcount. Key to the success of this approach is achieving the cooperation of the local data provider, who may otherwise accord the exercise low priority. Census-takers must be clear about the information being sought and keep data requests short and to the point. In Uganda the 7 original pieces of data specified grew to more than 220. In Orissa no standard form was used, creating confusion about the questions being asked and resulting in many inconsistent, inaccurate, and illegible responses.

Payroll reconciliation

A third approach involves reconciling the payroll against alternative data sources—such as individual personnel files or service books, the nominal roll or established register, and other databases. This appears to be the least favored methodology, probably

because of the difficulty of identifying credible alternative data sources. Reconciliation has been used in Yemen, where a headcount was considered politically impractical, and has been used as a supplementary check in countries including Uganda and Zimbabwe.

Reconciliation can be extremely time-consuming and becomes more complicated as the number of personnel databases grows. The Gambia, for example, has departmental personnel databases as well as a central system for human resource information and the payroll. A reconciliation exercise is only as meaningful as the data sources on which it is based.

These three methodologies are not mutually exclusive. For example, Ghana and Tanzania combined elements of the headcount approach and the questionnaire approach.

Lessons from international experience

The survey suggests that civil service censuses have often had mixed results. Censuses have helped eliminate ghost workers in some countries, resulting in moderate or even significant savings. But such audits have been costly and, in the absence of routine civil service controls, there has often been no mechanism to ensure that ghost workers do not get back on the payroll. Censuses have contributed to efforts to restructure civil services, but such exercises are typically incremental processes and need to be informed by regularly updated information on personnel management.

What has been learned? First, censuses are costly and must be planned strategically. Objectives must be clear—whether they are short-term savings or a broader initiative to establish a comprehensive database on human resources. Moreover, censuses must be structured relative to the local context and capacity. Information requirements should be analyzed carefully and balanced against the capacity to verify, analyze, and use data gathered in a timely and effective way. Census enumerators need to be well trained, and there must be effective mechanisms for resolving disputes about data and rectifying errors. Care should be taken to

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ensure that the exercise is comprehensive, or its results will be of limited value.

The second lesson is that whenever possible, censuses need to be devised as part of a long-term institutional investment in basic payroll and personnel systems. This requires that the census be part of a strategy for maintaining accurate information in the future. Such exercises are much riskier, harder, and more complex than simple headcounts. (In one West African country, for example, it took nearly five years to establish a computerized human resource database.) The most serious census problems have occurred when methodologies more suited for simple headcounts have been used with a view toward solving longer-term problems of record maintenance. If costly repeats are to be avoided, it is essential to establish ways of dealing with census returns before the census is conducted—including through information technology and trained personnel—and to start updating the database as soon as the census is complete. At the same time, efforts should be made to identify and fix failures or circumventions of earlier management systems.

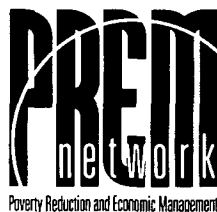
The third lesson is the need for incentives to ensure compliance. Staff and managers should be encouraged to ensure that payroll and personnel data are complete and accurate. Such efforts may involve, for instance, stopping salary payments for staff on the payroll who are not enumerated. (Though where such tactics are used, it is important to allow enough time for people on leave and those carrying out legitimate business away from work to return and be

counted.) If managers know that they will be held accountable for inaccuracies and irregularities, external auditors conducting random checks could have as much impact as costly complete audits. (It is common, for example, to see a pronounced drop in the number of inaccurate personnel entries just before a census is conducted.)

The fourth lesson is the importance of coordinated action, top-level support, and local ownership of the exercise's design and delivery. Many efforts to improve personnel data and civil service controls have failed because of inadequate coordination between key ministries, usually those responsible for managing personnel and those responsible for managing the payroll. Many efforts to eliminate ghost workers have failed because of lack of coordinated follow-up between central and line departments. In unsuccessful censuses the exercise was usually perceived as an end in itself, conducted to fulfill a condition imposed by external donors. In more successful census exercises, local ownership was repeatedly cited as a reason for success.

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