32nd Population Census Conference

Presidential address: “Living in a Global Society: How We Can Help Each Other”

Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia

Director’s remarks as prepared for delivery

August 18, 2024

[SLIDE 1]

INTRODUCTION

- Good morning, everyone. I’m Robert Santos, director of the U.S. Census Bureau.
- I want to thank the National Statistical Office of Mongolia and the ANCSDAAP Secretariat for co-hosting the Population Conference.
- It’s an honor to be here and address you all today.
- What a pleasure to meet with colleagues from national statistical offices from around the world!

[SLIDE 2]

GLOBAL SOCIETY

- You know, as I look around the room, it strikes me that this conference and the people attending it are revealing.
- By coming together and sharing our knowledge, we’re recognizing the importance of being interconnected in a global society . . . across borders, across continents, across oceans.
- Indeed, we live in a global society.
- And it’s been that way for a while, even as we continue to see ourselves and our lives through the geographic, parochial lenses of our choosing.
- But please think about this:
  - Every day, there’s virtually nothing we do that isn’t influenced by the global society we live in, by our global economy, or even by our rich, diverse cultures and languages.
  - Hey, our planet isn’t as large as we might think.
  - Our mother earth is of one ecosystem.
  - And we’re all of one human population.
- The many challenges that face our nations today transcend national boundaries.
- I’m talking about such challenges as climate change, pollution, the global economy, global health, and population movement.
- We recognize that around the world, the knowledge that flows from population statistics help inform how we might address these challenges.
- In fact, population statistics can help us pursue equitable growth, sustainable economic development and, more generally, informed decision-making.

ENGAGEMENT AND COLLABORATION

- This is certainly true in the United States.
- I'm proud that the Census Bureau is a leading source of statistical data on our nation's population and economy.
- We're constantly assessing how to improve our statistical programs to better serve and represent underserved groups as well as the general public.
- We continuously research strategies for improving the accuracy, timeliness, and relevance of our data.
- We continually strive for excellence.
- And, hey, that can be challenging in our current environment of constrained budgets and resources.
- But y'know, even in the face of challenges, I know that we can find new ways to collect data that are more accurate, timely, relevant . . . and most of all, that have utility.
- Now, since my first day in office, I've spoken about how we can promote excellence by including diverse voices and perspectives in all that we do, including our decision making.
- That's why we welcome and need the voices and perspectives of you, our international colleagues.
- Diverse voices and perspectives are potent catalysts for innovation and creativity.
- They can lead to new methods, new ways of framing problems increasing data quality, and new solutions.
- OK, so here's an example of how diverse thinking can help address a problem we're facing.
- It involves demography . . . specifically, how we measure population shifts into and out of the country when developing estimates of total population.
- We historically have relied on well-established, scientifically vetted methods for generating population components that go into an estimate of total population.
- These include data points on decennial census counts, births, deaths, migrations into and out of the country, and so forth.
- But the underlying assumption is that these data points can be readily obtained from administrative records.
- So, when the United States receives immigrant surges from many nations, and administrative records on these comings and goings don't exist, it presents a real challenge.
- Naturally, we aren't the only nation to experience immigrant surges.
- Many nations experience sudden population shifts that are not recorded in administrative records.
- And this has gone on for generations in countries across the globe.
- I expect that some national statistical offices have found ways to address such challenges.
- So, it's logical to ask: How can we learn from each other to create more robust national population estimates?
- By working together, I fully expect that we can jointly develop new ways to collect data that are more accurate, timely, relevant, and most of all meet the needs of the public.

[SLIDE 3]

DATA FOR EQUITY

- Now, all these efforts and collaborations are part of our commitment to producing data that reflects an accurate portrait of our countries.
- Why is that important?

- Well, Census Bureau data—and indeed, quality data from any national statistical office—are valuable assets that can be used by policymakers and the public to advance equity.
- Our data assist U.S. federal agencies and others in equitably distributing resources and identifying underserved communities.
- We provide a wealth of data by age, disability, race, ethnicity, sex, income, veteran status, and many other key demographic variables to help measure equity.
- These data are often reported by geography, which provides meaning and context to the statistical data, and can identify rural and underserved communities.
- Our economic data help businesses identify opportunities for growth in underserved communities.
- Our data inform policymakers working to advance equity.
- They enable them to propose effective, data-driven solutions.
- Now, we need to recognize that the value of data for equity is universal.
- It's not specific to the United States.
- Around the world, national governments and international aid organizations depend on data for economic development, disaster recovery, public health, infrastructure planning, and more.
- OK so here's another example.
- Take Cyclone Freddy.
- In 2023 it struck Madagascar, Mozambique, Malawi, and other African nations.
- It left a trail of destruction in its wake.
- Families watched their homes wash away in torrents of muddy water.
- And families witnessed their loved ones wash away.
- This one cyclone caused the deaths of over 1,000 men, women, and children.
- The tragedy transcended the weather event.
- Its aftermath led to cholera outbreaks.
- That triggering an even greater loss of life.
- Add to that, malaria—an ever-present threat in this part of the world—it was exacerbated by the subsequent proliferation of stagnant water.
- When these disasters befall nations, then governments and aid organizations depend on population data.
- It allows for the effective and efficient allocation of humanitarian assistance, for medical supplies to be delivered to where they are most needed.
- It helps decide where to set up shelters and food pantries, and to how plan the reconstruction of lost infrastructure like roads and bridges, utilities, schools, and hospitals.
- You see, data can provide the power to help people when they are most in need.

[SLIDE 4]

USAID PARTNERSHIP

- Let's next talk about the Census Bureau's partnership with USAID.
- Now, in the United States, emergency response officials rely on multiple data sources and tools to assess disaster impacts.
- They access administrative records, censuses, and high-quality survey data and tools.
- But in many low- and middle-income countries, the situation can be very different.
- They may have access to a count of their total population, but have limited data on the population characteristics at the lowest levels of geography.
- For these countries, high-quality census data are absolutely essential.

- We at the Census Bureau are committed to working with nations to share our expertise and assist them in building capacity.
- For over two thirds of a century, we've partnered with the U.S. Agency for International Development, or USAID, to help over 100 nations produce high-quality official statistics.
- Capabilities the Census Bureau built at national statistical offices—including those in Madagascar, Malawi, and Mozambique—greatly benefitted the Cyclone Freddy response effort.
- Census data provided maps and demographic profiles of the affected areas, facilitating a more effective and efficient response.
- The world looks quite different than it did when we began our partnership with USAID over 65 years ago.
- For one thing, the global population in 1960—the first census round after we partnered—was just over 3 billion!
- Throughout this period of immense change, the Census Bureau has helped the Americas, Africa, Europe, and Asia track and understand the changing world population.
- Specifically, our International Programs Center has helped a number of national statistical offices worldwide in all aspects of statistical data production.
- We work side-by-side with a country's statistical office staff to conduct high-quality censuses and surveys.
- And we provide free tools to enhance data quality and facilitate the census-taking process.
- These include tools like the Census and Survey Processing System.
- We also offer the Demographic Analysis and Population Projections System, as well as the Tool for Assessing Statistical Capacity.
- We've produced a series called Select Topics in International Censuses, as well as a series on International Population and Health.
- These products provide guidelines on data collection and analysis.
- We collaborate with United Nations bodies, the International Committee on Census Coordination and other international groups.
- For these collaborations we help develop best practices for census taking in resource-constrained environments.
- Through these various efforts, we hope to demonstrate our commitment to countries in generating the high-quality official statistics needed to advance data-driven, decision-making.
- Over the years, it's been rewarding to see so many countries benefit from our partnerships.
- In fact, some have blossomed into mature statistical systems that disseminate high-quality statistical data—and, in turn, provide assistance to other nations.

[SLIDE 5]

COMMUNITY RESILIENCE ESTIMATES

- Now, I've discussed the importance of data in advancing equity and in guiding policymakers.
- I'd like to discuss some tools and programs that we're working on at the Census Bureau.
- The first is our *Community Resilience Estimates*, or CRE.
- These provide metrics on social vulnerability of U.S neighborhoods natural disasters, including climate change, wildfires, and even pandemics.
- Social vulnerability to disasters varies widely even within a country, like in the United States.
- So it's important to tailor social vulnerabilities so that they align with the population and geography of the area you want to help.

- For instance, when developing an evacuation plan, access to public transportation may be relevant for many metropolitan areas, but not necessarily so for rural farmlands.
- Now, the CRE and its companion products, such as the CRE for Heat, highlight a critical aspect of climate risk: the unequal impacts of extreme climate and weather across space and among different sociodemographic subgroups.
- The CRE applies a vulnerability framework using household-level microdata and small area estimates to better measure the number of vulnerable households in the United States for small geographic areas.
- This provides essential data to policymakers for effective resource to the communities that are most in need.
- By knowing which areas are most vulnerable, governments and organizations can prioritize funding and support for disaster preparedness, response, and recovery efforts.
- This ensures a more equitable distribution of resources and helps build resilience in the most at-risk communities.
- And by making this data accessible, CRE facilitates building community resilience in several ways.
- It supports community-based adaptation strategies.
- It drives research agendas and innovation.
- It raises public awareness and promotes engagement.
- And it can help guide private sector initiatives.
- CRE is actually quite unique among vulnerability indices because it's developed using household-level microdata.
- This highlights a crucial and underappreciated aspect of climate control: that of statistical modeling that puts people first.
- Human-centric social modeling is crucial to assessing climate risk.

[SLIDE 6]

INTERNATIONAL CRE

- While the CRE is specific to the United States, its methodology provides a valuable use case for other countries who wish to develop similar tools.
- International collaboration on social vulnerability assessment fosters the exchange of best practices and innovative approaches to disaster risk reduction.
- Ultimately, this will contribute to global climate resilience.
- And that will benefit us all.
- Now, through the *International Community Resilience Estimates* program, the Census Bureau is sharing our expertise globally.
- We're building a methodology adapted to NSOs in low- and middle-income countries, where less data are available.
- Initially, International CRE is focused on census data, as those are the most reliable and complete for low- and middle-income countries.
- But we're also planning a small area estimates module for when it's technically feasible.
- The framework will be shared with other NSOs to help them prepare their own CREs.
- We're partnering with low- and middle-income NSOs to ensure the utility of this framework.

[SLIDE 7]

GRIDS

- Now, of course, natural disasters do not respect borders.
- Floods, droughts, tropical storms, and earthquakes strike entire regions.
- And the data used by disaster response and preparedness teams is similarly global in nature.
- These data are collected from earth observation instruments, producing global gridded datasets of surface temperature, rainfall, and fire.
- Yet, national statistical organizations like ours are organized to produce statistics using these national, provincial, and city boundaries.
- Population and housing data are critical inputs for planning.
- And they are typically produced only for jurisdictional boundaries.
- These are less useful in the context of climate change and natural disasters.
- A truly climate-ready global community needs to have the necessary inputs to create analysis-ready data.
- That is, data organized by a national grid can be rapidly integrated with earth observation data and other sources.
- Grids allow for international comparisons between one nation and another for regional analysis.
- Their uniform scale makes them conducive to cross-border analysis.
- Comparing data from, say, a U.S. state to a French or Nigerian province may be less meaningful than comparing data from standardized grid cells in each country.
- The analysis of standardized geographies could be critical for global and regional statistical work.
- And unlike jurisdictional boundaries, grids are stable over time.
- The grid only changes when the shape of the earth changes.
- That's a totally different timescale, right?
- Now, the Census Bureau currently doesn't have an official statistical grid.
- But we recognize their importance.
- In fact, we're prioritizing the construction of an official national statistical grid and hope to be disseminating such data soon.

[SLIDE 8]

DEMOBASE

- By the way, we already use grids in some of our programs.
- This includes Demobase, which is great example of international collaboration.
- Demobase delivers gridded population maps and geospatial data sets for countries around the world.
- It provides a level of granularity that's higher than any census geography map.
- It's derived from a combination of census and survey data, plus an array of noncensus datasets, such as building footprints and land cover.
- Our goal is to provide high-resolution, 100-meter grid cell maps of population distribution to support humanitarian assistance and disaster response globally.
- Right now, we have data for nine countries on Census.gov.
- And we'll release two more this year.
- We're looking to obtain funding for additional work, so please stay tuned.
-

- **[SLIDE 9]**

CONCLUSION

- OK, so, these are some of the ways that the Census Bureau is striving toward excellence in our data.
- But I hope you can see that our approach is critically dependent on all of us working together . . . helping each other.
- This is what I've been calling a community-of-the-whole approach.
- We recognize you—our international colleagues—as essential and valued partners in an interdependent global community.
- And I expect that you do, too.
- We very much have an obligation to help each other.
- The coming years will witness increasing intraregional cooperation.
- Various countries will take important helping roles to develop the statistical systems of countries in their own regions.
- This kind of international cooperation and networking is critical for better data . . . data that benefits us all.
- And better data are essential for programs that can lift people out of poverty, support improved reproductive and other health outcomes, and empower women, youth, and marginalized groups.
- Of course, much work remains.
- We look forward to developing new ways to share our Census Bureau's expertise globally in the upcoming 2030 census round and beyond.
- And we look forward to learning from your work and your experiences.
- Thank you. I look forward to learning from you all during this conference.