



THE FUTURE OF THE POPULATION (AND HOUSING) CENSUS

Ronald Schoenmaeckers*

FOREWORD The objective of this paper is to present (in a condensed form) some considerations about the future of the Population Census and to indicate its significance as an instrument for socio-demographic analysis.

We will first remind of the historical significance of the census. We will continue by outlining the decreased attractiveness for census undertaking for policy makers. We then continue by sketching the census as it is foreseen in the XXIst Century in countries like France and Belgium. We finally will underline the continued attractiveness of a census as an instrument for socio-demographic analysis and forecast.

1. Historical significance of a census

A typical definition of a census would be that it is "the process of obtaining information about every member of a population (not necessarily a human population). As such, it would be in contrast with sampling in which information is only obtained from a subset of the population. A census is a method for collecting statistical data."

A (population) census is likely the oldest statistical undertaking. Already the Bible refers to several census undertakings, the first one being realised after the Exodus, when the Jewish people were encamped in the Sinai.

The Romans conducted censuses to raise taxes (the word 'census' would stem from the Latin 'censor', which means the official in charge of counting the number of Roman citizens and setting tax rates¹).

Historically, besides taxes, the main reasons for conducting a population census were apportion seats in representative state bodies (USA, 1790) or to ascertain the number of men that could be enlisted in the army (UK, 1801)².

* Member of the advisory board to the Census in Belgium; UN census expert and guest lecturer in Social demography at the Catholic University of Brussels (KUB).

¹ The Latin word 'census' itself would refer to 'proportionate tax raising'.

² The very first census in England was, however, conducted in 1801.