

s not by accident the two countries with highly developed population registers were the first to abandon conducting a classical population and housing census. In both, the costly enumeration exercise was replaced by a (more or less) continuous use of the population registers (making use of the linkages to other existing administrative data sets such as those related to employment and housing). France followed beginning of this year by replacing the exhaustive census exercise that was conducted every 10 year (the last one took place in 1999) by a 'sample'⁶ exercise on a yearly basis.

Also Belgium conducted its last 'census' in 2001. Although exhaustive, the 2001 Belgian census is officially known as the 'socio-economic survey'. The reason is that in the future the census will be replaced by thematic surveys undertaken during the entire 10-year census interval. The precise nature and scope of the surveys are so far not been decided; since the beginning of this year the National Statistical Institute has put in place working groups to determine the needed statistical indicators (demographic and other). Most likely that other countries such as Switzerland, Austria and Luxembourg will adopt similar measures as those that are currently discussed in Belgium.

The most used argument by policy makers to abandon the classical census exercise are the huge costs involved. The argument is further reinforced by the statement that the needed information is available through the existence of advanced administrative and population registers. What is overlooked in the reasoning is that the argument only holds on the assumption that the population register(s) are error-free.

Granted, in those countries where the census is (was) organised on a strictly *de jure* basis (i.e., information is only collected for those households and individuals that are identified in the population registers and for which an address is known s cf. Belgium, Switzerland, ...) the discontinuation of a 'classical' census exercise is perhaps no great loss. On the other hand, in those countries where the census was organised rather on a *de facto* basis (with enumerators in the field, contacting every household s cf. France, but also all Anglo-Saxon countries), the discontinuation of the census implies losing a valuable instrument of data correction.

One needs to keep in mind that the urge or willingness to abandon the classical census and to replace it by alternative methods is not done on the basis of purely rational grounds (cf. *the case of less developed countries* below). Policy makers have the need to show 'efficiency'; regarding a *de facto* census as an instrument to correct the existing administrative registers is considered inadmissible

⁶ The exercise does not correspond to a straightforward sample of individuals. Different approaches are made for rural and urban areas. Not all municipalities are included every year. In that sense, the exercise has a 'rotating' dimension. According to INSEE, the statistical institute responsible for conducting census operations, the new approach would be more 'cost effective'.