

IMPROVING THE EFFICIENCY OF POPULATION-CENSUS DATA COLLECTION FOR ENHANCED EVIDENCE-BASED DECISION MAKING IN UGANDA



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PROFILE Ritah Nakato Nayiga is a statistician with training in economics and is passionate about data analysis. She currently works as a graduate trainee in data analytics with Enermech Uganda Limited. She holds a Bachelors Degree in Economics and Statistics from Kyambogo University and is currently pursuing a certification in Foundation and Advanced data and business analytics from Regenesys Business School. She has ably managed and led a data collection team, has interest in working with both the private and governments sectors to grow her career, strengthen her skill set and have an impact in these spaces. She strongly values integrity, authenticity and hard work. Her goal is to make a significant, transformative impact on the economy and careers of numerous individuals, through strategic leadership and collaborative effort.

Executive Summary

Population censuses are the foundation of planning, budgeting, and policy-making. They provide the demographic data needed to allocate resources fairly across health, education, and infrastructure, and to monitor progress toward Uganda Vision 2040 and the Sustainable Development Goals (UBOS, 2024). Uganda's 2024 National Population and Housing Census, the country's first fully digital census, revealed major weaknesses. Data collection was disrupted by technical failures of tablets, poor internet connectivity, and limited training of enumerators. Recruitment processes were marked by irregularities, including nepotism, while errors in reporting ethnicity and religion further damaged confidence in the results (Daily Monitor, 2024; Nile Post, 2024; New Vision, 2024). These shortcomings undermined both data quality and public trust in national statistics. This policy brief calls for strengthening existing systems by making recruitment more transparent, improving training, reinforcing digital data collection with reliable backups, and enhancing community oversight. These actions are essential for ensuring credible and inclusive census data to guide Uganda's development priorities.

Introduction

Population censuses are widely recognized as the foundation of evidence-based planning and decision-making. They generate essential data

that guide how governments allocate resources for health, education, housing, and infrastructure, and they provide benchmarks for measuring progress toward national and international goals, including Uganda Vision 2040 and the Sustainable Development Goals (UBOS, 2024; World Bank, 2023). Uganda has conducted national censuses since 1911, and each has provided a clearer picture of demographic growth, social change, and economic needs. Yet the usefulness of census data depends heavily on its accuracy, completeness, and the level of public trust in the process. Without these, the census cannot serve its purpose of guiding national development.

The 2024 census, Uganda's 11th and the first to rely fully on digital enumeration Computer Assisted Personal Interview (CAPI) Tablets, was expected to strengthen the reliability of demographic data. However, it instead exposed serious weaknesses that undermined both the quality of results and the credibility of Uganda Bureau of Statistics (UBOS) as the institution responsible for national statistics. The use of malfunctioning tablets, unreliable internet connectivity, and poorly prepared backup systems disrupted data collection, especially in rural areas where network challenges are common (Daily Monitor, 2024). Enumerators were insufficiently trained, receiving only a short orientation that did not adequately cover the use of digital tools, ethical considerations, or culturally sensitive engagement with local communities. This lack of preparation limited their effectiveness and contributed to errors in data collection (Nile Post, 2025).

Recruitment further weakened the credibility of the process with reports of nepotism and

favouritism in the selection of enumerators reduced transparency and inclusiveness, while delayed payments and poor working conditions discouraged many who had been hired to carry out the work (SoftPower Uganda, 2025). These frustrations were compounded when UBOS admitted to errors in reporting population figures by ethnic and religious groups, which deepened public skepticism and raised doubts about the overall credibility of the census (Nile Post, 2024; New Vision, 2024). Such mistrust not only threatens civic participation in future censuses but also undermines the legitimacy of official statistics used for political representation and development planning.

These challenges come at a critical time for Uganda, with its population reaching 45.9 million in 2024 and growing at nearly 3 percent annually (UBOS, 2024). Reliable and trusted data is urgently needed to plan for a youthful population, provide services such as schools and hospitals, and manage limited resources effectively. Unless reforms are introduced to address recruitment, training, technology, and oversight gaps, future censuses may face the same problems, making it difficult for Uganda to achieve its national development goals and weakening confidence in the country's statistical systems.

Policy options

- Uganda has several frameworks and institutions that guide the conduct of population censuses. The Uganda Bureau of Statistics (UBOS) Act of 1998 gives UBOS the legal authority to organize censuses and sets standards for data collection and management (UBOS, 2024). The National Development Plan (NDP IV) and Uganda Vision 2040 emphasize the importance of accurate data for planning and budgeting (NPA, 2007). In addition, the 2024 census was supported by structures such as the National Census Council and the Census Steering Committee, which were tasked with overseeing implementation and mobilization. The government also committed nearly full financial support for the 2024 census, reducing reliance on donors and demonstrating political will (UBOS, 2024).
- However, despite these frameworks, the 2024 census revealed serious gaps in implementation. The UBOS did not provide strong safeguards against irregular recruitment or nepotism. As a result, many enumerators were hired through patronage rather than merit, undermining professionalism and inclusiveness (Daily Monitor, 2024).
- The National Development Plan and Vision 2040 highlight the role of statistics in development (World Bank, 2023), but allocate limited resources for strengthening human capacity, training, and technology. Funding for the 2024 census was adequate in size, but little was directed toward improving training programs, developing backup systems, or building community trust. This created a gap between the ambitions of policy and the realities of implementation.
- The 2024 census also exposed the risks of over-reliance on digital data collection without proper safeguards. While modernization was a key objective, the lack of paper-based backups in areas with weak internet connectivity meant that technical failures translated into data losses and delays (Daily Monitor, 2024). UBOS did not provide for hybrid approaches that could combine digital tools with manual systems, leaving the census vulnerable to disruption.
- Finally, although UBOS has policies on dissemination of data, less attention has been given to building public trust in statistics. Errors in reporting ethnicity and religion in the 2024 census were not only technical issues but also political and social concerns, yet the frameworks in place did not anticipate strategies for community engagement, rapid correction, or transparent communication (Nile Post, 2024; New Vision, 2024). This gap has left citizens doubts about the accuracy of official data, which may undermine cooperation in future censuses. Therefore, this requires reforms to ensure that future censuses are credible, inclusive, and effective data collection and dissemination.

Policy Recommendations

- Strengthen transparency in recruitment processes. Although UBOS already has recruitment systems in place, they should be made more transparent and accountable. This can be achieved by publishing clear criteria for selection, and conducting independent audits
- Expand and deepen training programs. Training of enumerators should go beyond the current short sessions of 9 days. UBOS should strengthen training by extending its duration, introducing practical simulations, and incorporating modules on ethics, cultural sensitivity, and community engagement. This will ensure enumerators are better prepared for fieldwork.

- Improve the reliability of hybrid data collection systems. While Uganda has adopted digital census methods, these need to be strengthened with reliable backup systems. UBOS should institutionalize paper-based tools in hard-to-reach areas, invest in offline-compatible software, and maintain technical support teams to quickly resolve device failures.
- Enhance community oversight and trust-building mechanisms. UBOS already engages communities during census activities, but this should be strengthened by forming permanent district-level oversight committees that include civil society, local leaders, and the media.

Conclusion

Uganda's 2024 census highlighted serious weaknesses in recruitment, training, technology, and community engagement, which threaten the credibility of national statistics. Strengthening existing systems by making recruitment more transparent, improving training, reinforcing hybrid data collection, and enhancing community oversight will restore trust and ensure accurate, inclusive, and timely census data. Reliable statistics are essential for fair resource allocation, effective planning, and achieving Uganda's national development goals.

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