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Population Census in Cameroon: An Important Instrument in National Planning and Development

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ABSTRACT

Census is an indispensable tool for economic transformation, growth and development. Census results inform policy formulation and programme implementation, as well as socio-economic development. Planning for Cameroon's socio-economic development has been adversely affected by the inadequacy, obsolescence and unreliability of available demographic data. Past national development plans have failed partly because of a lack of demographic data for planning. There is, therefore, a need for an accurate, reliable and acceptable population census for the country, a concern of greater significance given the dynamism of modern socio-economic planning at both micro and macro levels. The April-July 2026 population census in Cameroon has become particularly important for establishing a baseline measurement of indicators required to assess progress toward attaining emergence by 2035. The exercise rests on the notion that clear-cut data sits at the centre of any roadmap that enables planning, implementation and long-term development. Empirical evidence on census informs policy recommendations for national planning and development. This paper recommends that government adopt a robust rolling plan to help determine the accurate population and demography of the country.

Keywords: Population, Census, National Planning, and Development

Introduction

The history of census-taking varies across the world, with many countries struggling not only with cost but also with data collection and storage. Such challenges mean census results have not always effectively informed policy formulation, though the situation is changing. Census is an essential source of data for national development planning in any country (Okeibunor, 1997). Census data are useful because they allow a clear picture of populations at lower administrative levels. The rationale for conducting censuses at regular intervals is to ensure better planning of sustainable development, extending beyond the socio-economic sector to other sectors for faster, holistic development. For Ashkpour (2019), censuses contain a wealth of information about nations and societies, structurally capturing societal information needs at given points in the past. Throughout history, censuses have helped governments understand national development on several fronts for decision-making. In the United States, for instance, Reamer (2018) noted that census-obtained data were used to allocate more than \$850 billion to states and localities through 302 programmes in Fiscal Year 2016 alone.

Population census is one of the means of ascertaining a society's demographic structure and other socio-economic indicators of individual status (Ketende, Calderwood and McDonald, 2011). According to Eze (2017), census holds a central place in a country's data provision for planning socioeconomic development, assessing current welfare needs and projecting future needs. Accurate population data is fundamental to rational policymaking, planning and programme implementation; planners need it to evaluate demographic trends, assess the socioeconomic situation of women, men and youths, and design responsive population policies. Systematic conduct of modern censuses has varied across Africa, with Anglophone countries tending to conduct censuses except during political instability, and Francophone countries implementing them less regularly (Marcoux and Konaté, 2012:215-25).

Cameroon's first population census was conducted in 1976, followed by censuses in 1987 and 2005. The 2026 national census, which started on 24th April 2026 and runs through 31st July 2026, covers all population groups, including nomadic populations. Census data is now primarily collected digitally using tablets, offering GPS access and real-time processing that allow analysts to identify almost immediately which areas have been covered, enabling adjustments to field operations that improve efficiency, coverage and data quality. Yet the rush for the latest numbers can come at the expense of the deeper understanding gained from analysing demographic progress over time; historical data remain key to understanding demographic transformation and social change. Population censuses provide the greater part of the basic information used to develop Cameroon's public policies, forming the core of all planning exercises. More than two decades on, the question on everyone's lips is: how many are we? Part of this quagmire stems from the fact that the nation has not conducted a census for over two decades, a state of affairs that ultimately motivated the 2026 exercise.

Population Census, according to the United Nations (2008), is the total process of collecting, compiling and publishing demographic, economic and social data pertaining to a specified time to all persons in a country or delimited territory. According to Mimiko (2006), census is the process of knowing

members of society in terms of age, sex, education, occupation and economic activities. For Olusanya (1989), “census-taking in every nation is the bedrock for understanding population size and structure in order to execute perfect economic planning.” Ezeah, Iyanda and Nwangwu (2013) maintained that census is an avenue through which a country accesses knowledge of the rate, direction and composition of its population. The United Nations similarly defined a population census as the total process of planning, collecting, compiling, evaluating, disseminating and analysing demographic, economic and social data at the smallest geographic level pertaining, at a specified time, to all persons in a country (United Nations, 2017). It must be intervallic, advisably every ten years, to accommodate dynamism in variables, since adopting old data for current planning yields stunted development results. Combining population and housing dimensions, the United Nations defined census as an operation producing an official count of a country’s population down to the lowest geographical level, at regular intervals (United Nations Economic Commission for Europe, 2006).

A census is a count, an enumeration and the publication, after careful checks, of the results of that exercise — the headcount of all nationals of a country at a particular time. It is the most expensive data collection activity a country can undertake, involving thousands of workers and millions of dollars in cost. Adiele (2009) similarly notes that the political stakes attached to population figures in heterogeneous states can be as consequential as the fiscal outlay itself, since figures determine political representation and resource allocation among competing groups. Appropriate long-term budgeting is thus a critical precondition for conducting a census, and national development requires a well-organised statistical system linking statistical planning to national goals. This paper examines the importance and use of the national census for national planning and development in Cameroon, and how census policy can meaningfully translate into improved planning outcomes.

Literature Review

There is a considerable array of literature on census-related issues, spanning population, housing, statistics and sustainable development, as well as falsification, quota politics, patterns of population distribution, and administrative census as an alternative to conventional headcounts. Golata (2014) stressed that population census is not only the oldest and best-known research but also the most methodologically reliable data source available to governments. Ogunlade (2000) listed census uses to include determining persons with disabilities for social amenity provision, ascertaining unemployment figures for adequate planning, enumerating school-age children, measuring development and living standards, delimiting constituencies, computing population density, and determining migration rates. A persistent pattern of falsification has characterised past censuses, as actors seek advantage; Adiele (2009) documents comparable dynamics elsewhere in Africa, where communal and regional actors have been accused of inflating figures to secure greater representation and allocations. Censuses should ideally be taken at regular intervals so comparable information is available in a fixed sequence, making it possible to appraise the past, describe the present, and estimate the future. Administrative data sources, such as civil registration, may supplement census data between rounds, though such sources remain too incomplete in most of sub-Saharan Africa to substitute fully for the census.

Obasanho (2018) frames population census plainly as the process by which government counts every person residing within its borders at a given time, capturing housing, educational, occupational and welfare characteristics that paint a fuller picture of national wellbeing — a framing that underscores census literacy as a matter of public trust, without which cooperation with enumerators cannot be guaranteed. Weeks (2012) situates census-taking within population studies more broadly, arguing that such data form the empirical foundation for testing theories of population change, migration and the demographic transition. Without periodic censuses, a country forfeits its ability to participate meaningfully in this broader demographic conversation about its own trajectory.

Taken together, this body of literature converges on three broad propositions relevant to Cameroon’s 2026 exercise. First, census data possess a unique evidentiary status among the sources of demographic information available to planners, since only a full enumeration lists every member of the population individually rather than relying on samples or partial administrative coverage. Second, the value of census data is time-bound: figures depreciate steadily the longer they remain unrefreshed, so that a census conducted decades apart from its predecessor supplies planners with a foundation that is already outdated before the results are even published. Third, the credibility of census figures rests as much on public trust and perceived neutrality as on technical accuracy, meaning that controversies over falsification or political manipulation can undermine the practical usefulness of even a technically sound enumeration. These three propositions frame the discussion of methodology, procedure and challenges that follows.

Census Methodology

Census operations must comply with methodological requirements of validity and reliability to produce quality data. Since the main objective of any census is complete enumeration, it is necessary to establish how well the census population reflects the true population. Several procedures assess completeness and under- or over-enumeration, the most versatile being the Post-Enumeration Survey (United Nations, 2007; 2010). Census output is expected to comply with quality elements grounded in methodological soundness, adherence to internationally agreed standards, and efficiency — minimising cost and respondent burden relative to output (United Nations Statistical Commission, 2015:73-84). While there is no single binding international quality-assurance standard, several countries have established national systems that can serve as models for Cameroon. Quality must be assured and verified transparently at every stage, with government, community, and international and local observers involved to ensure accountability. The United Nations’ (1980) principles and recommendations for population and housing censuses remain a foundational reference for definitional and procedural choices, including the treatment of *de facto* versus *de jure* populations, household definitions, and economic activity classification.

Technology reduces the personnel required across census aspects: scanning and character recognition reduce manual data entry and errors; satellite imagery reduces manual mapping; internet self-response reduces fieldwork. It can shorten interview times, enhance communication with respondents,

and reduce non-labour expenses such as printing, freight and travel. Secure mobile technology simplifies enumeration workflows, letting enumerators submit availability, receive assignments, collect and transmit data, and communicate with supervisors via mobile devices. Automated validation rules ensure consistent data checks rather than relying on manual, dispersed processes, reducing the time needed for enumeration, processing, analysis and publication. Faster release makes data more valuable to users. Public expectations and legal requirements may necessitate technologies supporting convenience and confidentiality, such as online questionnaires, online job applications for census roles, or digital dissemination of results. For census statistics to hold value, they must be accessible to a diverse range of users — the public, private sector, media, government, civil society and researchers — meeting principles of findability, accessibility, interoperability and reusability.

Procedure

The census process is a complex operation requiring careful advance planning of its sequence and timing; even minor oversights can lead to serious defects in results and costly inefficiencies. Appropriate organisational and administrative arrangements ensure that extensive human and material resources are mobilised effectively and that strict timelines and logistics are met. This is particularly demanding for Cameroon given the two-decade gap between census rounds and the consequent loss of experienced personnel and institutional memory.

Four activities are of particular relevance: cartography, questionnaire construction, data collection, and data evaluation and processing. Cameroon's current practice involves direct data collection of individual characteristics through households. Census cartography sub-divides the whole country into interlocking, non-overlapping geographical units of increasingly smaller size, respecting administrative sub-divisions, identifying all buildings, dwellings and households. This typically involves updating previous maps and converting them to digital format; accurate maps also serve analysis, presentation and dissemination, and can be updated for future intercensal surveys. Enumeration — the collection of required information from respondents — depends critically on field staff training and correct estimation of staffing needs, alongside field methodology, timing, coordination, logistics and quality control. Data processing translates collected information into useful statistical reports through digitisation, editing, imputation of incorrect or missing values, and tabulation. Evaluation measures accuracy and identifies error sources; although “perfect” results are impossible, figures subject to known and understood error remain valuable. The United Nations Statistics Division's report on census methods used in the 2010 round notes that most national statistical offices combine post-enumeration surveys with consistency checks against administrative data to bound the margin of error. Documentation, analysis and dissemination remain vital for meeting the needs of census data users, who increasingly expect timelier, more technologically integrated products — a standard by which Cameroon's National Institute of Statistics will be judged following the 2026 exercise.

Importance of Census Data to National Planning and Development in Cameroon

A population census is the total process of planning, collecting, processing, analysing, disseminating and evaluating demographic, economic and social data at the smallest geographic level, at a specified time, for all persons in a country. A housing census similarly covers the number and condition of housing units and facilities available to households. These heavy, intensive operations require considerable labour, time and investment. Much of the information recorded is consistent with data conventions established with UNESCO and other UN agencies: age, sex, national languages, literacy, school attendance, matrimonial status, economic activities and housing conditions, among others. Census results serve as a critical reference for ensuring equity in the distribution of wealth, government services and representation — informing fund allocation among regions for education and health, delineating electoral districts, and measuring the impact of industrial development (United Nations, 2017:1).

Reliable, detailed data on population size, distribution and composition are necessary for planning economic and social development, administrative activity and scientific research. Census data help governments allocate resources for schools, hospitals, roads and emergency services based on demographic needs. Population censuses are often the only source of quality information covering the entire population; demographic sources otherwise divide into registers and administrative files, censuses, and surveys, the latter relying on samples that are sometimes quite small. Civil registration and vital statistics (CRVS) are usually specialised, covering single themes such as births, marriages or deaths, but in much of sub-Saharan Africa, including Cameroon, CRVS gaps make them unusable for anything beyond administrative work — which is precisely why the periodic census retains its centrality.

Egeler, Dinsbacher and Kleber (2013:396) argued that “the usability of the results has become much more varied. It ranges from policy issues and economic aspects to social themes.” Yet any sane government must first identify how many people inhabit the country at regular intervals, as this determines who gets what, when and why. Cameroon's continued reliance on the ageing 2005 census for piloting policy suggests an abdication of responsibility for answering how many Cameroonians there actually are. Unsurprisingly, dependence on the outdated 2005 figures has produced disappointing outcomes, overtaken by shifting socio-economic realities and grave security challenges such as the Boko Haram insurgency in the Far North and the Anglophone conflict that broke out in 2016.

Undelikwo and Enang (2018) observed that data is indispensable for economic transformation, growth and development, and that unreliable data impedes planning efforts. Ajakaiye (2012) similarly noted that “the quality, frequency, timeliness and comprehensiveness of data are of paramount importance for effective development planning, plan implementation and plan outcome.” Cameroon collects data through census, sample surveys and vital registration; over the past two decades, these sources provided the evidence base for planning, even as the absence of a fresh census left significant gaps that surveys alone could not fill. For manpower and labour force planning, census data reveal how many persons are employed or unemployed, informing short- and long-term employment planning.

National planning is a short-, medium- or long-term government blueprint for moving the state toward a more favourable position, involving direction, control and accomplishment of overall national objectives for sustainable development (Onah, 2010). Dalton, cited in Jhingan (2007), described planning as “the deliberate direction by persons in charge of large resources of economic activity towards chosen ends,” while Zweig, also cited in Jhingan (2007), saw it as extending public authorities’ functions over economic resource organisation and utilisation, leading to centralisation of the national economy. Responsibility for development planning thus rests with central government. Egonmwan and Ibodje (2001) described development planning as “a consciously directed activity with pre-determined goals and predetermined means,” providing a rallying point for social and political mobilisation around development objectives.

Development itself is among the most ambiguous terms in social science discourse (Majekodunmi, 2012), encompassing economic growth, social welfare delivery, education, healthcare, poverty and inequality reduction, and infrastructure provision. Majekodunmi cites Sen’s concept of development as “capacity expansion” (Majekodunmi, 2012; Sen, 1990), arguing that development requires enhanced state capacity and institutional stability. She also cites Todaro (1989), who saw development as a multidimensional process involving structural, attitudinal and institutional change alongside economic growth and poverty eradication, and Rodney (1972), who linked development to both increased output and changed technical and institutional arrangements. Neglecting this structural dimension can render development efforts futile.

Census results also frame sampling and extrapolation in surveys; only updated results permit reliable extrapolation to the wider population (Wagner, 2010). Updated figures require sample designs to be revised for regional distribution, age and sex structure changes, and future extrapolations and weightings must rest on new data to ensure representativeness — an assurance largely absent in Cameroon for over two decades. Census data further inform analysis of rural-urban migration, urbanisation, geographic distribution by occupation and education, and labour force characteristics. It helps government determine taxable adults and expected revenue, track immigration, and distribute resources — areas of higher population, such as Douala and Yaoundé, receiving proportionately more resources. It informs provision of housing, water, electricity, roads, schools and hospitals, and reveals the size of the working population, which bears on assured economic development and investment decision-making.

Beyond specific policy purposes, census data provide scientific grounds for analysing population composition, distribution and growth — urban-rural concentration, occupational and educational distribution, age-sex structure, household composition, and mortality, fertility and migration differentials — questions of both research and practical interest for industrial and commercial growth. Reliable consumer demand estimates depend on accurate population size and location data, since these characteristics drive demand for housing, transport, food, clothing and medical supplies.

Census data also identify people affected by humanitarian crises, enabling relief planning for food, water, shelter and medical assistance, and identify vulnerable groups — women in marginalised communities, women-headed households, children, older persons and persons with disabilities — for targeted assistance, particularly relevant given displacement from the Anglophone crisis and Boko Haram insurgency. It plays a role in tracking disease spread by identifying susceptible sub-groups and enabling simulations that predict outbreaks and target interventions, while comparisons across censuses help track disease prevalence and intervention effectiveness over time.

The Sustainable Development Goals, adopted by UN Member States in 2015, address poverty, inequality, climate change, environmental degradation, and peace and justice. Census data are crucial for calculating denominators used in numerous SDG indicators; without a current census, Cameroon’s SDG progress reports have necessarily relied on projections rather than direct counts, weakening confidence in reported figures. Census data also identify housing needs through household size, overcrowding, access to basic amenities and tenure status, allowing policymakers to design targeted housing programmes and monitor their impact using comparable data over time.

Challenges of Population Census in Cameroon

The integrity of census-taking is under pressure not from scientific deficiencies but from technological, political, financial and social considerations. Administrative records and derived registers are increasingly conflated with census data, and methodological principles are sometimes ignored or trivialised. Though costly, census operations are flexible, adaptable and transparent in cost structure, with expenditures spread over several years and outputs serving multiple, sometimes unique, applications. The expansion of electronic media has created commercial entities collecting and processing detailed personal information that some fear could compete with official statistics.

Cameroon’s census, launched nationwide on 24th April 2026, was originally scheduled to end on 29th May 2026 but was extended by prime ministerial decree to 31st July 2026 — held over twenty years after the last census of November 2005. The extension followed widespread complaints: malfunctioning census kits in many localities, residents who never encountered a census agent, poor timing during the rainy season, and scheduling during the school period that hindered enumerators reliant on pupils and students otherwise occupied with schoolwork. Comprehensive census exercises demand significant financial resources, and balancing accuracy against budget constraints is challenging, especially in low-income areas where technology costs remain a substantial share of operations budgets. Unreliable electricity and internet in remote areas further undermine the digital tools meant to improve the exercise’s quality.

Illiteracy complicates census-taking, as some respondents cannot provide accurate, useful information, while conducting the exercise itself demands considerable funding. Rural-urban migration — movement from countryside to cities, often connected to labour and sectoral shifts — further complicates enumeration. Economic push factors include rural unemployment, low wages, and land scarcity linked to inheritance systems; non-economic factors include poor rural infrastructure, agricultural modernisation, and forced displacement from the Anglophone conflict pushing residents into French-speaking regions. Each of these movements complicates accurate headcounts at fixed addresses, since figures may already be outdated by publication.

Census data has been criticised for inaccuracy stemming from undercounting, double-counting and faulty enumeration, eroding trust and undermining its use for planning. Akah (2020) challenged the polarisation surrounding Cameroon's census figures, noting that political actors across regional and linguistic divides interpret disputed figures to serve competing narratives, further eroding public confidence. Demographic data derive from population censuses, specialised surveys and administrative registration systems, with census data forming the bedrock for the others; yet large data volumes combined with poor storage practices make census data difficult to analyse and preserve, leaving it underutilised and its results inadequately reflected in policy formulation. New, more affordable digital technologies deployed in the 2026 census create possibilities for more extensive use of both current and historical census data, where reconcilable.

Cameroonian censuses have long been accompanied by controversy, rooted partly in misconceptions and mistrust. In some areas, residents avoid the exercise for fear that figures will be used for tax imposition; elsewhere, religious and cultural norms prevent women from presenting themselves. These factors, alongside a shortage of technically skilled enumerators, limited access to remote areas, and poor transportation and communication infrastructure, have historically hampered Cameroon's censuses. The April 2026 exercise showed improvement, credited to more capable technical enumerators, though some of these same enumerators have since been implicated in falsifying figures, disregarding the implications for national planning. Given the ten-year interval recommended internationally, Cameroon has been overdue for a fresh census for well over a decade; a lack of adequate funds was cited as the reason for the delay, though some analysts dispute this explanation, leaving many wondering whether reliable population data is treated as expendable. Improving coverage and data quality remain top priorities, especially since standard demographic indices cannot always distinguish genuine irregularities in age and sex distributions from structural changes or social disturbances affecting health behaviour and labour migration — underscoring the need for careful interpretation of the 2026 results.

Conclusion

Census cannot be overemphasised as the bedrock of development planning and research on socio-economic and political issues, as evidenced in developed nations where consistent census data encourages proper development planning. The country's prolonged, impoverished developmental outcomes and strained security architecture have been exacerbated by a poor national census strategy; the gap since the last census is more than double the United Nations' recommended ten-year interval. This failure has produced more regress than advancement across national sectors, with delays in budget passage, poor timing, corruption, weak governance and inadequate funding all cited as contributing factors. National development requires well-organised census data, allowing planners to work with the statistical indicators indispensable to improved planning. There is now heightened awareness of the urgent need to integrate population elements into Cameroon's development planning. Quality must be assured and verified transparently at every stage of the census process running from 24th April to 31st July 2026. Options going forward include staggering future censuses across geo-political zones within a specified timeframe, or conducting sample censuses between full rounds to update key indicators. Government must remain open to whichever option delivers the most accurate information and best value for money, resisting the temptation, evident over the past two decades, to defer the exercise indefinitely.

Recommendations

After years of delay, the census exercise has become an emergency issue requiring government to conduct population and housing censuses, as in April 2026, with genuine intent to ascertain the exact number of people and housing units in the country. The Cameroonian government must henceforth embrace the United Nations' minimum standard of a decennial population and housing census, critical to the optimal performance of Cameroon's socio-economic, political, security and sustainable development architecture, since population and housing units are constantly changing and require frequent updates.

Adequate, timely funding should be released to the National Institute of Statistics and related population commissions to avoid delays and support effective planning for health, education, housing and agriculture, culminating in national development.

Government should evolve a suitable population policy as an integral part of its national development effort, informed by population size, growth rate, national and international migration, spatial distribution, and the structure and magnitude of usable natural resources.

Recruiting competent, capable personnel for the census is essential. Government should make it mandatory for everyone to be counted, irrespective of location, profession or religion, with enumerators strictly required to see and count each individual across all geopolitical zones; counting by proxy must not be permitted and should be treated as an offence against the state.

Finally, government should establish a standing, adequately staffed census bureau active between census rounds, tasked with maintaining cartographic databases, strengthening civil registration and vital statistics systems, and conducting intercensal surveys, so the country is never again left, as it was between 2005 and 2026, without a reasonably current picture of its own population.

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