# **Partnerships and collaboration**

## 11.1 Introduction

The shift to digital population censuses in Africa has fundamentally changed the operational model, making partnerships and collaboration not just beneficial, but absolutely essential for success, efficiency and cost saving. A modern digital census is too complex and resource-intensive for a National Statistical Office (NSO) to handle alone. It requires a "whole-of-society" approach, bringing together a diverse ecosystem of actors as outlined among the key prerequisites for a digital census in the chapter on [planning](#_Project_Planning_and) and the UN P&R para 2.165 to 2.172.

This chapter focuses on establishing partnerships and collaboration when implementing a digital census.

### 11.1.1 Comparison of partnerships and collaboration in the non-digital versus digital census era

The evolution from non-digital to digital censuses has fundamentally transformed the nature, necessity, and complexity of partnerships and collaboration. In the non-digital era, partnerships were largely supportive and logistical, helping the NSO execute a process it fundamentally owned and controlled. In the digital era, partnerships are foundational and integrated, forming the very technological and operational backbone without which a census cannot function. The digital era has brought new players to the center of the census ecosystem. Telecommunication companies and cloud service providers are now as critical as the NSO itself. Their services are not optional; they are foundational.

The risk profile of partnerships has increased dramatically in the digital era. Managing a partnership with a government printer in the non-digital era is straightforward. However, managing a multi-year contract with a cloud provider involves complex service level agreements, data residency laws, and cybersecurity protocols.

In the non-digital era, collaboration happened in distinct phases (e.g., a partnership for printing, then a partnership for logistics). In the digital era, collaboration is continuous and in real-time. The NSO, the telecom, and the IT helpdesk must be in constant communication during the entire enumeration period.

The NSO is no longer the sole doer of the census in the digital era. Its primary role has evolved to become the conductor of a complex orchestra of public, private, and international partners. The most important new skill for an NSO in the digital era is strategic partnership management.

### 11.1.2 Considerations for partnerships and collaboration in a digital census

Some considerations for partnerships and collaboration in a digital census include:

* Formulating and understanding the roles, responsibilities, capacities and relationships of the various executive and advisory stakeholders that exist at the various administrative levels and for each census phase. Detailed roles and responsibilities of stakeholders that can be adapted to a country are outlined in the UN P&R rev 4 para 2.169 and 2.170.
* Prepare legally signed Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) documents that are tailored to the specific needs of the partnership, providing the essential framework that enables the complex, multi-stakeholder collaboration required for a modern digital census in Africa. E.g. the technical and financial assistance MoU, public-private partnership MoU.

## 11.2 Key implementation areas for partnerships and collaboration in a digital census

Partnerships are a direct response to the primary challenges of conducting a digital census in the African context, so the following should be considered:

* Digital censuses are expensive, requiring investment in hardware, software, and training. Partnerships are crucial for mobilizing **financial resources** to fill funding gaps.
* Many NSOs lack the in-house capacity to develop, deploy, and manage the complex IT infrastructure required, so partnerships and collaboration offset the **technological deficits** that may exist. Mobile network operator partnerships that involve negotiating bulk data contracts with the NSO to ensure seamless data transmission. In some cases, subsidized communication for the census team can be negotiated, which helps enumerators easily contact supervisors for real-time guidance.
* There is often a scarcity of local **experts** in some areas like cybersecurity, geospatial analysis, and large-scale data management, partnerships and collaboration can fill the expertise shortages. Universities and research centers provide intellectual capital and analytical power.
* Procuring and distributing hundreds of thousands of devices, ensuring connectivity, and managing fieldwork across vast and sometimes difficult terrain is a massive undertaking. Partnerships and collaboration can relieve the **logistical complexities**.
* Overcoming public skepticism about data collection, especially digital data, requires credible voices and community engagement that NSOs may struggle to achieve on their own. Partnerships and collaboration can support in building **public trust**.

## 11.3 Selected country experiences

**Namibia** in carrying out the mapping exercise, the Namibia Statistics Agency (NSA) collaborated with the Ministry of Urban and Rural Development which had an interest in the housing characteristics and conditions as well as the Ministry of Agriculture, Water and Land Reform which had an interest in water and sanitation statistics. The output from this exercise contributed to the development of a Statistics Business Register and the National Dwelling Unit Frame meant to provide detailed household and land use information for each Dwelling Unit in Namibia. Most of these variables were included based on requests from stakeholders such as the Ministry of Agriculture, Water, and Land Reform, and the Ministry of Urban and Rural Development. Apart from households, buildings such as shops, schools, hospitals, lodges, offices, and other establishments were also covered, and these questions were sourced from the Ministry of Industrialization, Trade, and Small and Medium Enterprises development in collaboration with the NSA’s Economics department.

**Zimbabwe** Bureau of statistics (ZimStat) partnered with the government communication ministry and worked through its decentralized structure by creating a census communication and publicity committee at national level that worked with the district committees and included the political audience. This partnership was to address the challenge of lack of census communication and publicity officer.

**Gambia** Bureau of Statistics (GBoS) also leverage partnerships to address its challenge of lack of a designated communication and publicity unit. by engaging with the National Population Commission for effective census [communication and publicity](#_Selected_country_experiences).

**Kenya** and **Tanzania** leveraged partnerships and collaboration for effective logistics management. See chapter on [enumeration and logistics](#_Enumeration_and_Logistics)

**Tanzania** contracted experts from the universities to write monographs, through this partnership staff from NBS and OCGS and interns from universities built their skills and capacity. Several countries partnered in the development of census products and there were clear stakeholder roles based on their comparative advantage. The roles and responsibilities were clear at the [planning stage](#_2.1￼Development_of_the) such as:

* + The Census implementing agency provides technical and management leadership; planning of the census products’ release schedule; data analysis and content production; dissemination as well as data sharing if required.
  + Sectoral ministries guide selection of topics, give sectoral expertise; policy analysis; quality assurance, and data utilization for evidence-based decision-making. NSO to undertake the entire tasks of production of census products in partnership with sectoral ministries; National academic or public research institution lead NSO and sectoral ministries -this could be under an MOU or contracting the services.
  + Academia and national researchers provide research capacity; advanced statistical expertise; disciplinary and context-specific knowledge.
  + International consultants and research firms provide supplementary capacity for research and analysis, outsourcing recruitment / contract management. NSO outsourcing by subcontracting the entire production of census products either to national or international research institutions and/or consultants.
  + Development partners provide resource mobilization; technical support; operational support; promotion of international standards and best practices; quality assurance and capacity building at the NSO if required.
  + Donors provide funding, prioritization of topics and data utilization for development programs.
  + Donors and development partners also provide resources to hire research institutions or national/international consultant(s) to lead in areas/topics where national capacity is lacking in partnership with NSO and sectoral ministries/national institutions.

## 11.4 Challenges and Lessons Learnt

COVID-19 led census planners to seek innovative cost-saving measures, such as the sharing of resources and expertise through South-South cooperation. For example, Kenya donated computer tablets to several other African nations for their census activities.

While essential, these partnerships come with their own risks and require careful management such as:

* The inclusion of the many stakeholder requests changed the project from a typical cartographic exercise to a statistical undertaking. Several countries including Uganda and Namibia experienced this dilemma.
* Becoming overly dependent on a single private sector vendor for technology can lead to vendor lock-in.
* Storing sensitive citizen data on foreign-owned cloud servers raises legal and security questions can jeopardize data sovereignty.
* Different partners may have conflicting priorities or timelines that are misaligned with census goals.
* A lack of knowledge transfer can leave the NSO dependent on external support for future projects hence lack sustainability.

## 11.5 Recommendations

The following recommendations are based on country experiences:

* NSO should remain as the lead agency, however, internal collaboration is the first critical step to lead, coordinate, and provide the legal mandate for the census. Key government collaborators may include ministry of finance/planning, ministry of ICT/Communications, national mapping agency, ministry of interior/local government, defense forces among others.
* Countries are encouraged to leverage partnerships and collaboration in digital census undertakings, especially with the private sector as a cost saving option. It is indispensable for providing the technology and infrastructure that underpins a digital census. E.g Telecommunication companies are crucial for providing mobile network connectivity, bulk SMS services for communication with field staff, and sometimes the devices themselves. Several censuses in the 2020 round saw collaboration with local telecoms. Local IT firms can be essential for on-the-ground technical support, device maintenance, software localization, and call center operations. Building the capacity of local firms is a key benefit. Engage warehouse owners for secure storage of census materials.
* Embrace partnership with Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) and community leaders who are the bridge to the people, especially hard-to-reach and marginalized populations. They can play a role in advocacy, public education, monitoring, and building community trust.
* Recommend collaboration with academia and research institutions, especially the university demography departments, computer science and GIS departments as well as research institutions.
* Recommend collaboration with international and multilateral partners, some key partners include:
  + United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) - A leading partner, often providing financial support, procuring hardware (tablets, power banks), and offering extensive technical assistance on all census phases.
  + United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA) provides technical expertise, develops standardized tools and methodologies, and facilitates knowledge sharing among African countries.
  + The World Bank and African Development Bank (AfDB) are major sources of funding through loans and grants, often tying census support to broader national development goals.
  + Bilateral Donors: Development agencies from countries like the UK, USA (USAID), and Sweden (Sida) provide financial and technical support.

## 11.6 References

* + - 1. United Nations. Principles and Recommendations for Population and Housing Censuses, Revision 4 (Draft) [Internet]. DRAFT – VERSION 31 JANUARY 2025. Fifty-sixth session Statistical Commission, New York; [cited 2025 Apr 19]. 439 p. Available from: <https://unstats.un.org/UNSDWebsite/statcom/session_56/documents/BG-3b-Draft_P&R_4th_Rev-E.pdf>