Why is the heritage of the Francophone population under threat, particularly in African states?

Censuses, particularly in Africa, are often the only written traces of the many social and economic characteristics of the individuals who make up a given territory’s population at a certain point in time. These data form the demographic memory of the individuals in a collective group and, as such, represent a high cultural value. Censuses are also costly operations, which is especially important in the African context, and thus we should carefully preserve the information collected.

In the past few decades, data storage technologies have evolved at such a rapid pace that, quite often, the digital data from earlier censuses have now been completely lost. Most French-speaking African countries have paper archives of census documents, but, of course, paper documents collected in the 1970s and 1980s aren’t always stored in proper conditions and are under threat from fire, bad weather, vandalism, vermin, competition for storage space and so on.

Could you introduce the Demographic and Statistical Observatory of the Francophone (ODSEF)?

ODSEF was set up in Quebec in 2009, following the signing of a protocol between the Government of Quebec, International Organisation of the Francophonie (OIF), Francophonie University Agency and Laval University.

The first objective of ODSEF is to take steps to both preserve and promote the demographic heritage of French-speaking states, at a time when the heritage of certain African countries faces serious threats. The second objective is to support all initiatives seeking to get a deeper understanding of the place occupied by the French language, not only within French-speaking populations, but elsewhere as well.

How is ODSEF working to safeguard Francophone heritage?

So far, two digitised workshops have been created: one in Bamako, Mali, and one in Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). Mali’s 1976, 1987 and 1998 census forms have been digitised, as well as the 1984 census in DRC, which is the only scientific census for this country.

Overall, what progress has this initiative made so far with its research endeavours?

We can be extremely proud of what we have achieved so far, knowing the multiple challenges we faced. Of course, there are a lot more census forms that are waiting to be digitised in numerous African countries. One of our next objectives is to create new census micro-datasets from the digitised images, providing the opportunity to investigate complete datasets and better understand sociodemographic trends over a medium- to long-term period.

ODSEF and its partners, particularly OIF, have made great progress in estimating the number of French-speaking people in the world. All researchers who have tried to take on this challenge in the past know this is not a trivial undertaking.
A race against time to preserve demographic heritage

In challenging environments and working to strict deadlines, the Demographic and Statistical Observatory of the Francophone, Canada, is pioneering a programme to digitise and preserve archives of census data in Mali, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and other French-speaking African nations.

AT THE END of the 1960s, the UN Population Fund set up the African Census Analysis Project, which empowered 20 countries on the African continent to organise their first general census and thereby gather data required to develop robust public policies. The problem was that this collection of valuable census data was not accompanied by any real strategy to preserve the information collected. Now, the census archives of many African nations, together with the demographic heritage contained within them, is at risk.

In addition to the challenges of storing such vast paper archives in sometimes extreme environments (heat, humidity, pests etc.), the actual space that the archive occupies can also be at risk; sometimes, paradoxically, due to future censuses. For example, in 2007, Mali’s archives director was concerned about finding storage space for more than five million A3-sized documents from the 2009 census, and one of the options under consideration was to destroy the documents from the 1976 and 1987 censuses to free up the required space.

PRESEVING PAPER ARCHIVES

It was with this in mind that the Demographic and Statistical Observatory of the Francophone (ODSEF), directed by Professor Richard Marcoux, together with its partner the International Organisation of the Francophonie, set up a digitisation workshop to preserve the archived 1976 census data in Mali.

The process of preserving the paper archives involves four steps: extracting a document from the archives, preparing the document (dust removal and cropping paper to A3 size), digitising the document (using an automatic sheet feeder), and returning the document to storage. Well-trained local workers are responsible for managing the entire workflow, keeping appropriate data backups and creating weekly reports. “Most of the challenges are about operating technical equipment in a particular environment,” Marcoux explains. “In tough conditions [such as heat, dust, humidity and fluctuant power], computers, digitisers and hard disks need more maintenance than usual.”

Over four years, in Mali and in DRC, more than 14 million images (A3 size, in colour and at a resolution of 150-300 DPI) were created, taking up about 10 terabytes. Overall, the sociodemographic data of more than 56 million individuals were preserved, and the programme was declared a success.

ENABLING RESEARCH ON CENSUS DATA

In addition to preserving census data, ODSEF has also been instrumental in studying linguistic dynamics. Previously, the estimations proposed for the number of Francophones worldwide were widely criticised. ODSEF, employing its academic networks in Africa, Europe and North America, facilitated the inclusion of multiple data sources in the calculation, including censuses, major surveys, polls and informed local observers. However, the challenge of estimating the number of Francophones remains dependent on the availability of reliable data and, of the time, choices have to be made about which sources to include. ODSEF therefore developed a list of ordered criteria, and the final decisions on these inclusion criteria are both well documented and publicly available.

ODSEF has also given many researchers the opportunity to analyse the census information from their respective countries. As a result, many new reports have been written on census data from Francophone countries, including Benin, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Congo, Niger, Mali, Senegal, Tunisia and Vietnam. Yet there is still a lot to discover, and ODSEF is committed to helping statistical agencies make best use of census data and take language questions into account in their surveys and censuses.

“Over the coming years, ODSEF will continue to work with its institutional partners at both national and international levels to preserve census data and extend the current programme to some 20 other French-speaking countries,” concludes Marcoux.

FRANCOPHONE POPULATION ESTIMATES

Recent ODSEF calculations estimate the number of Francophones to be 278 million in 2015, which is close to 4 per cent of the world’s population. Based upon UN World Population Prospects, it is predicted that this number will increase to nearly 360 million in 2030 and to 430 million in 2050. Taking into account an expected improvement of schooling rate in some Sub-Saharan African countries, the number of Francophones could reach 400 million in 2030 and 535 million in 2050. Following this thread, an estimated 90 per cent of young Francophones (aged below 30) will live in Africa by the middle of the 21st Century.

www.internationalinnovation.com 2