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Census: Instrument is here, but strategy?

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The Census data is a veritable goldmine of information, both at the macro and micro levels, which can help make assessments and decisions of business people and policymakers far better informed.

However, given the near universal relevance of the data it collects and the many nuggets of data that it contains, the Census has not been mined as much as it should have been. In fact, the general area of macro consumer information is not really very well used by business strategists.

Census 2011 will provide a map of the universe of people so that policy and strategy makers can prioritise whom to target, where and with what kind of businesses. Policy makers can see what improvements have occurred and what policies have worked and set targets for improvement in living conditions and occupational status of people.

It can be used for a wide range of strategic and operational decisions, ranging from micro market planning to market opportunity evaluation and forecast to being a report card for governments' performance on development to providing a better understanding of inequality and how the fruits of economic liberalisation are trickling down.

For such an important and mammoth database, the more people working on this data the better. But the bigger debate is whether this is a public good or not. If it is, and we believe it should be, given the scarcity of up to date 'official' statistics, then the Census authority is a public service provider and they must make this data available for all to use, maybe with a nominal fee. The World Bank, UN and IMF sites are free to use.

We would love to see several PhD students in India doing PhDs around this data across a variety of disciplines.

Some bits of information move slowly or predictably — demographic data, for example. Some are far more volatile and unpredictable — like expenditure patterns or credit offtake, for example, where supplier hyperactivity influences consumer patterns.

The Census authority could focus on sequencing of information based on their time sensitivity. It could also look at using technology at the time of data collection (using personal digital assistants) alongwith multiple private agencies for tabulation and IT support to crash time lags as much as possible.

While Census 2011 will glean new information about households, it is crucial to think about why we are collecting information and how it could be used. Maybe a few more questions might make it more meaningful.

For example, access and source of drinking water are important but more importantly, is the quantity sufficient? Frequency and usage pattern could also be determined rather than just source or access. So, to the extent that the new questions are more fleshed out quality of living indicators, it is helpful.

At the same time, details such as mobile phones having FM radio or not, can be got in many other ways — talking directly to handset manufacturers or carrying out small sample surveys. There is far better use that can be made of interviewing time.

Including transgenders and counting live-in couples as married are good ideas. But we would be curious to know what how many live-in couples in India admit to being live-in couples. This number could tell us more about our society!

The unique identification exercise being tagged to this Census could help target government interventions more precisely, in theory.

But even if you have a precision instrument, you still need a strategy on what to do with it. The instrument does not become the strategy, nor does it obviate the need for a strategy.

(By Dr Rajesh Shukla Director, NCAER-Centre for Macro Consumer Research and Rama Bijapurkar, Non-executive chairperson, NCAER-Centre for Macro Consumer Research)

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