



THE NATIONAL
RESEARCH INSTITUTE
PAPUA NEW GUINEA

Press Release by PNGNRI Director, Dr. Osborne Sanida

“Why the next Population Census can’t come soon enough!”

Any “estimate” is just that, an “estimate” based on whatever method the party doing the estimation employed. The estimate may either be close to the actual (truth) or far away from it depending on the method used. This applies for the population as well.

Population estimates are based on methods used by Demographers (generally) in the estimation. Population estimates should never be taken to mean actual or factual. The only factual or rather close to factual will be the census figures (i.e. depending on how credible the census operation is) which we will know after the census is done. Without the Census, we can only project or estimate.

The Population Census for Papua New Guinea (PNG) needs to be conducted next year, as planned (and in the first half of the year at that), and not delayed any further. So, we can know the actual population (or close to actual) for policy and planning purposes. For example, population data is needed to calculate per capita GDP; unemployment rate; employment figures; death rate; population density; incomes; and so forth. Population data is also necessary to plan for the provision of public goods and services such as schools and health facilities, water, electricity, etc. Furthermore, the implementation of our Medium-Term Development Plan (MTDP) IV, which is being finalised, needs to be informed by population data. In fact, the population Census should have been done before we commenced preparation of the MTDP IV. So that all targets or objectives of the plan are based on population for the different sectors of the society and economy and the country as a whole.

At this stage, we can only go by estimates for the PNG population, for which there are different sources and methods used. One is the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) current estimate of 17 million, which has caused somewhat a stir and debate among researchers, academics and public officials and politicians. At the PNG NRI, a publication by Dr. Christine McMurray and Dr Esther Lavu in 2020 estimated that the PNG population for this year (2022) would be around 9,422,000, which as the authors put it, “is conservative”. So, the actual population is most probably above the 9.422 million estimate. But how far above that? We will have to wait for the census.

A look at past censuses could shed some light. In 1980, the population was 2,881,933. It grew by 25.2% to 3,607,954 in 1990, and by 43.9% to 5,190,786 in 2000, and by 40.2% to 7,275,324 in 2011. NRI’s estimate of 9.422 million is a growth of 29.5% from the 2011 population. The UN’s estimate of 17 million is a growth of 133.7% from the 2011 population (more than double).

So, is one of the two estimates (UNFPA or NRI) correct and the other wrong? Or is any of the other estimates by other sources (not mentioned above) right and the others wrong? The short answer is we cannot tell because they are all estimates. However, based on the growth rates between past (10-year) population periods, my inclination is that the population for PNG is between these two estimates but perhaps closer to 9.4 million rather than 17 million. Given the past growth trends of the PNG population, I am a bit skeptical about the 17 million estimate, but the estimate could be right if there was a significant improvement in fertility rates and/or a vast reduction in the death rate, which I doubt. But that can be left for another conversation.

In conclusion, given the need for real population data for policy and planning purposes, the planned 2023 Population Census cannot come soon enough!

P.O. Box 5854, Boroko, NCD, Papua New Guinea

Cnr Goro-Kaeaga Road & Waigani Drive, Port Moresby, NCD | +675 326 0300 | www.nri.org.pg

inquire, inform, influence