



Why Should We Care About Development Finance? ...because it's our money!

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## A Census in Question!

With the first phase of India's long-delayed Census now completed, attention is shifting from the exercise itself to the questions surrounding it. The Census is far more than a population count, it is the foundation on which economic planning, welfare schemes, public spending and democratic representation are built. Although the government initially attributed the delay to the COVID-19 pandemic, many observers argue that the prolonged postponement is no longer adequately explained. Questions are being raised about whether political considerations, including the upcoming delimitation exercise that will redraw parliamentary constituencies based on population, influenced the timing of the Census. The absence of clear explanations has only deepened concerns over transparency and public trust.

Equally worrying are recent reports emerging from the Census fieldwork. A [report by The Hindu](#) quotes several enumerators alleging that they were instructed to revisit households and alter entries that reflected poor living conditions, such as open defecation, inadequate housing, lack of electricity or dependence on firewood for cooking, so that the final data would better match official claims. Census authorities have maintained that such revisions are only meant to correct ambiguities and ensure accuracy. However, if field-level realities are adjusted to fit administrative expectations rather than the other way around, the credibility of one of India's most important statistical exercises is at stake. The wider debate on official data, from GDP estimates to health and nutrition surveys, has further strengthened [concerns among researchers](#) that reliable statistics are increasingly becoming difficult to obtain.

The consequences of inaccurate or outdated Census data extend far beyond academic debates. Population figures determine the allocation of resources, identify beneficiaries of welfare programmes and shape policies on health, education, housing and employment. They also influence new initiatives such as the draft rules for the [VB-GRAMG scheme, where Census data, forest cover](#) and other indicators are proposed as criteria for distributing funds among States. If these indicators rely on outdated or distorted data, poorer regions may receive less support than they actually need, while governments may continue planning on the basis of a country that no longer exists. Inaccurate Census data also weakens GDP calculations and many national surveys because they depend on Census figures for sampling and economic estimation.

Ultimately, the biggest losers from a weak or manipulated Census are India's poor and marginalised communities. When deprivation is undercounted, it does not disappear, it merely becomes invisible in government records. Families without toilets, clean cooking fuel, secure housing or basic services risk being excluded from welfare programmes because official statistics suggest that such problems have already been solved. Flawed Census data can distort the distribution of public funds, weaken evidence-based policymaking and widen existing inequalities by directing resources away from those who need them most.

- Team CFA

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Article

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