



Assessment of the Effectiveness of Communication Strategies in Shaping Census Engagement in Alimosho, Lagos State, Nigeria

Oyesomi Kehinde* & Joseph Olanrewaju Fasakin

Department of Mass Communication, Covenant University, Ota, Ogun State, Nigeria

Abstract

Despite the importance of accurate population data for national planning and development, citizen engagement in Nigeria's population census remains constrained by public distrust, contested census outcomes, and uneven participation. This study examines the effectiveness of communication strategies in shaping census engagement. Drawing on Communication for Development (C4D) and the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB), it conceptualises engagement as a function of awareness, trust, social norms, and participatory communication processes. A qualitative research design was adopted, with data collected through in-depth interviews with adult residents of Alimosho Local Government Area, Lagos State, representing diverse socio-economic, educational, and occupational backgrounds. Data were analysed using theory-informed thematic analysis. Findings reveal that communication strategies are effective in generating awareness but have limited influence on attitudinal and behavioural outcomes, resulting in an awareness–trust–participation gap. Institutional distrust, concerns about transparency, and uncertainty regarding the use of census data emerged as key barriers to participation. In contrast, participatory and community-based communication approaches mediated through trusted local actors were found to foster positive attitudes and greater engagement. The study further demonstrates that census participation is socially embedded, with community norms and peer influence shaping behavioural intentions. Theoretically, the study advances C4D and TPB by identifying institutional trust as a critical mechanism linking communication exposure to participatory behaviour. It recommends that census authorities institutionalise participatory communication mechanisms, enhance transparency throughout the census process, and collaborate with trusted community stakeholders to strengthen credibility and participation. The findings offer valuable insights for improving citizen engagement in large-scale public programmes in developing democracies.

Keywords: Behavioural intention; Census engagement; Civic participation; Communication for Development (C4D); Communication strategies; Nigeria; Public trust; Social norms

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INTRODUCTION

Communication constitutes a foundational pillar of contemporary governance, particularly as states increasingly rely on citizen engagement to enhance the legitimacy, responsiveness, and effectiveness of public policies and programmes. In this context, communication extends beyond its traditional role as a tool for information dissemination. It assumes a more strategic function in shaping public attitudes, influencing behavioural outcomes, and fostering civic participation (Asimakopoulos et al., 2025). As such, the effectiveness of communication strategies has become central to understanding how citizens engage with state-led initiatives, especially in contexts characterised by institutional distrust and complex socio-political dynamics.

This evolving perspective is reinforced within the framework of Communication for Development (C4D), which emphasises the deliberate use of communication processes to promote inclusive participation, behavioural change, and sustainable development outcomes (Baú, 2025; Cardey et al., 2024). Unlike linear, top-down communication models, C4D foregrounds dialogue, participation, and social embeddedness, recognising that communication effectiveness is contingent on trust, credibility, and institutions' capacity to engage meaningfully with diverse publics. This shift is particularly significant in developing country contexts, where historical experiences, social norms, and perceptions of governance performance often mediate public engagement with state initiatives.

One critical domain in which the effectiveness of communication strategies is especially salient is population census administration. Census exercises constitute a core governance instrument for evidence-based policymaking, equitable resource allocation, and political representation. However, their success is fundamentally dependent on citizen participation, which, in turn, is shaped by the effectiveness of the communication strategies deployed to inform, persuade, and mobilise the population.

In Nigeria, census administration has historically been characterised by low participation, public scepticism, and contestation over the credibility of outcomes (Bangbose, 2009; Owolabi, 2024). These challenges are rooted in a complex interplay of socio-political factors, including ethnic sensitivities, perceived political manipulation, and longstanding distrust in public institutions (Yousaf, 2025). Empirical evidence suggests that many citizens view census exercises not merely as technical demographic processes but as politically charged activities with implications for resource distribution and representation (Salisu & Efe, 2026).

A critical yet underexamined dimension of these challenges is the effectiveness of the communication strategies deployed by institutions responsible for census administration. Existing approaches have largely prioritised information dissemination through mass media channels, with limited emphasis on participatory engagement, feedback mechanisms, and trust-building processes (Owolabi, 2024). Consequently, communication strategies have often succeeded in raising awareness but have failed to address deeper concerns about credibility, transparency, and relevance, thereby limiting their impact on attitudes and participation.

From a theoretical standpoint, understanding the relationship between communication strategies and census engagement requires a behavioural lens. The Theory of Planned Behaviour posits that behavioural intentions are shaped by attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control, all of which are influenced by communication processes. In the context of census participation, this implies that effective communication strategies must not only inform citizens but also shape perceptions, normalise participation, and reduce uncertainties associated with the process.

However, beyond individual-level cognition, communication effectiveness is also inherently relational and socially embedded. Insights from dialogic communication models suggest that

engagement is enhanced when communication is interactive, participatory, and responsive, rather than unidirectional. In contexts such as Nigeria, where institutional trust is often fragile, the ability of communication strategies to foster mutual understanding and credibility becomes a critical determinant of participation.

Despite the recognised importance of communication in census administration, there remains a significant empirical gap in understanding how communication strategies shape public attitudes and participation in Nigeria, particularly at the sub-national level. Existing studies have predominantly focused on the political, administrative, and demographic determinants of census outcomes, often treating communication as a peripheral rather than a central factor in citizen engagement. Moreover, prior research has largely relied on quantitative approaches that measure awareness and participation levels without adequately examining the processes through which communication influences trust, attitudes, and behavioural intentions. Consequently, the behavioural and relational mechanisms linking communication to census participation remain poorly understood.

Furthermore, existing scholarship has rarely integrated communication and behavioural theories to explain citizens' responses to census messaging, creating a theoretical gap in the literature. This limitation is especially significant in densely populated and socio-demographically diverse urban settings such as Alimosho Local Government Area, where variations in trust, social norms, and access to information may shape engagement differently. To address this gap, the study adopts a qualitative approach grounded in Communication for Development (C4D) and the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB).

The integration of these frameworks provides a multilevel analytical lens for understanding census engagement. While C4D explains how participatory communication processes foster dialogue, trust, and community involvement, it offers limited insight into how such processes translate into individual behavioural intentions. Conversely, TPB explains how attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control shape intentions and participation but pays less attention to the communicative processes through which these determinants are formed. By combining the two frameworks, the study links communication processes to behavioural outcomes, demonstrating how participatory, trust-building communication strategies influence citizens' attitudes, normative beliefs, and intentions to participate in the population census.

Against this backdrop, this study assesses the effectiveness of communication strategies in shaping census engagement in Nigeria, with a specific focus on Lagos State, particularly Alimosho Local Government Area, one of the most populous and socio-demographically diverse urban settings in the country. By examining how communication strategies influence awareness, trust, social norms, and participation, the study provides contextually grounded insights into the mechanisms through which communication shapes civic behaviour.

In doing so, the study advances the argument that effective census engagement requires a shift from information-driven communication to trust-centred, participatory, and behaviourally informed strategies. It contributes to broader scholarly debates on governance and development by demonstrating that communication effectiveness is not merely a function of message dissemination, but of trust-building, social embeddedness, and institutional credibility in shaping citizen participation in public policy processes.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative research design to assess the effectiveness of communication strategies in shaping census engagement in Nigeria. A qualitative approach was

considered appropriate because the study sought to explore citizens' perceptions, experiences, and interpretations of census communication rather than establish statistical relationships. The design was theoretically anchored in Communication for Development (C4D) and the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB), which together conceptualise census engagement as a function of communication processes, trust, attitudes, social norms, and behavioural intentions. By privileging analytical depth and contextual sensitivity, the study aligns with established qualitative traditions in political communication and development studies.

Study Context and Participants

The empirical focus of the study is Lagos State, Nigeria, with particular attention to Alimosho Local Government Area. Lagos represents a strategically significant site due to its high population density, socio-demographic diversity, and extensive media ecosystem, all of which shape the dynamics of public communication and civic engagement. Alimosho, as one of the most populous local government areas, provides a relevant microcosm for examining how communication strategies operate within complex urban settings.

Participants were purposively drawn from key institutional actors involved in census communication, notably the National Population Commission (NPC) and the Lagos State Ministry of Information. These actors occupy central roles in the design, coordination, and dissemination of census-related messaging. They are therefore well-positioned to provide expert insights into the effectiveness, constraints, and practical realities of communication strategies.

Sampling Strategy

The study employs a purposive sampling strategy to identify information-rich participants with direct experience in the formulation and implementation of communication strategies. Selection criteria included:

- Institutional role and level of responsibility
- Direct involvement in census communication campaigns
- Knowledge of public engagement and media strategies

Sampling was conducted iteratively and guided by the principle of theoretical saturation, whereby data collection continued until no substantively new themes emerged. This approach enhances the conceptual robustness and analytical sufficiency of the study, consistent with best practices in qualitative research.

Data Collection

Data were collected through 16 semi-structured, in-depth interviews. Interviews lasted approximately 45–60 minutes and were conducted in locations convenient to participants. An interview guide was developed based on the study objectives and theoretical framework, focusing on communication channels, message credibility, awareness, trust, social influence, and participation intentions. With participants' informed consent, all interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The semi-structured format provided sufficient flexibility for probing and clarification while ensuring consistency across interviews.

Analytical Strategy

Data were analysed using thematic analysis, following an iterative and theory-informed approach. The analytical process involved three interconnected stages:

1. Open coding to identify recurring concepts and patterns within the data

2. Axial coding to establish relationships between codes and organise them into broader categories
3. Selective coding to develop higher-order themes that capture the core dimensions of communication effectiveness

The analysis combined inductive and deductive logics, allowing themes to emerge from the data while also being informed by the study's theoretical framework. In particular, the analysis was sensitised to constructs derived from the Theory of Planned Behaviour, including attitudes, subjective norms, and behavioural intentions, as well as relational dimensions such as trust and dialogic engagement.

This approach facilitates a shift from descriptive reporting to analytical explanation, demonstrating how communication strategies influence perceptions, trust formation, and participation outcomes.

Rigour and Trustworthiness

Several strategies were employed to enhance the study's trustworthiness. Credibility was strengthened through prolonged engagement with participants, iterative probing during interviews, and member checking, whereby selected participants reviewed summaries of key interpretations for accuracy. Dependability was ensured through the maintenance of a detailed audit trail documenting methodological and analytical decisions. Confirmability was supported through reflexive memo-writing, transparent coding procedures, and peer review of coding decisions. Transferability was enhanced through rich descriptions of the study context, participants, and communication environment, enabling readers to assess the applicability of the findings to similar settings.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical standards were rigorously maintained throughout the research process. Participants were fully informed about the purpose and scope of the study, and voluntary informed consent was obtained before data collection.

Confidentiality and anonymity were ensured by removing identifying information, and all data were securely stored in accordance with standard research ethics protocols. The study complies with established ethical guidelines for research involving human participants, ensuring that data were used solely for academic purposes and that participants' rights and welfare were protected throughout the research process.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section assesses the effectiveness of communication strategies in shaping public attitudes and participation in census activities in Nigeria, with a specific focus on Lagos State, particularly Alimosho Local Government Area. Drawing on qualitative interview data, the analysis adopts a theory-informed thematic approach, integrating insights from the Theory of Planned Behaviour and communication scholarship.

Using an iterative coding procedure, interview transcripts were analysed through first-order coding (capturing participant meanings) and second-order abstraction (deriving analytical themes). The findings are organised across three interrelated dimensions of effectiveness: cognitive (awareness), attitudinal (trust and perception), and behavioural (participation). This structure enables a systematic interrogation of how communication strategies shape census engagement.

Awareness without Conviction: Communication and Attitudinal Constraints

The findings indicate that communication strategies are effective in generating awareness but limited in transforming public attitudes toward census activities. Participants reported widespread exposure to census-related messages through mass media and community channels. However, such awareness did not translate into positive perceptions or trust in the census process.

As one participant noted:

"We hear about the census on the radio and TV, but many people do not believe it is just for counting; they think it has political motives."

Another participant observed:

"Government messages are there, but trust is the problem. People do not easily change their mindset because of announcements."

These accounts suggest that communication strategies operate within a context of entrenched institutional distrust, where messages are interpreted through prior experiences and socio-political expectations. This finding aligns with existing studies, which show that communication effectiveness is mediated by source credibility and public trust (Dominic et al., 2023; Kumalasari et al., 2024).

Within the Theory of Planned Behaviour, attitudes are shaped by beliefs about outcomes and trust in institutions. However, the findings extend this perspective by demonstrating that such beliefs are historically grounded and socially reinforced, thereby constraining the capacity of communication strategies to produce attitudinal change.

A minority of participants expressed cautious optimism, suggesting that consistent, transparent communication could improve trust over time, indicating that attitudes remain conditionally responsive rather than entirely fixed.

The Attitude–Participation Gap: Limits of Communication Effectiveness

A central finding is the weak linkage between awareness/attitudes and actual participation, highlighting the limits of communication strategies in driving behavioural engagement. While participants acknowledged increased awareness of census activities, their willingness to participate was shaped by perceived relevance, trust in data usage, and broader governance considerations.

One interviewee explained:

"Even if people understand the census, they still ask, 'What will the government do with the data? That determines whether they will cooperate.'"

Another remarked:

"I do not think information alone makes people participate. If they do not trust the process, they will not come out."

These findings indicate that communication strategies have indirect and contingent effects, influencing awareness but not guaranteeing participation. This supports broader literature suggesting that information dissemination alone is insufficient to drive civic engagement in low-trust contexts (Bukar et al., 2025; Ibrahim & Ali, 2024).

Within the Theory of Planned Behaviour framework, this reflects a disruption in the attitude–behaviour pathway, where institutional distrust weakens the translation of intention into action. Thus, communication effectiveness is mediated by governance realities, rather than being solely a function of message reach or clarity.

Participatory Communication and Trust Mediation

The study finds that communication strategies are more effective when they are participatory and community-embedded, particularly through engagement with trusted local actors. Participants consistently identified community leaders, religious figures, and local influencers as more credible sources than formal government channels.

As one participant stated:

“If the message comes through our community leaders or pastors, people take it more seriously than government adverts.”

Similarly:

“People listen more when someone they trust explains it, not just TV announcements.”

These insights highlight that communication effectiveness is fundamentally relational, relying on trust, proximity, and social legitimacy. This finding is consistent with Communication for Development (C4D) literature, which emphasises the importance of dialogue and participatory engagement in shaping behaviour (Pattanaik, 2024; Servaes, 2022).

However, the findings also reveal that participatory approaches are not systematically institutionalised, remaining sporadic and secondary to top-down communication efforts. This limits their scalability and reduces their overall impact on census engagement.

Social Norms and Collective Dynamics in Census Participation

The analysis further reveals that social norms and community dynamics play a critical role in shaping participation decisions. Participants frequently described census participation as influenced by family members, peers, and community expectations, rather than solely individual attitudes.

As one participant noted:

“If people around you are participating, you will likely join. However, if others are not interested, you also step back.”

Another added:

“In this area, people follow what the community is doing. It is not just a personal decision.”

These findings align with empirical research on social influence and civic behaviour (Fahrati, 2023; Muhdiarta, 2025). Within the Theory of Planned Behaviour, this reflects the role of subjective norms. Still, the study extends this insight by showing that in contexts such as Nigeria, collective expectations can outweigh individual attitudes.

This suggests that communication strategies focused solely on individual persuasion are insufficient and must incorporate community-level mobilisation and norm activation.

Discussion of Findings

The findings of this study demonstrate that the effectiveness of communication strategies in shaping census engagement in Nigeria is multidimensional, nonlinear, and deeply context-dependent, reflecting the complex interaction among information flows, institutional trust, and socially embedded behavioural processes. Rather than operating as a straightforward causal mechanism, communication effectiveness emerges as a contingent outcome shaped by structural, relational, and normative factors.

First, the study reveals that communication strategies are most effective at the cognitive level, particularly in generating widespread awareness about census activities. Participants consistently reported exposure to census-related messages through mass media and community channels. This finding corroborates previous studies that identify mass communication as an effective tool for increasing public awareness of government programmes and civic initiatives

(Ibrahim & Ali, 2024; Kumalasari et al., 2024). However, the present study extends this body of evidence by demonstrating that awareness alone does not necessarily translate into trust or participation. Whereas much of the existing literature implicitly treats awareness as an indicator of communication success, the findings reveal a persistent gap between awareness, trust, and participation. This suggests that communication effectiveness should be assessed not only in terms of message reach but also in terms of its capacity to foster trust, credibility, and behavioural commitment. The finding aligns with studies on electoral participation and public health campaigns in developing countries, which similarly report that information dissemination alone rarely produces sustained behavioural change in contexts characterised by institutional distrust and political scepticism.

Second, the analysis identifies institutional trust as the pivotal mediating variable in the communication–participation nexus. Citizens’ willingness to engage in census activities is not determined solely by message clarity or frequency but by perceptions of state credibility, transparency, and accountability. Consistent with Ibrahim and Ali (2024) and Dominic et al. (2023), the findings indicate that broader governance experiences fundamentally shape public responses to state-led initiatives. However, the present study goes beyond previous research by demonstrating how distrust actively interrupts the pathway between awareness and participation. Unlike findings from some public health communication studies, which showed that persuasive messaging partially mitigated institutional scepticism, the evidence from Alimosho suggests that communication strategies have limited influence when concerns about governance, political manipulation, and data utilisation remain unresolved. This finding reinforces studies from other African contexts that link civic participation to institutional legitimacy, while highlighting the particular salience of historical controversies surrounding census exercises in Nigeria.

Third, the study highlights the comparative effectiveness of participatory and community-based communication approaches, particularly in contexts characterised by distrust in formal state institutions. The prominence of community leaders, religious figures, and local influencers as credible intermediaries supports Communication for Development (C4D) scholarship, which emphasises dialogue, inclusion, and local legitimacy as drivers of behavioural change (Pattanaik, 2024; Servaes, 2022). Similar findings have been reported in studies of health communication, electoral mobilisation, and community development programmes, where trusted local actors enhanced message acceptance and participation. Nevertheless, the present study contributes additional understanding by demonstrating variation in trusted communication sources across demographic and social groups. While older participants tended to place greater trust in religious and traditional leaders, younger participants frequently identified community influencers and informal social networks as more persuasive. These variations suggest that trust is not uniformly distributed across communication channels and social categories, thereby requiring more differentiated communication strategies than those commonly advocated in existing studies. The findings further reveal that participatory approaches remain weakly institutionalised, fragmented, and often episodic, functioning as supplementary rather than central components of census communication. Consequently, their potential to generate systemic and scalable impact remains underutilised.

Fourth, the findings call for a contextual refinement of the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB), particularly regarding its assumptions about the progression from attitudes to behavioural intentions and actions. While previous applications of TPB in civic engagement and public participation research generally support the proposition that favourable attitudes lead to stronger behavioural intentions, the present findings reveal important contextual limitations. In contrast to evidence from higher-trust settings, attitudes alone were insufficient predictors of census

participation. Instead, subjective norms, collective expectations, and institutional trust exerted stronger influences on behavioural decisions. Participants frequently described participation as socially negotiated and influenced by family members, peers, religious communities, and neighbourhood networks. These findings support previous studies on social influence and civic behaviour while extending them by demonstrating that collective expectations can outweigh individual attitudes in highly socialised contexts. Consequently, the study suggests that TPB may benefit from incorporating trust and broader governance-related variables as more explicit explanatory constructs when applied to civic participation in developing democracies.

Taken together, these findings advance a more refined understanding of communication effectiveness as a relational, socially mediated, and governance-dependent process rather than a purely technical function of message design and dissemination. Communication strategies achieve optimal effectiveness not when they merely maximise information reach, but when they foster trust, resonate with citizens' lived experiences, and are embedded within credible social structures. By demonstrating how awareness, trust, social norms, and participation interact within a complex governance environment, the study contributes to communication and development scholarship by repositioning communication from a transmission-oriented model to a co-productive process in which meaning, trust, and civic action are jointly constructed. Furthermore, by providing empirical evidence from a subnational Nigerian context that has received limited scholarly attention, the study enriches the understanding of citizen engagement in state-led initiatives. It offers insights relevant to other developing democracies facing similar challenges of trust, participation, and public communication.

Implications for Policy and Practice

The findings of this study have significant implications for the design and implementation of communication strategies to enhance census engagement in Nigeria. They suggest a paradigm shift from information-driven approaches to trust-centred, participatory communication models.

First, there is a critical need to prioritise trust-building and transparency as foundational elements of a communication strategy. This entails moving beyond episodic messaging to sustained engagement that demonstrates credibility, accountability, and clarity regarding the purpose and use of census data. Without addressing underlying trust deficits, communication interventions will continue to yield diminishing returns at the behavioural level.

Second, policymakers should institutionalise participatory and community-based communication mechanisms. Rather than treating local engagement as an auxiliary activity, it should be embedded as a core pillar of the communication strategy, with clearly defined structures, resources, and accountability frameworks. This would enable the scaling of participatory approaches and enhance their long-term impact.

Third, the strategic use of trusted local actors as communication intermediaries should be formalised. Community leaders, religious authorities, and grassroots influencers possess social capital and legitimacy that state institutions often lack. Integrating these actors into official communication frameworks can significantly enhance message credibility and acceptance.

Fourth, communication strategies should incorporate feedback loops and dialogic mechanisms that allow for two-way engagement between the state and citizens. Such mechanisms not only improve message clarity but also foster a sense of inclusion and ownership, which is critical for sustained participation.

Fifth, there is a need to contextualise messaging to reflect citizens' lived realities, concerns, and expectations. Generic, top-down communication is less likely to resonate in diverse and socio-demographically complex settings such as Alimosho. Tailoring messages to local contexts

enhances relevance and strengthens the connection between communication and behavioural outcomes.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to assess the effectiveness of communication strategies in shaping census engagement in Nigeria, with a specific focus on public attitudes and participation in Alimosho Local Government Area of Lagos State. Drawing on qualitative interview data and guided by insights from the Theory of Planned Behaviour and communication scholarship, the study provides a nuanced understanding of how communication operates within a low-trust, socially embedded, and institutionally mediated environment.

The findings demonstrate that communication strategies in Nigeria are partially effective, with the greatest impact observed in awareness creation. While participants reported high exposure to census-related messaging, this cognitive success does not translate into commensurate changes in attitudes or participation. Instead, the study identifies a persistent awareness–trust–participation gap, highlighting the limitations of communication approaches that prioritise information dissemination without adequately addressing underlying issues of credibility and legitimacy.

A central conclusion of the study is that institutional trust constitutes the critical mediating factor in the relationship between communication and census engagement. Citizens' responses to census communication are shaped less by message content or frequency, and more by their perceptions of government transparency, accountability, and intent. In contexts where trust in public institutions is weak or contested, communication strategies, no matter how well designed, remain structurally constrained in their capacity to influence behaviour. This underscores the broader argument that communication effectiveness cannot be divorced from the governance environment within which it operates.

Furthermore, the study highlights the importance of participatory and relational communication approaches in enhancing effectiveness. Communication channels that leverage trusted local actors, such as community leaders and religious figures, are more likely to influence attitudes and encourage participation. However, the impact of such approaches is currently limited by their fragmented and non-institutionalised nature, which prevents their integration into a coherent and scalable communication framework.

In addition, the findings reveal that census participation is socially embedded and normatively driven, rather than purely individualistic. Social networks, peer influence, and community expectations play a decisive role in shaping behavioural outcomes, often outweighing individual attitudes. This challenges linear assumptions embedded in dominant behavioural models, including the Theory of Planned Behaviour, and calls for a more context-sensitive and socially grounded understanding of civic engagement in developing country contexts.

In all, the study concludes that the effectiveness of communication strategies in shaping census engagement in Nigeria is not simply a function of message reach or clarity, but also of their ability to build trust, engage communities, and align with citizens' socio-political realities. Communication must therefore be reconceptualised as a co-productive and relational process, in which meaning, credibility, and participation are jointly constructed through sustained interaction between the state and society.

Based on these findings, the study recommends a shift from campaign-oriented communication to an integrated, participatory communication framework that prioritises sustained citizen engagement. First, census authorities should institutionalise partnerships with community leaders, religious organisations, civil society groups, and local associations as core

components of communication planning and implementation. Second, greater transparency and accountability should be embedded throughout the census process through clear communication regarding data collection, protection, utilisation, and the policy value of census outcomes.

Third, communication practitioners should adopt continuous, two-way engagement mechanisms, including community forums, interactive media programmes, and digital feedback platforms, that enable citizens to voice their concerns and receive timely responses. Finally, regular monitoring and evaluation of communication interventions should be institutionalised through public perception surveys and community feedback systems to facilitate evidence-based improvements in future census exercises.

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