

Outdated census info hindering service delivery

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Johannesburg - The government doesn't know where the majority of South Africans live due to outdated census information, and because it doesn't keep track of migration patterns of rural inhabitants who move to the cities looking for work.

The Financial and Fiscal Commission is now calling for a review of the 10-year census process, shortening it to five years, as this is hindering service delivery and funding in some municipalities due to the lack of data on urban migration.

The commission said it had come across some "scary figures" where some municipalities are getting up to 80 percent less than they should be as a result of the outdated census data when it comes to funding allocations from the national and provincial government.

The commission is a statutory body that makes recommendations to Parliament, provincial legislatures, local government and other organs of state on financial and fiscal matters.

The final report on the commission's public hearings on the review of local government states that the hearings unanimously agreed on the inadequacy of using 2001 census data for calculating the current local government equitable share formula, which determines how much money a municipality gets.

"In the past it was possible to generalise that rural areas were poor and urban areas were rich, but in recent years, urbanisation has led to poverty also becoming concentrated in cities. The development and implementation of a national urbanisation policy need not contradict the government's support of rural areas."

Commission chairman Bongani Khumalo said on Monday that a lack of frequently updated and accurate data at the local government level "constrains the effectiveness and equity in the design and distribution of grants".

He said the Community Survey of 2007 was also found to be "totally unhelpful" when it came to identifying where people lived.

"I just can't pull out the numbers, but some of the numbers that we picked up when we reviewed the local government equitable share formulas were quite scary in the sense that people have moved so much, so that when you then apply the new formulas on the basis of what we knew about people and where they were located, you'd find that in some municipalities they had to receive as much as 80 percent less than they were actually receiving."

Khumalo said there was currently no component that deals with migration patterns.

"The release of the 2011 census has temporarily solved the issue of outdated data used in formulas for distributing funds for local government.

“However, going forward, the need to update data within formulas to keep pace with the rapidly changing delivery context, like urbanisation, will remain problematic, given the current practice of undertaking censuses once every 10 years,” said Khumalo.

He said that because of this, the commission called for the “institutionalisation” of a five-year census and the exploration of statistical methods to fill the data gap between censuses.

Khumalo said this could be achieved by strengthening the existing local government data forum.

“We have raised in the past, as the commission, that the 10-year census creates quite a significant amount of challenges when it comes to dealing with our revenue-sharing mechanisms, both at local and provincial government level. The reason being that these revenue-sharing formulas are heavily driven by demographic data.

“Even if we go to a five-year census, we will still be updating the information two years after the census has been conducted,” said Khumalo.

<http://www.iol.co.za/news/politics/outdated-census-info-hindering-service-delivery-1.1504952>