In Latin America, the need to include the identification of indigenous and afro-descendants peoples in the population and housing censuses emerges from the recognition of the fact that they are in a disadvantage social and economic situation, showing higher levels of poverty and lower recognition of their rights in all aspects.

Historical processes since the conquest, colonization and expansion of the republican states in Latin America determined –until today- a subordinate position of the indigenous and afro descendents peoples in the society.

Consequently, there is the need to know how many they are, where they are located and how they live, in order to dispose of basic information for the design, application and monitoring of public policies at the national and local level, which should be oriented to eradicate the structural discrimination they are suffering and preserve the accomplishment of their rights.

Censuses are the most basic and primary data source to make visible these groups. Its universal coverage makes it a privileged instrument to obtain dependable information at lower geographical levels and has the potential to identify and characterize these peoples, even when they represent a minority at the national level.

At the same time, the census is the framework for sample surveys, to improve the designs of the surveys currently used so that these populations be represented from the statistical point of view. It also allows the design of specific surveys and in-depth studies (like Argentina did with the complementary survey of indigenous populations in 2004).

Beyond the technical reasons that place the census in the front page in these matters, there are international norms and agreements which strongly sustain the need to produce and disseminate information about indigenous populations, as a part of the obligations of the States. Furthermore, this need is widely considered in the UN Census Manual.

At this respect and as a consequence of long struggles of the indigenous movements, a standard of rights can be found in the Agreement 169 of the International Labour Organization and in the UN Declaration on the rights of the indigenous populations approved by the General Assembly of UN in 2007. On the topic of information this Declaration establishes two articles (15 and 16) as to the “right for information”. Equally, the Program of Action of Durban, also relates to the need to have data disaggregated by ethnic groups.
In Latin America there is a recognition of the developments made in the 2000 censuses. This is not only due to the inclusion of ethnic self-identification questions but also because the statistical institutes have processed and disseminated desegregated results for this groups and made the databases available. However, the conceptual and methodological difficulties implied in the approach to ethnic matters and the need to consider the ethnic participation as a main issue of their rights requires greater efforts to consolidate already initiated processes.

In this framework, taking into account the previous experience (2000) and after intense debates, CELADE made recommendations for the purpose of censuses 2010. These recommendations were discussed and validated with the statistical institutes, indigenous organizations and afro-descendants groups as well as with experts in the field. Taking into account those recommendations greater developments in the round 2010 of censuses are analyzed.

The experience with the censuses in Latin America shows changes in the classification criteria to identify indigenous peoples. The most significant change is that at the beginning, they were identified –indirectly- through external and manifest characteristics, mainly by the use of the indigenous languages. At present there is an international consensus in that the proper way to obtain this information is through a direct question of self-identification. This change reflects the conceptual shift from an approach of the indigenous populations as “receivers” of policies to an approach of “right-holders”.

Up to now, 9 of 10 countries that have done their 2010 censuses have included questions of ethnic identification. They have incorporated a self-identification question for the whole population. These countries are Argentina, Brazil, Ecuador, Mexico and Panama in 2010; Costa Rica, Uruguay and Venezuela, in 2011; and Chile, in 2012.

As to the wording of the self-identification questions and the categories that have been used, 2000 census show great heterogeneity and semantic differences in various countries. These are associated to the terms used in the questions wording. They may refer to diverse dimensions of the definition of ethnic group (such as whether the persona “descends” or “belongs” to an indigenous people) or because they imply diverse degrees of personal involvement (such as in the case of “people” as different to “culture”).

A second element is related to the different local meanings of the categories used and its social and territorial variations. In the round of censuses 2010 a certain convergence can be seen in how the national statistical institutes are operationalizing the criteria of self-identification in the case of indigenous peoples. With the exception of Uruguay, all the countries refer to the sense of belonging to a “people” or indigenous “category”. Uruguay relates to “ancestors” and Ecuador includes certain cultural traits. Also, some countries designed a different question for indigenous and for afro-descendants, according to recommendations. Several countries included afro-descendants for the first time.

These differences respond for differences in conceptual and political positions in both groups. While indigenous peoples want to be identified as “peoples”, afro-descendants prefer the dimension “racial-ethnic” through phenotypic categories like the skin colour. Pilot studies were decisive in the reformulation of questions.

There are, at least, four dimensions for the definition of indigenous and afro-descendants peoples. They are: “self-identification”, “common origin”, “culture” and “territoriality”. To identify operational criteria for each of these dimensions would allow not only quantify but also characterize these groups in their heterogeneity.
According to this, several countries have incorporate additional questions, apart from self-identification, primarily related to indigenous languages. Some countries also modified categories in standard census questions (i.e. in housing variables) to increase the cultural relevance of the questionnaire as a whole.

The cartographic revision is another issue to be mentioned, particularly in Brazil and Costa Rica, countries that have made efforts to relate the census micro-data to the indigenous territories to obtain a reference of the ancestral lands particularly when they do not correspond to the administrative divisions in the countries.

As to the census process, in the framework of the new standards of human rights, the States through the national statistics institutes must guarantee the full and effective participation of the indigenous and afro-descendants peoples through all the stages of the process, from the elaboration of the questions and questionnaire application until analysis and dissemination of the data. In this sense, advances have been noted in participation of ethnic representatives. There were also advances in the training of enumerators and supervisors from ethnic groups and the design of communication campaigns with cultural and linguistic relevance, among others.

All this have contributed to improve the numbers of persons of indigenous and afro-descendants origins which cannot be explained only by natural increase but by a clear growth in self-identification. This document shows these figures including –when possible- intercensal population growth rates, while also offers some hypothesis to explain this increase. For the indigenous peoples, 2010 censuses are consistent with the prophetic words of Tupaj Katan (aimara indigenous who was leader of one of the biggest rebellions against the Spanish Empire): I will be back and I will be millions.