



**Decade for Repositioning  
of Civil Registration and  
Vital Statistics in Africa  
2017-2026**

**Why improving civil  
registration and vital statistics  
systems in Africa is important**



Making everyone visible in Africa!



**GROWING AWARENESS FOR  
INCLUSIVENESS EMBODIED  
IN TARGET 16.9 OF THE  
SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT  
GOALS: “ BY 2030, PROVIDE  
LEGAL IDENTITY FOR  
ALL, INCLUDING BIRTH  
REGISTRATION”.**



## CONTEXT

Most African countries have civil registration laws for systematically registering vital events. However, very few countries have maintained a comprehensive and complete civil registration and vital statistics (CRVS) system aligned to international standards, that is one that can contribute to building a modern public administration, upholding human rights and supporting national development initiatives.

The hallmark of civil registration system is the ability to log vital events on a universal, continuous, permanent and compulsory basis at the lowest administrative levels while ensuring the confidentiality of the information collected. This makes it a source of vital statistics that cannot be matched by other data-gathering methods such as censuses and demographic household surveys. The United Nations recommends the registration of 10 vital events<sup>1</sup>, with births, deaths and foetal deaths given first priority for countries that do not have the capacity to register or publish all 10 of them.

CRVS systems are central to any country's development process. The legal identity documents and records derived from the system are useful to both individuals and Governments. The system is also the most reliable and continuous source of vital statistics.

*Executive Council, during the 29<sup>th</sup> ordinary session of the African Union Heads of State and Government Summit held in Kigali, Rwanda in July 2016 declared. 2017-2026 as "A Decade for repositioning Civil Registration and Vital statistics (CRVS) in Africa's continental, regional and national development agenda." and urged government to respond with appropriate action.*

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### CIVIL REGISTRATION AND VITAL STATISTICS SYSTEMS NEED TO BE:



**Universal** to include all areas and the entire population of the country, and cover all vital events occurring inside the country and to citizens living abroad.



**Continuous and permanent** to record vital events as they happen and on a continuous basis. The continuous aspect of registration implies also that the procedure is permanent.



**Compulsory** in order to ensure continuous, permanent and universal coverage of vital events, and backed by a legal framework for its administration, operation and maintenance.



**Confidential** to retain public confidence by protecting citizens from misuse of records. The assurance that the information collected will only be released under specified conditions for specific uses helps to improve the accuracy and completeness of the data gathered.

<sup>1</sup> The 10 vital events are: live birth; death; foetal death; marriage; divorce, annulment (of a marriage); separation (of married people); adoption (of a child); legitimation (of a person with the status and rights of a person born in wedlock) and recognition (of the paternity of a child).



# WHAT IS BEING DONE TO IMPROVE CIVIL REGISTRATION AND VITAL STATISTICS SYSTEMS?

The CRVS systems are the basic building block of an identity ecosystems required to improve service delivery to all people. It is through providing legal documents of vital events to each individual that we can help realize and protect human rights. These documents are the sources for reliable and continuous data from CRVS systems that would enable monitoring of policy impacts continuously and at lower levels of disaggregation.

“Most people in Africa and Asia are born and die without leaving a trace in any legal record or official statistic. Absence of reliable data for births, deaths, and causes of death are at the root of this scandal of invisibility, which renders most of the world’s poor as unseen, uncountable, and hence uncounted.” stated the article “A scandal of invisibility: making everyone count by counting everyone” published in Lancet magazine in 2007. Since then, significant progress has been achieved globally and in particular in Africa in terms of the recognition of CRVS as a development imperative.

The sustainable development Agenda 2030 adopted by the world heads of states in 2015 implicitly recognizes the importance of CRVS systems. Without them, the resolutions “to end poverty and hunger everywhere; to combat inequalities within and among countries; to build peaceful, just and inclusive societies; to protect human rights (...) we pledge that no one will be left behind” cannot be fulfilled and the implementation monitored. It is only through building viable, universal and inclusive CRVS systems that we can truly eradicate the scandal of invisibility and make sure that no one is left behind.

Similarly, the African Agenda 2063 echoes inclusiveness as a prerequisite to the continent’s growth and development. The realization of these agenda requires that every vital event (primarily birth and death) is registered upon occurrence and that statistics pertaining to these events are produced and used to guide policy and planning and to monitor development.

In a bid to reverse the poor state of functioning of CRVS systems in the region, African countries have defined a regional road map that should guide accelerated improvement of the systems in all countries. The road map is conceptualized into a regional programme known as the Africa Programme on Accelerated Improvement of Civil Registration and Vital Statistics (APAI-CRVS). APAI-CRVS was created under the directives of African Ministers Responsible for Civil Registration,

during their first conference held in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia in August 2010. The programme is guided by the policy directives of the Conference of African Ministers Responsible for Civil Registration, which is now institutionalized as a permanent forum of the African Union Commission (AUC) that convenes every two years. The programme is steered by a regional APAI-CRVS Secretariat based at the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) and a partnership with the lead Pan-African organizations, United Nations agencies and non-governmental organizations that form the Africa CRVS Core Group<sup>2</sup>.

In order to bring about a viable long-lasting change in the countries, the implementation of APAI-CRVS follows five guiding principles: (i) Promoting country ownership and leadership; (ii) Promoting phase-based, holistic and integrated approaches; (iii) Promoting systematic and coordinated approaches at regional and national levels; (iv) Strengthening and building capacities of national and regional CRVS institutions; (v) Promoting partnership at country and regional levels; and (vi) Promoting innovation, research and knowledge sharing.

The first phase of implementation of the APAI-CRVS was concluded in August 2015 as per the regional medium term plan (2010-2015). The key priorities and achievements of this phase included training and capacity building of national CRVS functionaries, strengthening of coordination among core CRVS actors (mainly national statistics offices, civil registration agencies and the health sector), harnessing political commitment for improvement of the systems at the highest level of governments through the ministerial platform, promoting knowledge and sharing of experiences between countries and consolidating partnership and coordination among development partners with under developed and more developed systems. The programme also significantly contributed to the global momentum for improvement of CRVS systems. The Africa CRVS Core Group has prepared the first medium term plan (2017-2021) within the Africa CRVS Decade.

<sup>2</sup> The membership of the Africa CRVS Core Group, as of April 2017, is the pan-African Organizations (African Union Commission, Economic Commission for Africa and the African Development Bank), the Secretariat of the African Symposium on Statistical Development, the United Nations Children’s Fund, the United Nations Population Fund, the World Health Organization, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Plan International, INDEPTH Network, the Partnership in Statistics for Development in the 21st Century, and “Bloomberg Philanthropies Data for Health Initiative”.

# BENEFITS OF CIVIL REGISTRATION AND VITAL STATISTICS (CRVS) SYSTEMS



**CIVIL REGISTRATION and the resulting vital statistics are essential public goods that provide significant benefits to individuals, Governments and the wider global community.**



## FOR INDIVIDUALS

### CIVIL REGISTRATION AND VITAL STATISTICS UPHOLD HUMAN RIGHTS

Civil registration is the source and foundation of human and civil rights. It establishes the legal identity of individuals and the legal relationship between them and the State and other citizens.

Civil registration also helps to improve the efficiency and fairness of the justice system. For instance, civil registration records help to avoid identity fraud and ensure that services are correctly targeted.



### CRVS SYSTEMS IMPROVE ACCESS TO GOVERNMENT SERVICES

Legal documents derived from civil registration and vital statistics systems help individuals to claim government services such as education, health and cash transfers. They are also useful in claiming inheritance. Vital statistics sourced from civil registration and vital statistics systems enable Governments to adequately plan for the present and future needs of the population.



## FOR GOVERNMENTS

### CRVS SYSTEMS STRENGTHEN GOVERNANCE AND PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

Registration of vital events is the responsibility of the State. It helps the Government to develop and implement evidence-based policies and programmes, and to deliver services to the population.

### CRVS SYSTEMS IMPROVE PUBLIC HEALTH ADMINISTRATION

Trustworthy statistics on levels and trends in mortality and causes of death help to identify public health threats and high-risk groups. Complete civil registration and vital statistics systems and the improved statistics they generate support the health sector in determining what interventions and resources are needed and where.



The data on life events from civil registration and vital statistics systems are also essential for calculating the indicators needed to track progress in health programmes and the health status of the population.



### CRVS SYSTEMS SAVE MONEY

Investment in comprehensive civil registration and vital statistics systems will pay for itself many times over by improving the targeting of services and increasing the efficiency of resource allocation. By investing in improving its present civil registration and vital statistics system, a Government can save a substantial amount of public resources.



### CIVIL REGISTRATION AND VITAL STATISTICS PROVIDE A BASIS FOR NATIONAL IDENTITY

Countries all over the world use civil registration information as the basis for national identification systems. Information on births and deaths that feeds into a national identification system is the most accurate and least expensive source for this purpose.

### CRVS SYSTEMS PROMOTE EFFICIENT ELECTORAL PROCESSES

Civil registration and vital statistics systems have been extremely valuable to electoral systems, by providing accurate, up-to-date lists of persons qualified to vote at various electoral levels. Voter registration systems, when not based on civil registration, rely on inferior enrolment methods that undermine democratic elections.



### CRVS SYSTEMS HELP TO ACCURATELY MEASURE POPULATION DYNAMICS

Vital statistics obtained from civil registration have clear advantages over survey data because they allow fertility and mortality estimates to be measured at the national and subnational levels on a regular basis. These estimates are essential to understand the growth dynamics of a population; assess human aspects of socioeconomic development; and measure the risks of dying by gender at specific ages for insurance and social security purposes and for population projections.

### CRVS SYSTEMS HELP TO TRACK DEVELOPMENT GOALS

Civil registration and vital statistics systems provide the most reliable data source to track progress on the achievement of Sustainable Development Goals. With a complete system, the data needed to measure the indicators for achieving universal primary education, reducing child mortality, improving maternal health and decreasing the prevalence of HIV, malaria and other diseases are more accurate when they are continuously generated.

### CRVS SYSTEMS PROMOTE EQUITABLE DEVELOPMENT

A well-functioning civil registration and vital statistics system can provide valuable information that is essential for tackling social, geographic, gender and other inequities.



### FOR THE WIDER GLOBAL COMMUNITY

#### CRVS SYSTEMS FOSTER INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION

Reporting of infectious and chronic diseases to measure rates of morbidity and mortality is essential to identify countries or regions that may need international assistance. This also includes assisting in medical research.



#### CRVS SYSTEMS IMPROVE AID EFFECTIVENESS

Development partners, donors and foundations benefit from high-quality statistics as they can be used to improve allocation and monitoring of aid.

**CRVS Systems can advance Africa's development agenda. It can accelerate regional integration, meet the Sustainable Development Goals and advance other continental priorities.**



# CHALLENGES

There are a number of challenges that have constrained the successful operation of civil registration and vital statistics systems in Africa in the past. Although some of these challenges have been addressed by current initiatives, there are still several hurdles that need to be overcome.



## AT THE COUNTRY LEVEL:

- **Weak country ownership and leadership in national civil registration and vital statistics systems.** Many policymakers are still unaware of the value and importance of civil registration records and the role they play in the development of systems.
- **Outdated laws and registration procedures.** Many African countries still have laws inherited from colonial times that are no longer relevant to contemporary Africa. Registration procedures in the majority of countries are based on these outdated laws and regulations.
- **Organizational and infrastructure challenges.** In most countries on the continent, registration structures date from the colonial era. At the time, registration records were narrowly defined following the traditions of colonial practice. Registration offices also tend to be based in urban areas, making them inaccessible to the majority of rural people.
- **Limited expertise.** There is limited opportunity for formal education in civil registration and vital statistics in Africa. The civil servants that operate and manage CRVS systems on the continent have no formal training except through their exposure to civil registration laws and regulations.
- **Underdeveloped public administration infrastructure.** Availability of services at the local administration level is the first requirement for sustainable development and cost-effectiveness of civil registration and vital statistics in a country. However, many African countries are still biased towards urban-based public institutions and services. Nevertheless, recent decentralization programmes under way in several African countries are a step in the right direction.
- **Lack of properly articulated national standards, operational manuals and guidelines.** The majority of African countries do not have operational and management guidelines that provide systematic procedures and directives to the registrars and practitioners of civil registration.
- **Lack of monitoring and evaluation standards and procedures.** Most African countries, including those with

well-developed CRVS systems, do not have systematically developed standards to measure the coverage and completeness of the registration system or the content and quality of the statistics produced.

- **Inadequate efforts in mainstreaming CRVS into national statistical systems.** Most African countries have started preparing and implementing national strategies for the development of statistics, but in most instances CRVS have not been included in a comprehensive way or as an integral part of national statistical systems.
- **Backlog of unregistered vital events.** There is a massive backlog of unregistered births and deaths in African countries. Even those records of birth, death, marriage and divorce could be questionable in terms of quality and accuracy. Clearing the backlog is a challenge for most African countries.
- **Lack of comprehensive national action plan.** In most African countries, CRVS is treated as a traditionally run business with no formal planning and no strategy development requirements.

*Emphasis is being placed on achieving measurable results on the ground, on evidence-based planning and on mechanisms for monitoring and evaluating national, regional, and international development results. This clearly has placed statistics at the centre of these development initiatives; in particular, with regard to monitoring progress towards achieving sustainable development goals, civil registration systems play a critical role, by providing reliable and continuous data of vital events at the lowest administrative levels.*

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# **MANY AFRICANS ARE BORN AND DIE WITHOUT LEAVING A TRACE IN ANY OFFICIAL LEGAL RECORDS OR STATISTICS.**

THIS IS BECAUSE THE MAJORITY OF AFRICAN COUNTRIES DO NOT HAVE FUNCTIONING CIVIL REGISTRATION AND VITAL STATISTICS SYSTEMS THAT CAN ADEQUATELY ACCOUNT FOR THE BIRTHS, DEATHS AND OTHER VITAL EVENTS THAT HAPPEN IN THEIR TERRITORIES. THIS HAS BEEN REFERRED TO AS THE “SCANDAL OF INVISIBILITY”.





- **National statistics offices are overwhelmed with provisional demographic methods and techniques.** After the introduction of indirect methods in the 1960s, data collection and analysis on fertility and mortality statistics in most national statistics offices had moved to censuses and surveys. This trend created marginalization of initiatives in the CRVS field.
- **Lack of long-term vision and commitment.** CRVS systems, once properly installed, would last for generations with little cost. Although putting the system on the right track might initially require a huge effort, this would be paid back as soon as the system started functioning properly. Creating such vision and commitment is the current challenge in Africa.
- **Weak Development Partners coordination in many of the countries.** A coordinated partnership with UN agencies and other organizations is the basis for an integrated approach for strengthening of CRVS systems in countries. This however lacks in many of the countries.

## AT THE REGIONAL LEVEL:

- **Limited expertise.** Compared to the huge technical support requirements, African regional organizations are understaffed or do not have the required expertise in CRVS systems.
- **No clear directives or recommendations on the situation or extent of application of provisional demographic methods and techniques.** United Nations technical documents recommend that indirect demographic techniques and approaches should not be considered or used as substitutes or permanent methods to provide fertility and mortality statistics. Based on these global principles, regional organizations should have been able to develop an exit strategy for countries to transit to the conventional methods of generating fertility and mortality statistics, including causes of death from civil registration systems.

Birth registration is the **CONTINUOUS, PERMANENT** and **UNIVERSAL** recording, within the civil registry, of the occurrence and characteristics of births in accordance with the legal requirements of a country.





# CRITICAL INGREDIENTS FOR CIVIL REGISTRATION

A number of key steps are already being taken to build and strengthen civil registration and vital statistics systems in African countries.

## ASSESS CURRENT STATUS

Following on the directives issued by the 2nd Conference of African Ministers which was held in 2012, more than half of African countries have conducted comprehensive assessments to identify challenges and opportunities in terms of its functioning, coverage and quality of services and products. However, several countries have to follow others so as to identify the bottlenecks and develop concrete plans for accelerated and sustained improvement.

## SECURE POLITICAL COMMITMENT

High-level political backing and long-term budgetary funding commitments are essential for creating and maintaining civil registration and vital statistics systems. The 2010 Conference of African Ministers Responsible for Civil Registration was seen as a watershed event as it resulted in a ministerial declaration in support of strengthening CRVS systems on the continent. For the first time in many decades, a high-level commitment by countries to improving CRVS systems was evident across the continent.

## ESTABLISH A SUPPORTIVE LEGAL ENVIRONMENT

The establishment, operation and maintenance of a national CRVS system is a core governmental responsibility, which should have a legal basis. The legal framework needs to encompass both a national law and relevant regulations covering: designation of civil registration authorities at different levels with clear roles and responsibilities; compulsory registration of vital events; compilation of vital events; and safeguards for the confidentiality of information collected. The law should also stipulate that the registration of events will be free of charge. Fees are often a strong disincentive to public cooperation in civil registration and vital statistics, especially by poor and marginalized people.

*Reliable and timely statistics and indicators are crucial for formulating policies that can positively influence the lives of millions of people. Without a continuous supply of reliable data on vital events, including causes-of-death, from a well-functioning civil registration system to support informed policy making, development impacts cannot be measured and monitored. Therefore, the statistics program for ECA at the Africa Centre for Statistics is actively promoting and supporting improvement of data sources, sound statistical methods, new technologies, and strengthened statistical systems to ensure that quality information is readily available.*

OLIVER CHINGANYA, DIRECTOR, AFRICA  
CENTRE FOR STATISTICS, ECONOMIC  
COMMISSION FOR AFRICA

## ASSIGN ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

CRVS is multidisciplinary and multisectoral in nature and thus involves a wide range of stakeholders at any point in time. The roles and responsibilities of these different players need to be properly defined, and appropriate mechanisms identified for coordination between different stakeholders. Coordination is essential between bodies involved in registration, statistics, health services and research, to ensure standard concepts, definitions and classifications and to avoid duplication of activities.

## GAIN PUBLIC TRUST

Creating public demand for civil registration is challenging. Legal provisions alone will not guarantee public participation. The readiness of citizens to participate in registration is largely determined by societal consensus around the value of the system and trust that it will be used to their benefit. The civil registration and vital statistics system must be recognized by the public as a public good if it is to be successful. Maintaining confidentiality is one of the important aspects of gaining public trust.

## FOSTER AND SUPPORT ADVOCACY

In countries with no or weak civil registration and vital statistics systems, the involvement of a wide range of stakeholders and use of various advocacy channels can prove useful to convincing senior government officials of the value of comprehensive civil registration systems. National ambassadors or champions of civil registration and vital statistics, the media, public education campaigns and use of civil society as advocates are all ways of creating demand for civil registration and vital statistics.

## MOBILIZE FINANCIAL SUPPORT

Governments need to provide enough resources to meet the core needs for running CRVS systems on day-to-day basis. Plans for strengthening the system should, apart from making efforts to garner internal budgetary support, seek support from various ministries or departments and international donors. Opportunities should also be sought to leverage funds from other development activities being supported by donor agencies in the country, which benefit from a complete and efficient CRVS system.

## DEVELOP CR RESOURCES BASE

Many countries have shortages of registrars, especially in remote rural areas. In addition, supplying stationery, training civil registration officials, supervision and community outreach are all not well-resourced activities, which reduces the effectiveness of the work of registrars. This situation needs to be remedied and greater attention given to building sufficient capacity to operate and maintain high-quality civil registration and vital statistics systems.

*In the absence of well-functioning civil registration systems, Africa faces a risk in designing and implementing interventions that are specific to the people's needs, as well as accurately monitoring the success of the continent's development programmes in a timely manner. Investment in these systems could significantly satisfy the data demands for Agenda 2030 and for the good governance age as prioritized by the African Agenda 2063.*

RENE N'KOUASSI, DIRECTOR ECONOMIC AFFAIRS, DEPARTMENT AUC



## MODERNIZE CRVS SYSTEMS

Access to registration offices by the public and efficiency in service provision are central to achieving successful CRVS systems. Most Africans live in rural areas, far away from administrative government services. As a result, most vital events happen outside health facilities and are not registered. The use of handheld devices for the transmission of information over distances and the computerization of data capture, storage and archival systems can help to boost the efficiency of civil registration and vital statistics systems.

## BUILD A PARTNERSHIP WITH THE HEALTH SECTOR

Building a partnership with the health sector is important as it provides a good platform for reaching the population through community health activities. Innovative approaches used to reach those living in difficult areas by the health sector to collect cause of death will also benefit civil registration agencies in registering occurrences of births and deaths.



FOR MORE INFORMATION VISIT:

[www.apai-crvs.org](http://www.apai-crvs.org)

or

[www.uneca.org](http://www.uneca.org)

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Africa Programme for Accelerated Improvement of Civil Registration and Vital Statistics

