

## Concept Note for a meeting of civil registrars in South-East Asia<sup>1</sup>

### **Context**

In Asia-Pacific, approximately 64 million children under the age of 5 do not have their births registered.<sup>2</sup> Such a lack of identity denies these children an existence before the law, and as they grow it also prevents them from participating in governmental processes, or from accessing social and financial services, employment markets and legal protections necessary for increasing their quality of life and for sustainable and inclusive development. Universal civil registration and legal identity for all consequently strengthens a country's ability to measure, monitor and meet a wide variety of goals and targets for the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

Each country in South-East Asia has an operational civil registration office, reflecting this region's prioritization of civil registration in its domestic policy agenda, and their commitment to the realization of the goals of the Regional Action Framework on Civil Registration and Vital Statistics (CRVS) in Asia and the Pacific. Although each country in the region exercises different coordination mechanisms and methods to conduct civil registration tasks, there remains a fundamental commitment to achieve complete civil registration.

Birth and death registration, as well as identity management, are a priority of most governments, however, across South-East Asia there are similar issues and questions faced by civil registrars. With the ambitious targets of 100% birth and 80% death registration by 2030, countries are employing different information and communication technologies to achieve their objectives. These are also being placed, at times, within a broader ID-Management structure. For these reasons, as well as the intra-regional fluidity and movement of refugees and migrants, also requires cross-border collaboration.

### **What can a network of civil registrars achieve?**

While Asia-Pacific civil registrars face unique national challenges in achieving universal registration, they must also address practical registration issues, as well as cross-border issues such as migration caused by conflict, natural hazards and climate change. As such, strengthening information and communications technology, and adopting innovative approaches to meet these challenges requires registrars to network in a space suitable for sharing ideas, learning from each other, and finding common solutions through South-South cooperation.

Recognizing universal civil registration as critical for sustainable and inclusive development, ESCAP and its development partners hosted an initial meeting of Asia-Pacific Civil Registration Authorities in 2014. The participants agreed to create subregional mechanisms for national registrars to meet, share ideas and

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<sup>1</sup> Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Indonesia, Lao PDR, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Timor-Leste and Viet Nam

<sup>2</sup> <https://getinthepicture.org/midterm-report>

practices and collaborate on cross-border issues. The initial meeting emphasized solutions to common challenges.

Since then, two subregional mechanisms were established with assistance from ESCAP, UNICEF, SPC and other development partners; namely, the Pacific Civil Registrars Network (PCRN)<sup>3</sup> for Pacific Island States and the Civil Registration Professionals of South Asia (CR8)<sup>4</sup> for South Asian countries, while a third network for the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) countries is currently under discussion. The mechanisms have, in turn, assisted members in developing methods to foster coordination and prioritize shared technological approaches to collaborate on common, transboundary challenges. For instance, PCRN's data sharing plan assists members in building resiliency to natural hazards by enabling members to adopt best practices in data archiving and use of vital statistics to inform the provision of public services responding to crises.

The subregional mechanisms ultimately promote South-South cooperation through disseminating knowledge of innovative methods for improving CRVS systems, developing data-sharing approaches and sharing good practices for improving systems to ensure no one is left behind. Stemming from shared visions to improve subregional systems, platforms for sharing information allow stakeholders to regularly communicate with one another and have even generated collective approaches to CRVS data storage and retrieval.

The subregional mechanisms are also the first of their kind in Asia-Pacific, which specifically prioritize the needs of civil registration authorities while still accounting for cross-border interests. Each mechanism is also based on a shared vision for addressing common issues while maintaining flexibility to local needs and supporting the implementation of the shared vision that, by 2024, all people in Asia and the Pacific will benefit from universal and responsive civil registration and vital statistics systems that facilitate the realization of their rights and support good governance, health and development.<sup>5</sup>

### **How are the existing networks organized?**

By emphasizing South-South collaboration whilst placing the national needs of the registration authorities at the heart of their visions, both subregional mechanisms are self-sustaining and driven by the participating countries themselves. This sustainability is further supported by the subregional agreements, such as the PCRN data sharing agreement. Furthermore, member countries also benefit from developments in each other's systems. For example, thanks in no small part to the cooperative nature of the subregional mechanisms, national stakeholders are streamlining the process for recognizing public documents from other members to ease the transmission of data sharing across borders. PCRN, for instance, quickly recognized the need for a common network sharing civil registration data. Because Pacific Islanders frequently travel overseas for medical treatment, the lack of data sharing hindered countries from collecting accurate information on vital events, including births and deaths.

After observing the demonstrable success of the PCRN, the Civil Registration Professionals of South Asia (CR8) established a group of professionals in 2018 dedicated to common issues facing their own subregion. Each meeting of the CR8 has subsequently resulted in the production of compendiums showcasing common issues and the efforts being made to address them. Finally, as the mechanisms learn

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<sup>3</sup> <https://sdd.spc.int/pacific-civil-registrars-network-pcnn>

<sup>4</sup> <https://getinthepicture.org/partners/institutional-partners/civil-registration-professionals-south-asia>

<sup>5</sup> <https://getinthepicture.org/resource/ministerial-declaration-get-every-one-picture-asia-and-pacific>

from one another, replicability in additional subregions relies upon political commitment to improving CRVS systems, as well as an openness to sharing information. In this manner, civil registrars across Asia and the Pacific will continue working together to expand registration coverage and meet related SDGs by guaranteeing legal identity for all.

### **Objectives of the inception meeting of South-East Asian registrars**

An initial meeting of the SEA registrars will be organized with support of the Philippines Statistics Authority on 7-9 February 2023 in Manila and will be part of the CRVS month in the Philippines. Multiple partners are supporting the event including ESCAP, Vital Strategies, Global Health Advocacy Incubator, UNICEF, UNFPA, and possible others.

The objectives of the meeting are:

1. To explore and possibly initiate the establishment of a network for civil registrars in South-East Asia
2. To facilitate knowledge exchange and potential collaboration on issues of concern of civil registrars in the region
3. To document existing practices in the region and common challenges

The meeting will provide a professional forum for civil registrars to discuss priority areas that are of common concern to the civil registrars in the region as well as the potential terms of references and organizational setup of a SEA civil registrars network. For each of the priority areas a draft background paper will be developed by ESCAP and UNICEF in preparation for the meeting. The papers will be shared with participants and inputs from the meeting will support finalization of the papers. A similar setup has been used in South Asia.<sup>6</sup> The priority areas have been identified in collaboration with the Philippines Statistics Authority and include the following:

#### 1. Legislative frameworks

A good legal and regulatory framework is important for the effective management, operation, and maintenance of a civil registration system.<sup>7</sup> Well-designed registration law gives clear guidelines around how the civil registration system will work. It provides the rules needed to register the vital event records that affect the civil status of individuals, defines the roles of civil registration in the production of vital statistics and its relationships with other institutions that rely on such data, and defines the services it should provide. Overall, a strong legal framework provides the foundation on which an effective CRVS system is built.

The multiple stakeholders involved in CRVS, scattered responsibilities among government agencies and service providers, and complexity of systems and processes, however, means that many systems are operating under outdated and sub-optimal legal frameworks with limited provisions for data confidentiality and security, insufficient attention to marginalised and vulnerable populations, and

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<sup>6</sup> <https://getinthepicture.org/news/civil-registration-professionals-south-asia-cr8-release-compendium-civil-registration>

<sup>7</sup> *Action guide on CRVS legal and regulatory reviews*. The University of Melbourne: Melbourne. 2018. Available at: <https://crvsgateway.info/file/17044/81> and *Guidelines on the Legislative Framework for Civil Registration, Vital Statistics and Identity Management*. United Nations Statistics Division. 2019 [https://unstats.un.org/unsd/demographic-social/Standards-and-Methods/files/Handbooks/crvs/CRVS\\_GOLF\\_Final\\_Draft-E.pdf](https://unstats.un.org/unsd/demographic-social/Standards-and-Methods/files/Handbooks/crvs/CRVS_GOLF_Final_Draft-E.pdf)

legislation that is unenforced. Other common challenges include fragmented and inconsistent laws, unclear delineation of roles and responsibilities, poor definitions of key terms, and limited adherence to international standards, particularly the UN Guidelines on the Legislative Framework for Civil Registration, Vital Statistics and Identity Management.

Reviews of existing legal frameworks can help to improve understanding of system design, including strengths and weaknesses; identify possible improvements that can be made under existing regulatory authority; and reform laws and regulations to achieve best practices and align with international standards. Legal reviews can also assess the degree to which existing legal frameworks foster (or inhibit) key attributes of effective and efficient CRVS systems, including the ability of civil registrars to delegate authority, the level of uniformity of procedures across the country, and the clarity of processes for information sharing, among others. Several countries in South-East Asia have undertaken significant legislative reviews over the last few years and some countries are still in the process of overhauling their legislative frameworks. It is therefore an opportune moment to take stock and for civil registrars to discuss their common challenges, processes and initiatives in this area.

## 2. CRVS digitisation in South East Asia

Over the last two decades, the digitization of civil registration and identity management systems has paved the way for a more enabling environment to collect and store identity data using a coherent electronic database architecture. These advancements have also been accompanied by an increasing ability to share data. The digitization of identity systems has resulted in significant changes to the design of registration business processes, including how registered vital events can be defined, configured, created, stored, shared, and processed.

Digital processing of identity data has further enabled the creation of systems with an improved efficiency for data processing and sharing between different components of a system, including with other government systems. Digitization, in addition to the development of new tools, offers an improved means to integrate different systems into one seamless system that reinforces a holistic approach to civil registration, vital statistics, and identity management, including the possibility to share information with functional registers. In recent years, the majority of countries in South East Asia has invested significant resources to digitise their civil registration and legal identity systems, and more efforts are currently in process or underway. The thematic discussions around this topic will evolve around the following questions:

- What is the status of CRVS system digitisation in the region?
- What are the main areas of CRVS system digitisation conducted by countries in South East Asia in the last 10 years (e.g., digitisation of registry books, archives, the registration process itself, facilitation of online registration etc.)?
- Has digitisation been linked with the establishment of a national ID and/or unique identifier?
- To which extent has digitisation been practically linked to increased interoperability with other government systems (social protection, education, digital identity, etc.)
- What has been the role of development partners in supporting the digitisation process?

Key lessons learned and considerations when implementing digital CRVS systems and processes

- What considerations should be given when implementing digital systems and/or processes in CRVS?
- What have been the key challenges and barriers?
- How are digital systems addressing issues around data protection and privacy?

### 3. Assessing and addressing inequalities in CRVS

Some countries experience lower civil registration completeness rates among certain marginalized and hard-to-reach population groups or within specific geographic areas. Despite these inequalities and their negative impact, this problem often remains a blind spot. The groups affected remain largely invisible if the matter is not specifically investigated.

To ensure progress in registration is truly universal and fully inclusive, the Ministerial declaration to "Get Every One in The Picture" in Asia and the Pacific recognized the need to address disparities in civil registration completeness and coverage of these groups. Hence, the Regional Action Framework (RAF) for the Asia-Pacific CRVS Decade 2015-2024 (ESCAP resolution 71/14) calls upon countries to assess any CRVS-related inequalities experienced by population subgroups. Doing so is an essential step to getting every one in the picture. This step is also key to the realization of the 2030 Agenda in terms of both data and social protection. It is also critical from a gender perspective. First, it is essential to know how and why there are differences in civil registration by sex and any gender-related barriers to registration, especially for different sub-groups in the population.

The thematic discussions around this topic will evolve around the involvement of civil registration authorities in both quantitative and qualitative assessments of inequalities in CRVS as well as changes to legislation and operating procedures to support registration of hard to reach and marginalized groups. This includes outreach campaigns, mobile registration points and other initiatives.

### 4. Discussions on establishing a network

In addition, the meeting will facilitate discussions on the potential establishment of an ongoing network of organizations and individuals from Southeast Asia involved in civil registration. This may involve identifying a chair and vice chairs (or equivalent) to support ongoing work to establish term of references for a civil registrars network for South East Asia. An ongoing network could (i) identify key issues in common across the civil registrars that would benefit from joint discussion, (ii) facilitate gatherings (virtual or in-person) of members, (iii) facilitate information exchange (listserv, e-bulletins, website, social media, etc.), and (iv) liaise with other networks on areas of mutual interest.

ESCAP could provide secretariat services for an initial and possibly subsequent meetings. ESCAP and other development partners may commission research supporting meetings of the group in a similar fashion as has been done for CR8, which has resulted in two compendiums on the CRVS situation in South Asia. [11](#)

### 5. Visits to registration facilities

Finally, meetings of PCRN and CR8 have also benefited from visits to registration facilities in the host countries of meetings. The Philippines Statistics Authority will arrange for visits to their facilities for participants to see how the registration practices work on the ground. ESCAP and other development partners will cover the cost of transport and conference facilities.

**Participants**

Participants at the meeting will include 2-3 professionals (Ideally the civil registrar general or deputy) working in civil registration from each of the SEA countries. In addition, relevant development partners will be invited to participate in the meeting.

Invitations will be sent from ESCAP to the countries' civil registrar general (or equivalent) asking them to nominate a participant or participants depending on the country.

**Report of the meeting**

Following the meeting, a report will be published by ESCAP with the finalized papers on the priority issues. The report and other meeting documents will be disseminated via [www.getinthepicture.org](http://www.getinthepicture.org) and through [CRVS Insight](#).