

# DEATH REGISTRATION

## WHY IS DEATH REGISTRATION IMPORTANT?

Death is one of the priority vital events recommended by the United Nations for registration.<sup>1</sup> Death and cause-of-death records are primary inputs for governance and development. Mortality statistics derived from these records provide critical evidence for health policy and planning. Death records can be used to ensure voting rolls and other registers or administrative collections are accurate reflections of current records.

Death registration serves two major purposes:

1. **Legal and Administrative:** An individual's right to be counted at both extremes of life is fundamental to social inclusion. Although the death of a loved one is a cause for sorrow, it is legally necessary for the next of kin to register the death and obtain a death certificate. Death certificates provide legal evidence of the fact and circumstances of death and are often prerequisites for burial, remarriage, inheritance, social assistance or the resolution of criminal cases that may arise in relation to its occurrence.

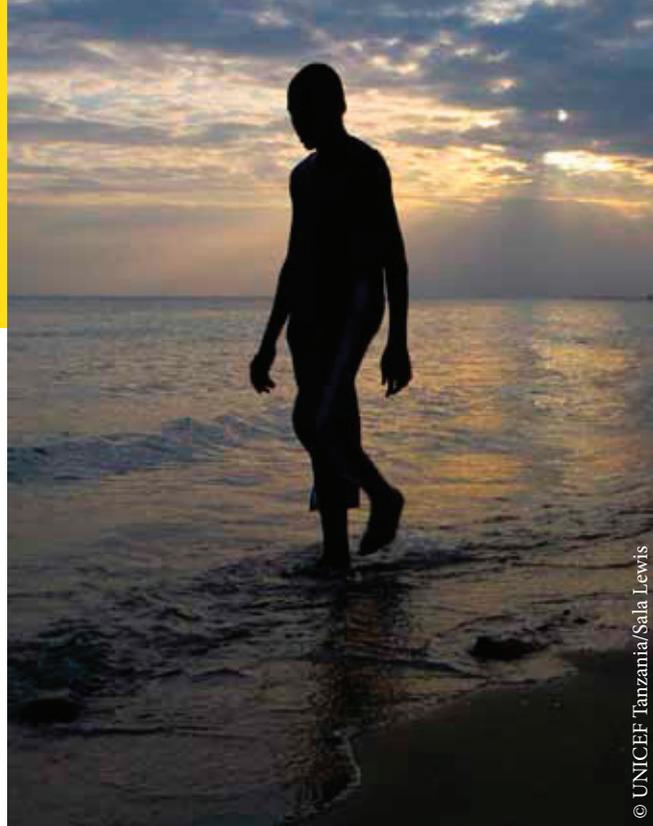
Death records are also of use in public safety and accident prevention programmes, and in removing files dealing with individual identification systems, social security, electoral lists, taxation and government service files.

2. **Statistical:** Death and cause of death records provide the basis for the compilation of mortality statistics, which are primary inputs for health policy and planning, for monitoring and evaluation of health programmes, and for identifying and prioritizing health research activities. Mortality and cause-of-death statistics benefit societies because they help Governments to plan services for their citizens.

Death and cause-of-death records are of particular importance in public health for identifying the magnitude and distribution of major disease threats. Accurate and timely data for mortality by age, gender and cause, both nationally and subnationally, are essential for the design, implementation, monitoring and assessment of health programmes and policies. Such health estimates also help to determine where billions of dollars in health funding can be effectively distributed and invested. The estimates justify public health spending on interventions to tackle major causes of premature mortality, such as immunization to prevent measles, access to skilled care to prevent maternal mortality, tobacco control measures to prevent deaths from cancer and cardiovascular diseases, and behaviour-change interventions to prevent HIV/AIDS.<sup>2</sup>

1 The recording of foetal deaths is also important because it supports the accurate recording of live births and infant deaths.

2 Gretchen Vogel, How do you count the dead? Available from: <http://www.sciencemag.org/content/336/6087/1462.2.full>.



© UNICEF Tanzania/Sala Lewis

Citizens in developing countries pay a heavy price when public health decision-making is impeded by the absence of reliable and comprehensive data. Both government expenditure and development assistance can be jeopardized if countries are unable to provide evidence of the effectiveness of interventions to avert premature deaths due to the weakness of their civil registration and vital statistics systems.

## WHAT IS THE SITUATION?

In most parts of Africa, death registration lags far behind birth registration coverage. Most deaths in Africa occur outside health facilities and their causes are rarely certified by a doctor. The existing international guidelines and standards on improving civil registration do not capture this unique context in Africa, thus the need to design and adopt innovative approaches that are specific for the situation on the continent.

Of the 46 member States in the World Health Organization (WHO) African region, only one country can provide high-quality cause-of-death data (Mauritius), with another three able to provide low or medium-quality data (Seychelles, South Africa and Zimbabwe). In addition, Egypt and Morocco can provide low to medium-quality cause-of-death data.<sup>3</sup> The World Bank recently noted that lack of information on deaths and causes of death means that problems arise from using estimates, and the only way to accurately track progress will be through complete civil registration and vital statistics systems.<sup>4</sup>

3 World Health Statistics, 2012. Available from [http://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/10665/44844/1/9789241564441\\_eng.pdf](http://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/10665/44844/1/9789241564441_eng.pdf)

4 World Bank 2014, 'Global Civil Registration and Vital Statistics Scaling up Investment Plan 2015-2024'. Available from <http://www.worldbank.org/content/dam/Worldbank/document/HDN/Health/CRVS%20Scaling-up%20plan%20final%205-28-14web.pdf>.

Following the issuance of a medical death certificate, the underlying causes of death are coded to statistical categories according to the current version (10th revision) of the International Statistical Classification of Diseases, Injuries and Causes of Death. However, most African countries do not use the International Classification of Diseases, which limits the comparability and usability of data.

## WHAT IS BEING DONE?

The conventional method for collection of data on death and its causes is through a comprehensive civil registration and vital statistics system. However, these systems are not functioning properly in most countries in Africa. The Economic Commission for Africa, in collaboration with the African Union Commission, the African Development Bank and other key regional and international organizations, has developed the Africa Programme on Accelerated Improvement of Civil Registration and Vital Statistics, which is intended to guide systemic reform and support sustainable progress in improving civil registration and vital statistics systems in African countries.

## HOW DO WE IMPROVE THINGS?

- **Review the death registration legal framework** to make sure that it establishes a well-functioning, permanent and compulsory death registration system, including making it obligatory for deaths to be certified by a doctor. The law should incorporate measures for ensuring the confidentiality of data and reporting. It should also make burials and cremations dependent on the issuing of a funeral permit.
- **Build local technical and administrative capacity to improve and expand registration systems.** The use of standard methods for compiling cause-specific mortality statistics for international comparison is an area of technical expertise that cuts across the disciplines of demography, epidemiology and statistics. Knowledge and practical skills need to be developed in these disciplines, as well as in the administration of registration systems.
- **Increase awareness among physicians of death-certification practices** and improve their skills in using the International Form of Medical Certificate of Cause of Death. Train statistical clerks and coders in the use of the International



Classification of Diseases for coding causes of death.

- **Adopt innovative approaches for collection of cause-of-death information for events occurring at home through use of verbal autopsies.**
- Establish **collaborative mechanisms** between the Ministry of Public Health, national statistics offices and local registrars to improve the cause-of-death certification process and ensure better quality data.
- **Find innovative solutions to reach remote and rural areas**, such as partnering with religious leaders and faith-based organizations, and using mobile registration systems or mobile phone registration systems.
- **Intensify public education to reduce stigma**, especially in cases where the death is related to HIV/AIDS, so that all deaths can be registered.

 United Nations  
Economic Commission for Africa



 World Health Organization

 UNFPA  
United Nations Population Fund

 UNHCR  
United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

 unicef

 Plan

 INDEPTH

 SSD  
Africa Symposium on Statistical Development