



MAKING EVERYONE

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

VISIBLE

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".





CONTEXT

Almost all 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 system to international standards, that is one that can contribute to building a modern public administration, upholding human rights and supporting national development.

The hallmark of civil registration and vital statistics is the ability to log vital events on a universal, continuous, permanent and compulsory basis at the lowest administrative levels. 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,² 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.

Civil registration and vital statistics 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.

“Africa cannot fulfil its dream unless we know who we are, where we live, work and play and what we need to better our living conditions. Births, marriages, divorces and deaths are all vital events that must be recorded in any country.”

JACOB ZUMA,
PRESIDENT OF SOUTH AFRICA

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 for legal matters. 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.

² The 10 vital events are: live birth; death; foetal death; marriage; divorce, annulment (of a marriage); separation (of married people); adoption (of a child); legitimization (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?

Efforts have been made in the past to improve civil registration and vital statistics systems in African countries but they were project-based and tended to focus solely on the collection of statistics rather than on a coordinated and holistic approach to strengthening the system. As a result, civil registration and vital statistics systems on the continent are still incomplete. Contrast this with the almost complete civil registration systems in developed countries that allow citizens to access the host of entitlements and facilities that come with e-governance and ensure the continuous and permanent provision of vital statistics.

However, the movement to improve civil registration and vital statistics systems in Africa is being reinvigorated. There is recognition that civil registration and vital statistics initiatives have to be overhauled to efficiently service citizens, modernize African public administration and provide much-needed statistics. The technological advancements witnessed in almost all parts of the continent could also help civil registration and vital statistics systems to expand rapidly, bringing major gains to citizens.

The Economic Commission for Africa (ECA), in collaboration with the African Union Commission (AUC), the African Development Bank (AfDB) and other key regional and international organizations, has developed a regional policy and advocacy framework that will guide systemic reform and support sustainable progress in improving civil registration and vital statistics systems in African countries.

The Africa Programme on Accelerated Improvement of Civil Registration and Vital Statistics (APAI-CRVS), as the framework is called, is being rolled out by ECA, AUC and AfDB in collaboration with other partners. Support for its implementation was bolstered as a result of the first session of the Conference of African Ministers Responsible for Civil Registration, which was held in August 2010 in Addis Ababa. The meeting brought much-needed political commitment for civil registration and vital statistics improvements in Africa and rallied all stakeholders around the initiative.



“We would all agree that a civil registration and vital statistics system is an integral part of the regular and routine governance of a country and it is primarily the responsibility of the Government to ensure that the necessary resources are in place to run it smoothly and efficiently.”

DR. CARLOS LOPES, UNDER-SECRETARY-GENERAL OF THE UNITED NATIONS AND EXECUTIVE SECRETARY OF ECA



BENEFITS OF CIVIL REGISTRATION AND VITAL STATISTICS



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.



CIVIL REGISTRATION AND VITAL STATISTICS CRVS 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

CIVIL REGISTRATION AND VITAL STATISTICS 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.

CIVIL REGISTRATION AND VITAL STATISTICS 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.



CIVIL REGISTRATION AND VITAL STATISTICS 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.

CIVIL REGISTRATION AND VITAL STATISTICS 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.

CIVIL REGISTRATION AND VITAL STATISTICS 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.

CIVIL REGISTRATION AND VITAL STATISTICS HELP TO TRACK DEVELOPMENT GOALS

Civil registration and vital statistics systems provide the most reliable data source to track progress on the achievement of the Millennium 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.

CIVIL REGISTRATION AND VITAL STATISTICS 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

CIVIL REGISTRATION AND VITAL STATISTICS 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.



CIVIL REGISTRATION AND VITAL STATISTICS 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 can advance Africa's development agenda. It can accelerate regional integration, meet the MDGs 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 policy-makers 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 civil registration and vital statistics 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 the majority of 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 civil registration and vital statistics 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 civil registration and vital statistics into national statistical systems.** Most African countries have started preparing and implementing national strategies for the development of statistics, but in most instances civil registration and vital statistics have not been included in a comprehensive way or as an integral part of national statistical systems.

“*Emphasis is being placed on achieving measurable results on the ground, on evidence-based planning and on mechanisms for monitoring and evaluating development results. This clearly has placed statistics at the centre of these development initiatives; in particular, with regard to monitoring progress towards the Millennium Development Goals, civil registration and vital statistics play a critical role, especially in between census rounds.*”

CHARLES LEYEKA LUFUMPA, DIRECTOR,
STATISTICS DEPARTMENT,
AFRICAN DEVELOPMENT BANK



→ **Huge backlog.** There is a massive backlog of unregistered births and deaths in African countries, and even those records of birth, death, marriage and divorce could be questionable in terms of quality and accuracy. Designing backlog civil registration procedures and clearing the backlog is a challenge for most African countries.

→ **Lack of comprehensive national action plan.** In most African countries, civil registration and vital statistics is treated as a traditionally run business with no formal planning and no strategy development requirements.

→ **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 ignorance and marginalization of initiatives and projects in the civil registration and vital statistics field.

→ **Lack of long-term vision and commitment.** Civil registration and vital statistics 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.

AT THE REGIONAL LEVEL:

→ **No regional policy framework or platform.** Civil registration and vital statistics are integrated information systems that affect the legal, administrative and statistical aspects of every country. Africa as a region is highly affected by the inadequacy of such systems. In the past, regional organizations such as ECA, AfDB and AUC did not take adequate policy measures that would have facilitated progress in improving the systems and addressing the problems and challenges in accordance with the regional perspective, thus making it difficult to bring forth the issue as a regional policy agenda.

→ **No regional standards, guidelines and comprehensive plan.** All African countries are striving to attain complete civil registration that would enable them to produce valuable vital statistics and other individual and aggregate information. There are global standards and guidelines recommended by the United Nations in all aspects of civil registration and vital statistics operation and management; however, no attempts were made to have regional standards and guidelines that reflect the African realities and context and that would guide and urge member States towards certain regional targets and accomplishments.

→ **Limited expertise.** Compared to the huge technical support requirements, African regional organizations are understaffed or do not have the required expertise in civil registration and vital statistics 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.

AT THE INTERNATIONAL LEVEL:

→ **No international policy platform.** Although there are comprehensive United Nations principles, recommendations and guidelines on civil registration and vital statistics that represent global standards, flows of international support to countries are largely uncoordinated and in most cases have no clear reference to the general principles of the United Nations, which reveals the need to develop global policy frameworks.

→ **Lack of clear mandate and accountability.** In addition to the United Nations Statistics Division and the specialized United Nations agencies, there are a number of international organizations and academic institutions working on civil registration and vital statistics. These varied initiatives and interventions, run by different actors, might result in confusion unless working modalities are harmonized and coordination mechanisms are put in place at the international and regional levels.

CRITICAL INGREDIENTS FOR CIVIL REGISTRATION



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

ASSESS CURRENT STATUS

Following on from the directives issued during the first session of the Conference of African Ministers Responsible for Civil Registration, which was held in 2010, a regional assessment has been undertaken based on information obtained from a majority of countries. However, in every African country, the civil registration and vital statistics system needs to be comprehensively assessed in terms of its functioning, coverage and quality of service and products so as to identify the bottlenecks and develop concrete plans for accelerated 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 civil registration and vital statistics systems on the continent, and the endorsement of a medium-term plan to guide the implementation of a regional initiative. For the first time in many years, a high-level commitment by countries to improving civil registration and vital statistics systems was evident across the continent.

ESTABLISH A SUPPORTIVE LEGAL ENVIRONMENT

The establishment, operation and maintenance of a national civil registration and vital statistics 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 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 regis-

tration 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.

ASSIGN ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

Civil registration and vital statistics 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 lacking 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 civil registration and vital statistics

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 civil registration and vital statistics system.



DEVELOP A HUMAN 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.

MODERNIZE MANAGEMENT AND MAINTENANCE OF CIVIL REGISTRATION AND VITAL STATISTICS SYSTEMS

Access to registration offices by the public and efficiency in service provision are central to achieving successful civil registration and vital statistics 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. Building a partnership with the health sector is also important as it provides a good platform for reaching the population through community health activities.



“Civil registration data is essential for a functional and people-centered integration process that aims to improve well-being and promotes job creation and market expansion”

MAXWELL MKWEZALAMBA,
COMMISSIONER FOR ECONOMIC AFFAIRS,
AFRICAN UNION



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