



Distr.: **GENERAL**

E/ECA/STATCOM/3/13
26 October 2011

**UNITED NATIONS
ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COUNCIL**

Original : ENGLISH

ECONOMIC COMMISSION FOR AFRICA

Third Meeting of the Statistical Commission
for Africa (StatCom Africa - III)

Cape Town, South Africa
18-23 January 2012

**Report of Civil Registration and Vital Statistics
System in Africa**

I. Background

1. The primacy of civil registration as a source of inter-censal population estimates and vital statistics is well recognized. Because a population increases by the addition of live births and decreases by the subtraction of deaths, information about the number of live births and deaths occurring in a population is crucial for estimating the natural increase (or decrease) and the annual change in population size and structure for that population¹. A complete civil registration can provide the size and structure of the population (including its correlates) on a continuous and permanent basis, not only at the national or province level but also at the lowest levels of geography. Such data is crucial for socio-economic planning, especially in situations where the planning and implementation processes are decentralized. Data obtained from the civil registration system provide inputs for deriving 42 out of the 60 Millennium Development Goals (MDG) indicators. Inadequate data from civil registration has been identified as one of the main reasons for inconsistencies between MDG data at the national and international sources. Not only does a complete civil registration provide fertility and mortality estimates on a continuous basis, it is also of importance in providing data on mortality by causes.

2. In Africa, there have been several efforts in the past to improve the coverage and completeness of Civil Registration² and Vital Statistics³ (CRVS) systems. These efforts have not brought the desired results as even today the levels of completeness of registration of vital events⁴ in the majority of African countries are far from complete. The CRVS was perceived to be a non-functioning statistical system and therefore, the above mentioned efforts on the continent were mostly statistically oriented with the sole objective of obtaining vital statistics on a regular basis. Moreover, past initiatives and efforts aimed at improving CRVS systems in Africa were largely dominated by isolated project-based and institution-led *ad hoc* exercises. Support in this area mainly came from international and regional agencies such as United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), World Health Organization (WHO), the United Nations Statistics Division (UNSD) and the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA) but generally under statistical development programmes. The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) it from a child rights perspective and was mainly concerned with birth registration.

3. The CRVS as a subject at the global level was dealt with by UNSD and thus it very much remained in the realm of statistics. The first version of Principles and Recommendations (P&R) for Vital Statistics of the United Nations in 1953 recommended civil registration as the only source of vital statistics. The two subsequent versions of the P&R (1973 and 2001) considered civil registration to be the primary and preferred source of vital statistics, but also included methodologies on interim methods as alternative sources.

¹ Principles and Recommendations for a Vital Statistics System, Revision 2,; page 3 para 16 - UNSD

² Civil Registration is the continuous, permanent, compulsory and universal recording of the occurrence and characteristics of vital events pertaining to the population as provided through decree or regulation in accordance with the legal requirements of each country. (United Nations)

³ A Vital Statistics System is defined as the total process of (a) collecting information by civil registration or enumeration on the frequency of occurrence of specified and defined vital events, as well as relevant characteristics of the events themselves and of the person or persons concerned, and (b) compiling, processing, analyzing, evaluating, presenting and disseminating these data in statistical form. (United Nations)

⁴ According to the UN, the whole list of vital events includes live births, adoptions, legitimations, recognitions; deaths and foetal deaths; and marriages, divorces, separations and annulments of marriage.

4. However, UNSD never attempted to come out with an exclusive P&R for civil registration until the late 1990s, when, with the support of the UNFPA, it published a set of five handbooks on civil registration covering also non-statistical aspects⁵. These handbooks were potentially useful guides for establishing or strengthening civil registration systems. However, preliminary enquiries suggest that these handbooks never found their way to the civil registration offices in the countries and mostly remained with the National Statistics Offices (NSOs), which could not make much use of them as they were not handling the subject of civil registration.

5. On the other hand, since the system was not yielding the much needed vital statistics, the NSOs over the years, got disenchanted and in many of the countries even disengaged themselves from the system and looked for alternative methods for obtaining vital statistics. This included collection of data through demographic surveys and censuses and also using indirect methods to calculate various vital rates (especially from censuses). Meanwhile, the civil registration offices in the countries continued to run the civil registration system as a part of routine administration, in some cases totally oblivious of the fact that vital statistics are an integral part of the system. Part of the constraint was that the civil registration laws in some countries did not have provisions that gave the NSOs the responsibility for collection and compilation of vital statistics from a civil registration system. This completely short-circuited the link between the two systems. In some countries, the statistics laws do not explicitly give the NSOs the responsibility for obtaining and compiling vital statistics from the civil registration system.

II. The new paradigm

6. It has to be recognized that vital statistics from civil registration can be used only when they are complete⁶. Civil registration is multi-disciplinary in nature and this calls not only for a coordinated approach but also a holistic approach for improving and strengthening the system. Effective civil registration requires good governance with strong legislative provisions, and efficient operations and management systems within the given administrative and political structure of the country. It also has to be backed by a suitable monitoring and evaluation system. Above all, political commitment to improving civil registration so as to provide the necessary basic services to general public and to generate useable vital statistics in a country within a given time frame is imperative. The project-based approaches and pilots did not succeed as they did not address these core systemic issues dogging the national CRVS systems in Africa.

7. In most instances, there are no properly developed national CRVS plans with clear targets and systematic mechanisms for evaluating successes and failures, neither in the medium-term nor in the long term. Likewise, past interventions from regional and international development partners have not been guided by systematically developed regional plans, thus contributing to uncoordinated and fragmented resource use with limited impact.

8. Keeping in view the various issues stated above, it has been clear that in Africa, civil registration system initiatives had to be re-designed and overhauled to adopt a much more holistic

⁵ The five handbooks are a) Legal Framework; b) Management, Operations and Maintenance; c) Computerization; d) Protocol for release and archiving of registration record; e) Information, Education and Communication. Guidelines are also provided in the Handbook of Vital Statistics and Methods - Vol. 1 on Legal, Organizational and Technical Aspects and Vol. 2 - Review of National Practices. UNSD thereafter published a Trainers Manual for training of registrars.

⁶ The United Nations recommends 90 per cent completeness of registration as the threshold for tabulation and use of vital statistics.

approach to ensure that the CRVS not only provides efficient service to the people and much needed vital statistics but also plays a fundamental role in modernizing African public administration.. The need to develop a regional framework that could guide systemic reforms and help make sustainable progress in the area of CRVS in African countries is also evident. The importance of a coordinated approach among all institutions/agencies working in this area in Africa has also been strongly underscored.

III. Moving towards an Africa programme on civil registration

9. The first crucial meeting that planted the seed for the new approach in CRVS was held in Dar es salaam, Tanzania in June 2009. The meeting, which brought together the experts from the civil registration offices in various countries and vital statistics experts from the NSOs, addressed some of the fundamental bottlenecks that were hindering improvement of the systems in the region. Following the recommendations of the meeting, the African Centre for Statistics (ACS) at UNECA, as per the mandate given by the group of experts, initiated preparation of a Medium-term Plan (MTP) in close collaboration with the African Development Bank (AfDB). The preparation of the MTP was supported by field information that was collected from field assessment missions in five countries⁷. The MTP was also prepared in line with the *ECA Business Plan 2010-2012* and the recommendations of the Second Meeting of the Statistical Commission for Africa (StatCom-Africa) that was convened in January 2010 in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

10. One of the most important response initiatives was organization of the First Conference of African Ministers responsible for Civil Registration held 13-14 August 2010 in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. Over forty African Ministers in charge of Civil Registration attended the conference. During the conference, the Ministers made commitments to improve the CRVS in their respective countries and to support the efforts being made in this regard by the regional organizations. They made a number of declarations providing the policy ground for moving the regional agenda into action. The Ministers also endorsed the MTP and directed the regional organizations to organize an expert meeting to finalize it based on the comments obtained during the conference. The other important directives from the Ministers were as follows:

a) The African Union should institutionalize the Conference of Ministers responsible for civil registration to serve as a standard regional platform meeting every two years to review the progress of work in CRVS;

b) The Africa Symposium of Statistical Development (ASSD) which brings together all major statistical organizations, NSOs and professional statisticians in Africa every year, to discuss a chosen statistical theme for the next five years may focus on CRVS; and

c) A regional assessment of the status of CRVS in all African countries should be carried out.

11. In January 2011, experts from countries and from regional and international organizations reviewed and finalized the plan. The plan was expected to serve as a guiding tool for both countries and regional and international organizations, in managing interventions and monitoring achievements in CRVS systems in Africa from 2010 to 2015.

⁷ The countries were Ethiopia, South Africa, Cameroon, Mauritius and Sierra Leone

12. The first ministerial conference had clearly provided the much needed political space and rallied all the stakeholders at the continental level onto a common platform to embark upon a unified Africa Programme on Accelerated Improvement of CRVS (APAI-CRVS).

IV. Progress so far

13. Following the above mentioned meetings and the ministerial conference, significant progress has been made in implementation of the recommendations. Some of the important steps taken in this regard are given below:

- a) A Core Group for proactively pursuing implementation of the APAI- CRVS was constituted. The group consists of UNECA, African Union Commission (AUC), AfDB, UNFPA, UNICEF, Health Metrics Network (HMN) and United nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR). UNECA provides the the secretariat for APAI-CRVS.
- b) The MTP has been finalized by the Core Group based on the comments from experts during the Expert Group Meeting held in January 2011. The plan has a list of outputs and activities with clear timelines and is appropriately costed. It clearly identifies the agencies that will be responsible for implementation of the various activities and at what cost.
- c) The Ministers had directed the regional organizations to immediately undertake a comprehensive assessment of the CRVS systems in Africa. The Core Group developed an assessment questionnaire and sent it to all the countries along with the necessary guidelines for its completion. There was a good response from the countries and at the time of the preparation of this report, filled-in questionnaires had been received from 32 countries. A preliminary report based on the reports received from these countries has been presented to the current meeting of the Stat Com Africa. The final assessment report will be presented to the second Ministerial meeting to be held in September 2012 in South Africa.
 - The seventh ASSD was held in Cape Town, South Africa 18-20 January 2012. The Director-Generals of the NSOs and the Registrar-Generals of civil registration⁸ from the majority of the African countries met under the same roof and deliberate on CRVS issues and challenges in Africa. This was the first time that the two major stakeholders in CRVS from all the countries in Africa came together to share their experiences on the subject. The joint recommendations of these two important stakeholders in the ASSD should be able to revive the diminishing engagement of the NSOs and to pave the way for renewed interest in the vital statistics derived from civil registration.
- d) A clear and concise conceptual framework for the APAI-CRVS has now been developed and was presented in the recently concluded ASSD. This document is meant to guide the implementation of the CRVS systems at the regional level and also at country levels in a systematic and pragmatic manner. The APAI-CRVS has been conceptualized as a continuum of three phases - re-orientation, preparatory and operations. Certain core deliverables and outputs have been identified for each of these phases and the CRVS

⁸ The Chief of Registration Department is known differently in different countries.

programme both at the regional level and country levels ideally should seek to systematically transit from one phase to another. The two important elements articulated in this overarching conceptual document are the operational linkages and inter-play of the CRVS systems with other systems and the institutional framework envisaged for implementation of the programme. These are diagrammatically depicted in annex 1. The roles and responsibilities of NSOs in these frameworks have been clearly identified.

- e) The preparations for the Second Ministerial Conference to be held in September 2012 in South Africa have already begun. The recommendations drawn from the seventh ASSD and this meeting will feed into the ministerial meeting.

V. The role of NSOs

14. The role of NSOs in strengthening the CRVS systems cannot be overemphasized. The sustained involvement of NSOs at various stages of implementation of CRVS systems in their respective countries will eventually lead to production of useable vital statistics system. The nature and extent of NSO contribution are described below:

- a) In the countries where the reform and revamping of civil registration is being undertaken, the NSOs should be the part of the coordination team overseeing this process from the very beginning so as to ensure that all elements of data collection are well integrated and embedded into the registration process. Any attempt to retrofit the statistical processes at a later stage either in the law or in the operations of the civil registration can be very complicated.
- b) The NSOs have to ensure that all the elements of civil registration, especially those with regard to collection, editing, processing, tabulation and dissemination, are guided by the Principles and Recommendations for a Vital Statistics System⁹.
- c) The civil registration offices need to monitor the levels of registration on a regular basis for identifying areas of low registration and implementing measures for improving the situation in such areas. The civil registration system also needs to be evaluated at periodic intervals to identify the bottlenecks and challenges facing the system so as to make adjustments to the process and methods. The NSOs can play an important role in providing technical guidance to the civil registration offices and even help them in establishing a monitoring system and undertaking (or supervising) evaluations based on statistically sound methodologies.
- d) The NSOs need to play a key role in undertaking a comprehensive assessment of the CRVS systems in their respective countries and in supporting development and implementation of the national action plan.
- e) The NSOs should compile and disseminate civil registration based vital statistics on a regular basis even if the registration levels are not complete. They should bring out the reports on vital statistics obtained from the civil registration system at least on an annual basis.. Complete registration areas within the countries should be identified (say a city or town) and vital statistics for these areas should compiled and its use be promoted. Such

⁹ The Principles and Recommendations also include guidance on the legal, management, and operations aspects of a civil registration system.

demonstrative use of vital statistics helps in advocacy with the policymakers about the importance of civil registration in providing the much needed data for planning purposes, especially at regional and local levels.

- f) The NSOs in collaboration with the health ministries and civil registration offices can provide the technical leadership in improving statistics on cause of death in their respective countries.
- g) The NSOs have to be the principal and strongest advocates for promotion and use of vital statistics based on a civil registration system.

VI. The way forward

15. The Commission is invited to consider the following for discussion and action:

- a) The NSOs should actively participate and contribute as a prime stakeholder at every stage in the process of implementation of APAI-CRVS in their countries as described in section 5 above.
- b) The NSOs should help integrate CRVS in national statistical development strategies or programmes. Countries that have developed National Strategies for the Development of Statistics (NSDS) in the recent past need to revisit them to make sure that CRVS is properly reflected¹⁰.
- c) As envisaged under the APAI-CRVS, implementation of the re-orientation phase under the programme is expected to encourage countries to consciously and deliberately reject the project-based approach in favour of a more holistic approach in strengthening the CRVS systems. The multi-faceted dimensions of a CRVS system have the potential to pull in many stakeholders from various other systems. Therefore, the APAI-CRVS programme under the leadership of the Core Group and the country-level coordination team will have to make conscious efforts to align and integrate all the technical and financial resources from interested partners into the common plan of action developed and implemented at national and regional levels. This is a win-win situation for all the stakeholders, including the regional institutions and countries that are leading the process of CRVS reform and improvement.
- d) The Ministers responsible for civil registration at their first conference in August 2010 advised the African Union (AU) to institutionalize the Conference of Ministers responsible for civil registration by making it a permanent forum meeting every two years to review the progress of work in CRVS. AU has to take the necessary steps for implementing this ministerial recommendation.
- e) The APAI-CRVS, backed by the strong political commitment that it has already garnered at the continental level, is developing into a major Africa-wide programme. The programme implementation is led by the Core Group with the support of the secretariat based at UNECA. The secretariat is led by the Chief of Demography and Social Statistics and is supported by a full time Regional Advisor.

¹⁰ Ministers' Declaration Action point 8.1

However, this team is not sufficient to handle a major programme of this magnitude and diverse nature. There is a need to boost the resources in the secretariat by creating at least one more full time core post at the professional level and two more at the support staff level¹¹.

¹¹ Ministers' Declaration 9.4 - ECA to consider establishing a substantive post on civil registration and vital statistics with appropriate support staff at the African Centre for Statistics to ensure the sustainability of ongoing efforts to improve CRVS systems in Africa