Digitization of civil registration and vital statistics: towards information and communications technology assets for civil registration and vital statistics in Africa

Conference theme

Innovative Civil Registration and Vital Statistics systems:
*Foundation for Legal Identity Management*

I. Introduction

1.   Information and communications technology (ICT) has the potential to provide transformative improvements in civil registration and vital statistics (CRVS) systems based on its ability to extend registration coverage, standardize and streamline CRVS processes, integrate data from multiple systems and securely store data at scale, all in a cost-effective way. If properly employed, ICTs can make a significant contribution towards achieving universal registration of vital events, providing legal documentation of civil registration as necessary to claim identity, civil status and ensuing rights, and producing accurate, complete and timely vital statistics.

2.   The Civil Registration and Vital Statistics Digitization Guidebook (figure 1) was created by Plan International and other core group members of the Africa Programme for Accelerated Improvement of Civil Registration and Vital Statistics (APAI-CRVS). It is an online resource that provides step-by-step guidance for countries to plan, analyse, design and implement digitized systems and automated processes for CRVS.[1] It responds to the need expressed by countries in Africa to develop effective, scalable and sustainable CRVS systems and to maximize the impact of ICT investments. It was developed in collaboration with country experts across Africa and remains a living resource that will continue to evolve and expand over time. Use of the Guidebook is widespread, with over 1,500 active users per month from all over the world.

Figure 1
Outputs of the Civil Registration and Vital Statistics Digitization Guidebook
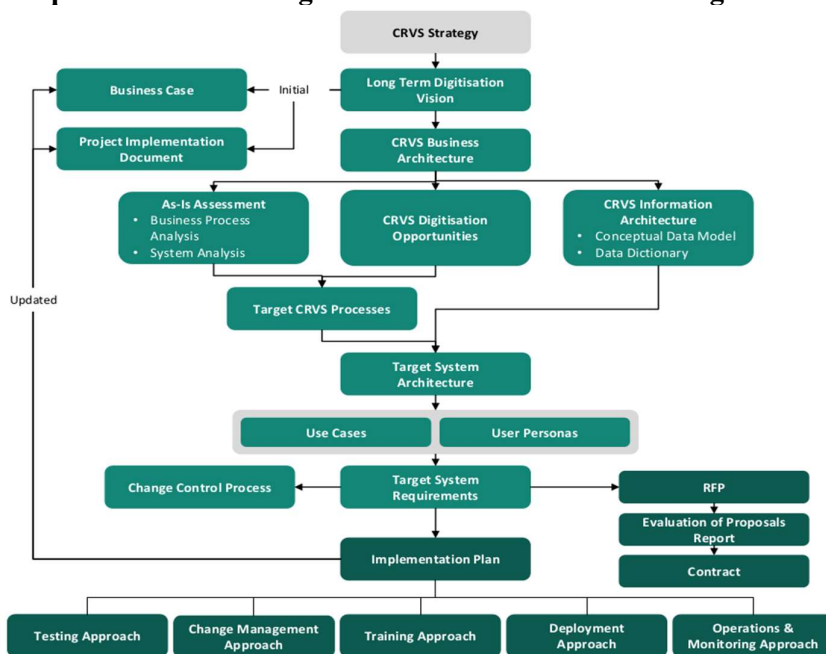

Note: RFP means "request for proposals".

3.   With the advent of accessible digital technology more than a decade ago, international development organizations began seeking new ways of including digital tools in their programming for improved outcomes. Some digitally-enabled programs have failed however,

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[1] See www.crvs-dgb.org.

and quite often that failure was for reasons that were both predictable and preventable. The Principles for Digital Development (figure 2) were created as a result of the above. They are a set of living guidance intended to help digital development practitioners integrate established best practices into technology-enabled programs.[2]

Figure 2
Principles for Digital Development
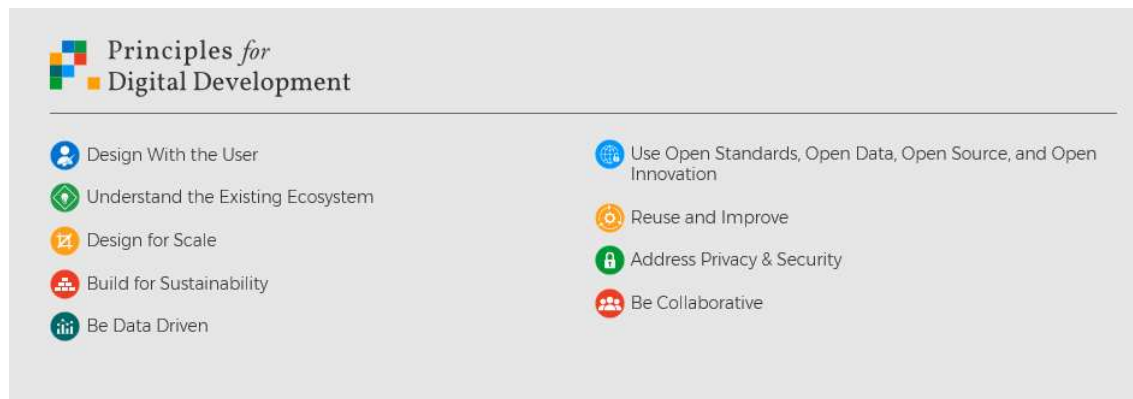
4.   The Nouakchott Declaration from the Fourth Conference of African Ministers Responsible for Civil Registration made multiple references to the need for CRVS digitization:

> *Welcoming* the entry into force of the digitization of civil registration and vital statistics systems, which brings the potential to provide transformative improvements in such systems, based on its ability to extend registration coverage, standardize and streamline relevant processes, integrate data from multiple systems, and securely store data at scale — all in a cost-effective way;

> *Encourages* African Union member States to develop shared information and communication technology assets in support of effective civil registration and vital statistics systems for the continent, which are built to common standards and are interoperable with other governmental systems, such as health and identity management;

> *Encourages* the Economic Commission for Africa, as the secretariat of APAI-CRVS, to lead the development of common information communication technology assets to support effective civil registration and vital statistics systems across Africa, ensuring the highest standards of data protection and confidentiality of personal data, in order to promote interoperability among civil registration, health and identity management systems, and having the flexibility to meet the needs of all African countries.

5.   OpenCRVS has been built by Plan International and Jembi Health Systems in support of APAI-CRVS and is a direct response to the request from African Ministers for common ICT assets to support effective CRVS on the continent.[3] The software is a freely available alternative

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[2] See www.digitalprinciples.org.
[3] See www.opencrvs.org.

to the challenges of home-grown solutions and proprietary CRVS packages. From the outset OpenCRVS has been conceived as a digital public good that is:

- Freely available with no license fees or ties to software vendors.

- Safe and secure using best-practice security features.

- Fully interoperable with other government systems.

- Data enabled for fast decision-making.

- Based on international CRVS standards.

- Easily configured and deployed in all country contexts.

- Rights-based, empowering all individuals to access their basic human rights.

- User friendly, designed by and for the people it serves.

- Accessible and inclusive, extending registration coverage to the hard to reach and marginalized.

II.   Issues for Discussion

6.   Creating, adopting and maintaining a common ICT asset for CRVS in Africa can have many advantages, but it is currently unclear what the expectations of such an asset would be, both from the perspective of product features and also in the way that the asset would be supported.

What would be the expectations of a shared ICT asset for CRVS in Africa?

1.   Is your country ready to use a common CRVS asset such as OpenCRVS? If you already have a digital CRVS system, does this need replacing with a more effective solution?

2.   What key features need to exist in OpenCRVS to make it of interest as a common ICT asset for Africa?

3.   What demands may users have of OpenCRVS? How do you see them using the solution?

4.   Do you consider that you have sufficient information technology resources available to configure, deploy and maintain a system such as OpenCRVS?

5.   Would countries be interested in a cloud-based CRVS solution hosted outside their territory (if proven to be cheaper, more secure and more performant) or must the data always reside in-country?

What are the practicalities of adopting a common ICT asset for CRVS in Africa?

1.   What is required to make OpenCRVS a shared ICT asset for Africa? Documentation, reference implementation, training?

2.   How many countries would need to use it for it to be a common asset?

3.   Would you contribute financially towards maintaining and supporting a central ICT asset for CRVS in Africa?

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