Evaluating the completeness and quality of civil registration systems and producing vital statistics reports

Conference theme

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

I.   Background

1.   The majority of African countries do not have fully functioning civil registration and vital statistics (CRVS) systems that are compulsory, continuous, universal and permanent recordings of vital events, such as births, deaths with their causes, marriages and divorces. Such systems provide individuals with legal documents generated through the official recording of vital events. For example, birth registration provides every child with a birth certificate, an essential legal document required to secure basic human rights to name, identity and nationality. A well-functioning CRVS system is also a source of data that is essential for good governance, policy planning and monitoring development programmes on global, national and subnational levels.

2.   CRVS systems are the preferred source of vital statistics. The births and deaths data from the civil registration system can be used to determine population estimates in the years between census collections, and for population projections. Information on how many children are born in each village and town is required to plan and implement education and health programmes. Health intervention programmes cannot be efficiently planned and implemented unless there are data on how many people are dying, where and of what diseases. Most countries in Africa lack well-functioning CRVS systems, and therefore rely on infrequent and expensive sample surveys for vital statistics, the latter being of limited value when it comes to obtaining continuous and reliable data disaggregated by lower administrative units.

3.   In recent years, there has been an increasing demand for statistics to monitor progress on the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its various Goals and targets. A fully functioning CRVS system contributes, directly or indirectly, to achieving 12 out of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals. In addition, data generated from civil registration systems are the preferred source of demographic data to measure 67 out of the 230 indicators of the Goals.[1] Ultimately, the implementation of the global 2030 Agenda and the regional Agenda 2063 will fulfil the promise to "leave no one behind".

4.   Data from the civil registration system are also crucial for the improvement of the registration system itself. The production and availability of a vital statistics report provides critical feedback on the state of a registration system in terms of its coverage, completeness and the quality of its records. Such data inform the registration system improvement initiatives on different levels – from local registration offices to the national policymaking process. Local registrars would be more informed in their daily activities by evaluating registration records that are more complete and of a high quality. At national level, Registrars General would be better informed about the state of the system nationwide and would advocate for more resources or focus attention on improving CRVS systems at the highest level. Recognizing the critical role of vital statistics, the third Conference of Ministers Responsible for Civil Registration recommended countries to compile and use data from civil registration systems irrespective of the registration completeness rate.

5.   In spite of the numerous advantages of producing and disseminating vital statistics, only a few countries in Africa regularly produce and publish vital statistics reports based on civil registration data. The main challenges are technical capacity and lack of expertise in compiling and analysing vital statistics, and lack of a fully functioning civil registration system for generating data on quality assurance at different stages of the CRVS system.

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[1] World Bank Group (2017). *Civil Registration and Vital Statistics (CRVS) for Monitoring the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)*.

II.   Guidelines and template for developing a vital statistics report

6.   In order to support African countries in producing and disseminating vital statistics reports from civil registration data, ECA has prepared guidelines and a template for developing vital statistics report in collaboration with Statistics Norway and ESCAP.[2] The guidelines and template are for the use of government agencies that are responsible for the production of vital statistics based on civil registration data, primarily for providing support to countries with little experience in preparing such reports. In most countries, responsibility for the production of vital statistics reports rests with national statistics offices. In some countries, civil registration offices produce vital statistics reports, while in others, the Ministry of Health is responsible for the generation of statistics on deaths and cause of death. It would be ideal for all involved agencies to collaborate in the production of national vital statistics reports.

7.   There are two parts to the document providing guidelines and a template. The first part presents general guidelines that describe the procedures involved in producing vital statistics reports from a civil registration system. The guidelines explain how the template may be used and they provide information on writing the vital statistics report. The second part provides a detailed outline for a vital statistics report, with specifications on what should be included in the report. It covers background information on the civil registration system of the country and the way that vital statistics are produced and disseminated. It also explains in detail what tables and variables need to be included and how the tables are produced, interpreted and presented in a vital statistics report.

III.   The first capacity-building workshop on vital statistics

8.   The first capacity-building hands-on training workshop on the guidelines and template took place in Nairobi from 2 to 6 October 2017, in which eight African countries participated.[3] The workshop targeted staff members of national statistics offices responsible for producing and disseminating vital statistics and staff members of civil registration offices responsible for the management and operation of civil registration systems.

9.   The main objective of the workshop was to strengthen the capacity of participating countries in assessing the quality of data on vital records, producing and disseminating vital statistics reports based on civil registration data. This ranges from basic concepts, tools and procedures to advanced methods of data processing and analysis.

10.   The specific objectives of the training workshop were to:

(a)   Improve the capacity of civil registration systems in compiling and transferring vital records in a timely manner to the agency responsible for producing annual vital statistics reports;

(b)   Develop capabilities in quality checking of vital statistics data, and assessing registration completeness and coverage;

(c)   Develop skills in compiling and producing vital statistics from vital registration records;

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[2] "Guidelines and template for developing a vital statistics report". Economic Commission for Africa: Addis Ababa, 2017.
[3] The participating countries were Botswana, Kenya, Lesotho, Namibia, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Zambia and Zimbabwe.

(d)   Develop statistical skills in calculating and interpreting key vital statistics indicators, tabulation plan and preparing summary tables and graphs on vital statistics;

(e)   Promote an understanding of standard vital statistics reporting guidelines and the template for preparing and completing national vital statistics reports.

11.   Participating countries were provided with a template as a model for preparing and completing their national vital statistics reports, and with technical guidance on measuring coverage and completeness of registration records. Project teams were expected to adapt the template to their respective national situation, in respect of civil registration records and issues accorded high priority in terms of improvements in CRVS systems.

IV.   Objective of the session

12.   The main objective of the parallel session is for selected countries participating in the workshop to share their experiences in using guidelines and the template for preparing vital statistics reports based on their civil registration systems. The session helped to share practical experiences among countries on good practices and challenges in evaluating the completeness and quality of their CRVS systems, and on the process of compiling, analysing, producing and disseminating vital statistics reports. It also provided an opportunity for countries to discuss their experiences on coordination and collaboration between civil registration agencies, health institutions and national statistics offices, specifically for improving completeness in registration and producing high-quality vital statistics reports.

V.   Points for discussion

(a)   What are some experiences and challenges in your country on preparing the basic tables and graphs for birth statistics, and calculating and interpreting key indicators?

(b)   What are some experiences and challenges in your country on preparing the basic tables and graphs for death statistics, including causes of deaths, and calculating and interpreting key indicators?

(c)   What are some experiences and challenges in your country on collaboration between civil registration offices, the health sector and national statistics offices, in compiling and producing vital statistics reports?

(d)   What are the experiences and challenges in your country in evaluating the quality of civil registration records and vital statistics, including completeness of registration data, accuracy of records of vital events, and the transmission of records in a timely manner to the national statistics office?

(e)   What are the ways forward to improve the completeness of vital events registration, and improve accuracy, timeliness and availability of reliable vital statistics reports, based on civil registration systems?

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