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Progress report on the Africa Programme for Accelerated Improvement of Civil Registration and Vital Statistics

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A. Introduction

1. Civil registration is recognized to be the most preferred source of vital statistics. Data on births and deaths from the civil registration system can be used to determine population estimates in the years between census collections, as well as for population projections. Any government needs such data on a regular basis for day-to-day planning, programme implementation and basic governance. Information on how many children are born in each village and town is required to plan and implement school education 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, lacking civil registration and vital statistics (CRVS) systems, rely on infrequent and expensive population surveys for vital statistics and population data, the latter being of limited value when it comes to obtaining such data at the disaggregated level.
2. Civil registration also plays an important role in realizing many of the human rights embodied in international declarations and conventions. The documents emanating from the civil registration registers, such as certificates of births, deaths, marriages and other vital events, are of immense probative value in enabling individuals to claim various benefits and privileges. Civil registration is well placed to provide some key public services, either directly or through other systems that could be linked to it.
3. The recently adopted 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development implicitly recognizes the importance of civil registration and vital statistics systems. Without them, none of the pledges “to end poverty and hunger everywhere; to combat inequalities within and among countries; to build peaceful, just and inclusive societies; to protect human rights” so that “no one will be left behind” can be fulfilled. It is only through building viable, universal and inclusive CRVS systems that the scandal of invisibility can be truly eradicated so that no one will be left behind. CRVS systems are the basic building block of an identity ecosystem required to improve service delivery to all people. It is by providing legal documentation of vital events to each individual that human rights can be realized and protected. Finally, reliable and continuous data from CRVS systems enable monitoring of policy effects continuously and at lower levels of disaggregation. In a similar way, the African Union’s Agenda 2063 re-echoes inclusiveness as a prerequisite to the continent’s growth and development. Implementation of these agendas requires that every vital event (primarily birth and death) is registered upon occurrence, and that statistics pertaining to these events are produced and used to guide policy and planning and to monitor development.
4. African countries, with support from development partners, have committed to strengthening and building complete systems which are in line with international standards and recommendations, and respond to the specificities and unique social and cultural context of the African continent. This initiative has been conceptualized into a regional programme known as the Africa Programme for Accelerated Improvement of Civil Registration and Vital Statistics (APAI-CRVS). The programme is guided by the policy directives of the Conference of African Ministers Responsible for Civil Registration, which is a permanent biennial forum of the African Union, and steered by the Regional CRVS Core Group led by the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) (which also hosts the secretariat of the programme) in partnership with the African Union Commission (AUC), the African Development Bank (AfDB), the secretariat of the African Symposium on Statistical Development, the United Nations Children’s Fund, the World Health Organization (WHO), the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, the United Nations Population Fund, the INDEPTH Network, Plan International and the Partnership in Statistics for Development in the 21st Century (PARIS21). In order to bring about viable long-term change in African countries, the programme pursues five main goals: (a) promoting country ownership and leadership; (b) promoting a phased, holistic and systemic approach at country and regional level; (c) promoting coordination at the regional and national levels; (d) building the capacities of national and regional CRVS institutions; and (e) promoting innovation and knowledge-sharing.

5. Since the creation of the programme in 2010, significant progress has been made in improving CRVS systems in Africa, particularly in harnessing political commitment for improvement of the systems at the highest level of government through the ministerial platform; promoting country ownership and leadership; fostering systematic and coordinated approaches at the regional and country levels; and building the capacity of CRVS functionaries and facilitating knowledge and the sharing of experience between countries. There are still, however, many crucial areas, in which countries require support as they progress in the improvement of these multisectoral and multifaceted systems. The present paper reviews the progress made in the implementation of the APAI-CRVS programme over the past two years.

B. Key achievements and progress made

1. Institutionalization of the Conference of African Ministers Responsible for Civil Registration

6. In 2012, the Conference of African Ministers Responsible for Civil Registration was institutionalized as a standing forum of the African Union Commission. The Conference will meet every two years to take stock of the progress made in implementing the regional CRVS programme and provide policy and programme guidance. The institutionalization of the Conference was approved at the nineteenth ordinary session of the Assembly of Heads of State and Government of the African Union, held in July 2012 in Addis Ababa, on the recommendation of the Joint Annual Meetings of the ECA Conference of African Ministers of Finance, Planning and Economic Development and the African Union Conference of Ministers of Economy and Finance. The third session of the Conference of African Ministers Responsible for Civil Registration was held on 12 and 13 February 2015 in Yamoussoukro, Côte d'Ivoire, on the theme "Promoting the use of civil registration and vital statistics in support of good governance in Africa". The fourth session is planned for April 2017.

2. Formation of the Regional Core Group

7. As mentioned above, the regional CRVS programme is supported by a group of pan-African institutions, United Nations agencies and non-governmental organizations, which together form the regional CRVS Core Group. The objective of this partnership is to bring together all of the key participants in CRVS on the continent to work within a common framework. Set up in 2011, the Core Group is intended to harmonize approaches, harness synergies and thus help to avoid duplication of effort. It provides technical and financial support to the APAI-CRVS programme. The core group arrangement is currently being formalized by means of a memorandum of understanding, which will ensure more sustainable engagement by partners in the implementation of the programme.

3. Promoting collaboration between key stakeholders in national CRVS systems

8. CRVS was the focus of the last five African Symposiums on Statistical Development. These regional CRVS initiatives have continuously and successfully promoted the collaboration of CRVS stakeholders at the country level (mainly statistics offices and civil registration authorities). The seventh Symposium was the first ever continent-wide meeting between civil registration authorities and heads of national statistics offices. Some of its key recommendations included strengthening coordination between national statistics offices and civil registration offices, and enhancing the roles and responsibilities of the two players in the operational aspects of CRVS at the country level. The eighth and ninth Symposiums went a step further by involving officials from ministries of health, in recognition of the important role of the health sector as a producer and user of vital statistics from civil registration, a key player and potential resource in the registration of births and deaths, and a core participant in the accurate recording and certification of death and the collection of cause-of-death information. The tenth

Symposium resolved that countries should use CRVS systems to generate mortality and cause-of-death statistics in seamless cooperation between national statistics offices, civil registration offices and ministries of health. During the eleventh Symposium, the last one dedicated to the improvement of CRVS, the representatives of national statistical offices and civil registration authorities of African States decided to establish a Committee of Civil Registrars at the continental level. It was also resolved that each country will set up a mechanism to regularly measure the completeness of vital events registration at all levels of hierarchy using CRVS systems.

9. The third session of the Conference of African Ministers Responsible for Civil Registration, which took place in Côte d'Ivoire in 2015, was also attended by the Ministers of Health of many member States, helping to strengthen the partnership between the civil registration offices and ministries of health.

4. Capacity-building through guidelines and training in specific areas

(a) Digitization of CRVS systems

10. The Core Group has continued to implement its mandate of providing technical guidance and building the capacities of African countries in the management and operation of CRVS systems. Following the Third Conference of African Ministers Responsible for Civil Registration, held in Yamoussoukro, Cote d'Ivoire, in February 2015, where the Ministers recognized the importance of the challenges posed by the digitization of CRVS systems and "the pervasive nature of information technology in CRVS applications and its strategic implications for the economy of Africa", and consequently decided to "adopt a sustainable development stance for civil registration and interrelated systems by using appropriate information and communication technology that [meets] the legal, administrative and statistical functions of civil registration", APAI-CRVS prioritized the need for comprehensive guidelines to support countries intending to digitize their CRVS processes. A *CRVS Digitisation Guidebook* has been developed by the Core Group under the technical leadership of Plan International, supported by ECA and AfDB in collaboration with country experts across Africa. Jembi Health Systems, South Africa, provided technical support as a consultant organization. The *Guidebook*, which will be used to train country experts in digitization, is intended to be a living resource including reusable assets and case studies that will continue to evolve and expand over time. It is available online at www.crvs-dgb.org.

(b) Improvement of death registration and mortality statistics

11. One of the areas in which assistance is most needed is death registration and cause-of-death recording. African countries face considerable challenges in developing health interventions and building health systems, measuring and monitoring mortality and reporting against national and global development mortality goals and targets. Death registration levels in most African countries are abysmally low, and recording and compilation of causes of death are almost non-existent. At the February 2015 conference, the African ministers responsible for civil registration took note of the situation and called on WHO and its pan-African partners to take urgent steps to support African States in establishing real-time death registration and cause-of-death information systems. ECA and WHO have jointly developed a mortality statistics strategy to respond directly to this ministerial call for action. The overarching objective is to make readily available continuous, harmonized, high-quality mortality and cause-of-death data and statistics for African countries, guiding the development of mortality systems which are better planned, designed and integrated. Following a meeting on development of the strategy held in August 2015 in Addis Ababa, a meeting of experts on mortality statistics was held in Cairo from 28 September to 1 October 2015 to discuss a five-year mortality statistics strategy for systematic improvement of regional and country mortality registration and statistics in Africa, especially in the context of improving CRVS systems, and develop a pool of experts on improvement of mortality statistics as part of the CRVS initiative.

12. It has also been noted that the key challenges being faced by countries in Africa include the lack of guidance on how to improve death registration, particularly in settings where a majority of deaths occur outside medical institutions. In order to address the need for such

guidance, work has begun to develop a practical guide to help countries to design and implement suitable business processes for death registration covering the entire value chain beginning with notification of death and ending in compilation and dissemination of death statistics. A workshop on the guide was held in May 2016 in Lusaka to seek inputs from countries and validate the proposed structure of the guide. In addition to the practical guide on the improvement of death and cause-of-death registration processes, there is a need for further in-depth research in the form of country case studies on current practices in death and cause-of-death registration processes. The result of this research should complement the guide in presenting good practices as well as examples of bottlenecks in the death and cause-of-death registration processes in different settings and contribute to guiding countries in developing suitable business processes for their particular setting. Both the practical guide and a research template are currently under development.

(c) Producing vital statistics from civil registration records

13. Another key area for support identified by the Core Group is strengthening the capacity of countries to produce vital statistics from their civil registration records. This issue was reiterated by the African Ministers at their February 2015 meeting, at which they decided to “analyse and disseminate statistics from civil registration regardless of the level of completeness as a means to establish the state of the system and its development”. The production and availability of vital statistics from civil registration systems constitute key steps in building national capacity as well as accelerating the improvement of the whole system. This is why there is a need to initiate the process even though the level of registration in many countries means that it will not be possible to produce high-quality statistics for a few more years to come. In order to support the countries in starting to compile vital statistics, ECA, in collaboration with the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), has embarked on the development of a training manual on producing vital statistics from civil registration records, as well as a vital statistics report template and guidelines, developed jointly with Statistics Norway. Both publications were reviewed and validated at a three-day expert group meeting held in May 2016 in Addis Ababa, and are being finalized.

(d) Other areas

14. Plans are under way to develop two more sets of guidelines: “Operational guidelines on advocacy and information, education and communication” and “Guidelines and recommendations for maintaining and managing CRVS in conflict and emergency situations under APAI-CRVS”.

15. ECA and other members of the Core Group have participated in the development of a global e-learning course on CRVS coordinated by the World Bank, developing a module on assessments and plans, but also providing comments on and inputs to other modules based on their expertise and regional experience. Once finalized, the global e-learning course will help to build capacity in different areas of CRVS.

5. Supporting countries in conducting comprehensive assessments of CRVS systems and development of strategic improvement plans

16. The second Conference of African Ministers Responsible for Civil Registration, which was held in Durban, South Africa, in 2012, made specific recommendations calling on all African countries to urgently undertake comprehensive assessments of their CRVS systems to be used to develop national action plans to strengthen the systems. The Ministers also called on the Core Group to provide countries with the necessary technical and financial support. In response to this call, the Core Group developed a set of resource documents to guide countries in conducting the assessments and developing the plans of action. The documents include “A comprehensive assessment tool for the civil registration and vital statistics system”, “Guidelines on how to undertake CRVS comprehensive assessments: a guideline for strategic planning” and “A facilitator’s handbook for strategic planning”. These documents are already available for use by countries, and will be updated regularly on the basis of inputs received from users.

17. Bearing in mind the differences between CRVS systems in English-speaking and French-speaking African countries, the ECA Subregional Office for West Africa was requested to lead the French-speaking countries in the implementation of the APAI-CRVS programme. Already developed technical materials were translated and adapted to practices in French-speaking countries to ensure effective implementation of the CRVS process. A Regional Support Group for French-speaking countries was officially established in February 2015. A subregional core group, made up of the same institutions and based in the Subregional Office, was created in 2013 to serve the specific needs of these countries.

18. As of October 2016, a total of 26 countries have completed their assessments, 5 are in the process and further 9 are initiating the process. Of those, 24 countries have developed strategic plans. The Core Group has contributed immensely to this process by supporting the development of the required resource materials and helping governments to secure funding for the various components of the assessment and planning processes.

19. In order to provide the countries with an opportunity to share (a) their visions of building an efficient and effective CRVS system; (b) the results of assessments of CRVS systems and plans developed for their improvement; (c) experience in undertaking or planning CRVS assessments and developing plans; and (d) strategies for implementation of the CRVS plans, two experience-sharing workshops on CRVS assessments and plans were held during 2016. The first workshop, attended by representatives of eight countries, was held in Addis Ababa in February 2016. The second was attended by representatives of 22 countries. Both workshops were also attended by Core Group Members, other development partners and senior advisers that have assisted countries in conducting comprehensive assessments. These two important workshops resulted in a set for recommendations for the revision of the existing guidelines, and brought to light new issues and challenges faced by the countries in the CRVS improvement process.

20. A “Regional Orientation and Training Workshop on Enterprise Architecture - Process Mapping for Strengthening CRVS Design” was held in Kigali from 21 to 23 June 2016. The workshop was co-hosted by the Bloomberg Data for Health Initiative (D4H), the Ministry of Health of Rwanda and ECA. It trained participants from countries involved in the Initiative throughout Africa and was facilitated by experts from D4H implementing partners (Vital Strategies, the University of Melbourne and the Swiss Tropical and Public Health Institute). During the workshop, the participants were introduced to the basic principles of enterprise architecture and business process mapping and acquired the skills needed to apply this system analysis approach to CRVS systems. As business process mapping is proving to be a very effective and efficient tool facilitating discussion on the improvement of CRVS systems, useful not only as an essential step in the assessment process, but also during planning and implementation of CRVS reform, it has been decided that business process mapping and enterprise architecture processes should be integrated into the APAI-CRVS process in a more systemic and systematic way. A strategy is being developed in this regard.

6. Promotion of knowledge-sharing

21. In order to ensure that countries benefit from each other’s experience in the improvement of CRVS systems, ECA and ESCAP organized a two-day Interregional Seminar to Exchange and Discuss Best Practices in CRVS from Africa, Asia and the Pacific in June 2016 in Addis Ababa. During the meeting, representatives of countries from the two regions identified common challenges in the implementation of CRVS programmes and various strategies adopted by countries in their successful mitigation. The following areas were covered: (a) improving the accessibility of civil registration services, including accessibility for remote, hard-to-reach and nomadic populations; (b) creating demand for registration of all vital events; (c) coordination among national stakeholders and development partners; (d) digitization of CRVS systems; (e) ensuring sustainability and political commitment to the improvement of CRVS systems; (f) building the skills of national CRVS officials; (g) monitoring the performance of the systems and registration completeness; and (h) building demand for vital statistics from civil registration.

22. In June 2016, the Core Group launched a regional CRVS website (www.apai-crvs.org) that will provide the basis for knowledge and information-sharing and, just as importantly,

monitoring and evaluation of the regional CRVS programme. The platform will also allow for sharing and exchange of CRVS knowledge products and information between countries, development partners and training and research institutions. The platform is intended to foster partnerships, networking and collaboration, and efforts to facilitate resource management, monitor improvement efforts, coordinate the work of the regional CRVS core group and other development partners, and support member States in reporting on their progress and improvement efforts.

7. Establishment of a monitoring framework

23. Responding to the call made by African ministers responsible for civil registration at their second conference in Durban to “develop results-based monitoring and evaluation systems and tools to monitor and report on progress on CRVS”, the APAI-CRVS secretariat has developed a framework for use in documenting and monitoring progress made by member States in the improvement of CRVS systems. Monitoring forms to be completed by a designated focal point in the civil registration office and submitted through the above-mentioned website are intended as tools for an annual review of progress in CRVS in each country, assisting in systematic stocktaking of the implementation of the CRVS action plan, and identifying bottlenecks and corrective measures needed to accelerate the pace of reform. The review process is envisaged to be consultative in nature, involving the main stakeholders in each country. This monitoring exercise was launched on the APAI-CRVS website in October 2016, and its results will be used to prepare a consolidated annual report to be shared with all civil registration offices and with the ministers during the ministerial conference. The information will also be used to develop a regional dashboard that will present a more detailed status of progress on various aspects of CRVS in Africa.

C. Challenges

24. To date the funding for the programme, largely sourced from development partners, has been inadequate and ad hoc in nature. The unpredictability of resources has affected the smooth implementation of the programme and caused difficulties in sustaining the human resources required to run the secretariat. Although the bulk of the funding for the plans will come from governments, some countries will require catalytic funds to kick-start implementation. The availability of such funding has critical implications for the success of the regional initiative, and it would be useful for ministers to deliberate on this issue and provide strategic guidance.

25. Many African governments and regional economic communities are increasingly focusing on and committing resources towards the establishment of national identification systems. There are significant risks posed by this, as most of these resource-intensive national identification systems are being developed with no organic link to civil registration systems. The civil registration system should essentially be the primary source of breeder documents on births, deaths and marriages for national identification systems. The existing approaches on the continent largely fail to recognize and apply these underlying principles. The risk is that governments and their development partners may divert resources and attention towards building national identification systems without giving due attention to building efficient and complete civil registration systems. Under these circumstances, the coordination of interventions by donors and development partners is even more important in order to avoid duplication of resources and unnecessary waste of resources.

26. Most countries lack mechanisms and the capacity to routinely monitor the development of their civil registration systems, and therefore cannot adequately report on any improvements emerging from their interventions. The APAI-CRVS programme has put in place a monitoring mechanism at country level which will make it possible to monitor progress in and the achievements of the regional CRVS initiative and to conduct an annual review of progress in each country.

27. Capacity development continues to remain a challenge. Although the country-led process of assessments currently under way is helping to develop capacity across the continent, there is a need to build a more systematic management, operational and technical approach. The Core Group is planning to develop a strategy and action plan in collaboration with other institutions for a more sustainable approach to CRVS capacity-building on the continent.

28. Now that more than 25 countries have conducted assessments and many of them have developed plans, it becomes crucial to support and guide them in the implementation of the plans and ensure that they are progressing in the right direction. CRVS in its nature is multidisciplinary, and different types of support are required in the reform of different parts of the system. The Core Group has already started developing guidance on key areas, such as digitization, mortality statistics and vital statistics, but more support and capacity-building is needed, including the creation of a pool of specialized experts.

29. Although most countries have adopted a uniform approach to conducting the assessments, some of them have followed different methods, and a few others have used tools for CRVS assessment and planning that are different from the ones developed by the regional Core Group under APAI-CRVS. Such deviations were mostly found in the North African countries and in those countries that had completed their assessments even before the tools and guidance had been developed by the regional Core Group. Countries adopted different approaches to planning, and in some the process of assessment and planning was consultant-driven. The question that needs to be addressed is whether the strategies and plans developed by countries will lead to the desired goal of achieving an efficient and effective CRVS system that meets the international benchmark as envisaged in the United Nations Principles and Recommendations and other global guidelines and standards, and also whether these are best suited to the country context.

30. Analysis of the business processes involved in the CRVS system was not always conducted properly during the assessment, mostly because guidance and tools were limited. A strategy on how to incorporate the methods of enterprise architecture in APAI-CRVS assessment guidelines and tools is currently being developed to address this issue.

D. The way forward

31. The regional CRVS secretariat plans to undertake the following core activities to tackle the challenges currently faced by the regional programme and to accelerate the development of CRVS systems on the continent:
 - (a) Continue to provide technical support to countries through activities such as training, provision of platforms for knowledge and experience-sharing, research and development of resource materials;
 - (b) Continue to seek and establish partnerships with relevant donor and funding agencies in order to meet the existing resource gap.

E. Discussion points

- The Fourth Conference of Ministers responsible for Civil Registration on the theme (Accelerating a coordinated improvement of Civil Registration and Vital Statistics (CRVS) for implementation and monitoring development in Africa: Review of progress and the way forward)
- Evolving from Comprehensive Assessments to the development and Implementation of CRVS Strategic Plans;
- Enhancing CRVS activities in French speaking countries;
- Producing vital statistics from civil registration records;
- Resource mobilization for CRVS;
- Monitoring and evaluation of CRVS Systems;

- CRVS capacity-building in the continent;
- Integration of the CRVS Business Mapping Processes into the Comprehensive Assessments processes;
- Linkages between Birth Certificates, National ID's, National and Regional Passports, Insurances, Education etc. (Support to National ID's and Electoral processes –Electoral Cards, more than CRVS in Africa)