



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 OF ANY LEGAL RECORD AND OFFICIAL STATISTIC.

THIS IS BECAUSE THE MAJORITY OF AFRICAN COUNTRIES DO NOT HAVE FUNCTIONING CIVIL REGISTRATION AND VITAL STATISTICS (CRVS) 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'.





THE CONTEXT

Almost all countries in Africa have civil registration laws for systematically registering vital events. However, very few have maintained a comprehensive and complete CRVS system to international standards; one that can contribute to building a modern public administration, upholding human rights and supporting national development.

The hallmark of CRVS 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 UN recommends the registration of 10 vital events¹, with births, deaths and foetal deaths given first priority followed by marriages and divorces² for countries that do not have the capacity to register or publish all of them.

A CRVS system is 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.”

H.E. JACOB ZUMA
PRESIDENT OF THE REPUBLIC
OF SOUTH AFRICA

CRVS 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 regular basis. The continuous aspect of registration implies also that the procedure is permanent.



Compulsory in order to reach continuity, permanence 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 and in the compilation of vital statistics. The assurance that the information collected will only be released under specified conditions for specific uses helps to improve accuracy and completeness of the data gathered.

¹ The 10 vital events are: live birth; death; foetal death; marriage; divorce, annulment (of a marriage); separation (of married people); adoption (of a child); legitimation (of a person with the status and rights of a person born in wedlock) and recognition (of the paternity of a child).

² Births, Deaths, Marriages and Divorces have been identified as the priority vital events for this region.



WHAT IS BEING DONE TO IMPROVE CRVS SYSTEMS?

Efforts have been made in the past to improve CRVS 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, CRVS systems on the continent are still incomplete. Contrast this with the almost complete civil registration systems in developed countries that allow citizens to access a host of entitlements and facilities that come with e-governance and further allow the continuous and permanent provision of vital statistics.

However, the movement to improve CRVS in Africa is being re-invigorated. There is recognition that CRVS systems have to be overhauled to efficiently service citizens and play their fundamental role in modernising African public administration, in addition to providing much-needed statistics. Technological advances in almost all parts of the continent can also help CRVS systems to expand rapidly and bring 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 programme that will guide systemic reform and support sustainable progress in improving CRVS in African countries.

The Africa Programme on Accelerated Improvement of CRVS (APAI-CRVS), as the programme 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 Conference of African Ministers Responsible for Civil Registration, held in August 2010 in Addis Ababa. The meeting brought the much-needed political commitment for CRVS improvements in Africa and rallied all stakeholders around the initiative.



“We would all agree that a CRVS 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, UNITED NATIONS UNDER-SECRETARY GENERAL AND EXECUTIVE SECRETARY OF ECA



THE MANY BENEFITS OF CRVS



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

CRVS UPHOLDS HUMAN RIGHTS

Civil registration is the source and foundation of human and civil rights of people. It establishes the legal identity of individuals and the legal relationship between them and the state as well as between people.

Civil registration also helps to improve the efficiency and fairness of the justice system. Civil registration records and extracts from the system help to avoid identity fraud and ensure that services are correctly targeted.



CRVS IMPROVES ACCESS TO GOVERNMENT SERVICES

Legal documents derived from CRVS 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 CRVS systems enable governments to adequately plan for the present and future needs of the population.



FOR GOVERNMENTS

CRVS STRENGTHENS GOVERNANCE AND PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

Registration of vital events is the responsibility of the State. It is a basis for the government to develop and implement evidence-informed policies and programmes, and a platform for the delivery of services to the population.

CRVS IMPROVES 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 CRVS systems and the improved statistics they generate support the health sector to determine what interventions and resources are needed and where.

The data on life events from CRVS systems are also essential for calculating the indicators needed to track progress in health programmes and the health status of the population.

CRVS SAVES MONEY

Investment in comprehensive CRVS systems will pay for itself many times over by improving the targetting of services and increasing the efficiency of resource allocation. By investing in improving its present CRVS system, a government can save a substantial amount of public resources.



CRVS PROVIDES A BASIS FOR NATIONAL IDENTITY

Many nations all over the world use civil registration information as the basis for national identification systems. Information on birth and death registration that feeds into a national identification system is the most authentic and least expensive source for this purpose.

CRVS PROMOTES EFFICIENT ELECTORAL PROCESSES



CRVS 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.

CRVS HELPS 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 sub-national levels on a regular basis. These estimates are essential to understand the growth dynamics of a population; assess human aspects of socio-economic development; measure the risks of dying by sex at specific ages for insurance and social security purposes and for population projections.

CRVS HELPS TO TRACK DEVELOPMENT GOALS

CRVS systems provide the most reliable data source to track progress on the achievement of the MDG targets. 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 is more accurate when it is continuously generated.

CRVS PROMOTES EQUITABLE DEVELOPMENT

A well-functioning CRVS system can provide valuable information that is essential to tackle social, geographic, gender and other inequities.



FOR THE WORLD

CRVS FOSTERS 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.



CRVS IMPROVES AID EFFECTIVENESS

Development partners, donors and foundations benefit from high quality statistics that 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.



THE CHALLENGES



A number of challenges have constrained the successful operation of CRVS systems in Africa in the past. Though some of them are being addressed by the current initiatives, there are still several hurdles that need to be overcome.

AT COUNTRY LEVEL

- **Weak country ownership and leadership in national CRVS 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.
- **Limited expertise.** There is limited opportunity for formal education on CRVS in Africa. The civil servants that operate and manage CRVS systems on the continent have no formal training except through their exposure to civil registration operations.
- **Underdeveloped public administration infrastructure.** Availability of services at the local administration level is the first requirement for sustainable development and cost-effectiveness of CRVS in a country. However, many African countries are still biased towards urban-based public institutions and services. Nevertheless, recent decentralization programmes progressing 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 CRVS systems, do not have systematically developed standards to measure coverage and completeness of the registration system or content and quality of the statistics produced.
- **Inadequate efforts in mainstreaming CRVS in National Statistical Systems (NSS).** In the recent past, most African countries prepared and started implementing National Strategies for the Development of Statistics, which in most instances did not reflect CRVS in a comprehensive way or as an integral part of the NSS.

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

MR. CHARLES LEYEKA LUFUMPA,
DIRECTOR, STATISTICS DEPARTMENT,
AFRICAN DEVELOPMENT BANK GROUP





- ➡ **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 quality and accuracy. Most countries are faced with the challenges of clearing backlog. There are no existing procedures that would guide countries on how to address issues on backlog.
- ➡ **Lack of a comprehensive national action plan.** In most African countries, CRVS is treated as a traditionally run business with no formal planning and 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 CRVS field.
- ➡ **Lack of long-term vision and commitment.** CRVS, once properly installed, would last for generations with little cost. However, putting the system on the right track may initially require a huge effort, which pays back as soon as the system starts functioning properly. Creating such vision and commitment is the current challenge in Africa.

AT REGIONAL LEVEL

- ➡ **No comprehensive monitoring and evaluation framework.** CRVS are integrated information systems that affect legal, administrative and statistical aspects of every nation. Specifically, 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. The region is now implementing the APAI-CRVS.
- ➡ **No regional standards and guidelines.** 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 UN in all aspects of CRVS 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 CRVS systems.
- ➡ **No clear directives or recommendations on the situation or extent of application of provisional demographic methods and techniques.** UN 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 INTERNATIONAL LEVEL

- ➡ **No international policy platform.** Although there are comprehensive UN principles, recommendations and guidelines on CRVS that represent global standards, flows of international support to countries are largely uncoordinated and in most cases have no clear reference to the UN general principles, calling for the need to develop global policy frameworks.
- ➡ **Lack of clear mandate and accountability.** In addition to the UN Statistics Division and the specialized UN agencies, there are a number of international organizations and academic institutions working on CRVS. These varied initiatives and interventions, run by different actors, might result in confusion unless working modalities are harmonized and coordination mechanisms put in place at 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 CRVS systems in African countries.

ASSESS CURRENT STATUS

Following the directives emanating from the First Conference of African Ministers Responsible for Civil Registration held in 2010, a regional assessment has been undertaken based on information obtained from a majority of countries. However, in every African country, the CRVS 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 with commitment to long-term budgetary funding is essential for creating and maintaining CRVS systems. The 2010 Conference of African Ministers Responsible for Civil Registration was a watershed event as it resulted in a Ministerial Declaration in support of strengthening CRVS systems on the continent, and the endorsement of a Medium-Term Plan to guide implementation of the regional initiative. For the first time in many years, high-level commitment by countries to improving CRVS systems was evident across the continent.

ESTABLISH A SUPPORTIVE LEGAL ENVIRONMENT

The establishment, operation and maintenance of a national CRVS 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 registration of events will

be free of charge. Fees are often a strong disincentive to public cooperation in CRVS, especially by poor and marginalized people.

ASSIGN ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

CRVS is multi-disciplinary and multi-sectoral 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. 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 CRVS system must be recognised 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 absent or weak CRVS systems, the involvement of the 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 CRVS, the media, public education campaigns and use of the civil society as advocates are all ways of creating demand for CRVS.

MOBILISE FINANCIAL SUPPORT

Governments need to provide enough resources to meet the core needs for running CRVS systems on a 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 CRVS 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 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 CRVS systems.

MODERNISE MANAGEMENT AND MAINTENANCE OF CRVS SYSTEMS

Access to registration offices by the public and efficiency in service provision are central to attaining successful CRVS systems. Most Africans reside 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 to transmit information over distances and computerization of data capture, storage and archival systems can achieve the objectives of the CRVS systems more efficiently. Building a partnership with the health sector is important as it provides a good platform for reaching the population through community health activities.



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

H.E DR. MAXWELL MKWEZALAMBA,
COMMISSIONER FOR ECONOMIC
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