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Registering Death, Assigning and Certifying Cause of Death and Compiling Death Statistics under APAI-CRVS¹

PART 1 - Concepts, Approaches and Work Processes on Death Registration

Inception Paper *Draft*

ECA and AfDB



African Union Commission



African Development Bank

¹ Africa Programme on Accelerated Improvement of Civil Registration and Vital Statistics (APAI-CRVS)

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1) Introduction

1. Recording death, assigning and certifying cause of death and compiling death statistics are the major components in the chains of functions and activities of civil registration and vital statistics (CRVS) systems. Birth signals a person's existence on earth and hence the beginning of his/her rights and privileges as a human being while death ends his/her existence as well as rights and privileges as member of a society in a defined territory. Birth registration establishes the legal contract between the individual and the State while death ends such a contract. The rationale for the establishment of birth and death registration systems in countries is deeply rooted in the judicial and public administration principles of societies that define the rights and duties of citizens and States as established in national constitutions, regional treaties and international conventions and covenants. Birth and death registrations are the basis for realizing these principles and provisions and also provide the tools for operational processes and procedures in linking the individual to the State machineries.

2. A Resource Kit prepared by the University of Queensland on CRVS systems presented the broad arching purposes of CRVS as follows: *“For many people, their only knowledge of civil registration comes from their own personal experience of registering a birth or a death, applying for a copy of a birth certificate, getting married or divorced, or making arrangements for the funeral of a relative. For others, their knowledge derives from their day-to-day work of filling in forms about births, marriages, or deaths, perhaps at a registry office or in a health care facility. Others are responsible for compiling birth and death data and generating vital statistics. Others use statistics about births and deaths in their work as health planners, program managers, policymakers, or demographers analysing fertility and mortality statistics. Many of us are involved in civil registration and vital statistics (CRVS) systems, as individual family members, as practitioners, as users or, indeed, as all of these. But we may not be fully aware of the importance of our different roles and responsibilities. We do not always realise that the simple acts of registering a birth, filling out a death certificate, or entering a code into a database are at the heart of larger systems that provide proof of identity to individuals and also generate information about the whole population. This information is the basis of sound governance.”*

3. The narrow perception and understanding of the origin and purposes of CRVS systems created wide misconception in translating the functions and implementation processes of the systems in the majority of the developing world. In past 50 years efforts and initiatives of installing and developing CRVS systems based on conventional methods and procedures in the developing world, particularly in Africa did not succeed largely due to failures in understanding the basics and fundamental principles of CRVS functions and services. In Africa, since 2009 a new approach was developed that critically reviewed past practices and interventions and proposed a paradigm shift in the methodological approaches, management and operation of the systems in the region. The three premier regional organizations, the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA), the African Union Commission (AUC) and the African Development Bank (AfDB) took leadership and coordination role at regional level taking CRVS as integral part of the regional development agenda. In order to address the various political and policy implications of CRVS and the complexities of managing the multi-sectoral and multidisciplinary operational requirements both at the national and regional levels, a high level regional forum was established in 2010. It was also decided to have a regional programme supported by time-bound rollout plan in the form of Medium Term Plan (MTP), which is now being implemented. These are few policy measures that have been taken in leading the CRVS regional initiative towards a

coordinated and harmonized management and operation systems guided with standard methodologies and operational procedures developed following the United Nations standards, principles and recommendations.

4. This inception paper focuses on concepts, approaches and work processes with regard to death registration. This will be followed by two papers that will focus on methodologies and tools on assigning and certification of cause of death and compiling cause of death statistics. Preparation of these inception papers is part of the planned activities in the MTP as per the policy directives of the regional CRVS initiative.

2) The Situation

5. In countries with advanced civil registration system, conventional methods are employed in recording deaths and assigning and certifying cause of death. In these countries, death registration was developed as integral part of the whole system of registration of birth, marriage, divorce and the different complementary vital events. Through years of experience these countries managed to develop standard operational method and procedure that comprehensively and holistically address the judicial, administrative, social and statistical aspects of the different vital events. It can be learnt from the history of CRVS in these countries that it should be treated as integral part of the development agenda of countries, and contribute to national development endeavors and benefit from the fruits of these developments. For instance, in the economically advanced countries individual and aggregate death registration information helped in the improvement of the health and welfare of the people and in turn CRVS benefited from the development of health infrastructures. In these countries the majority of deaths occur in health facilities or are attended by health personnel. The presence of developed institutional and human health infrastructure facilitated the application of conventional methods and tools of recording deaths and assigning and certifying cause of death. Specifically, the WHO standard methods and classification tools are easily been implemented in these countries.

6. The situation in the African region is different. The health system and institutional and human infrastructure are highly underdeveloped. Most deaths occur at home and unattended by medical personnel which make it difficult to implement WHO standard methods and formats. In addition, there are no standard management and operational guiding principles, methods and procedures developed that take care of the African realities and peculiarities. In most instances, the application of standard methods is limited to areas with relatively better health facilities in which are mostly in large urban centres. In the past years, development of suitable registration methods and tools that addresses the situations prevailing in rural parts of the countries in general and urban areas with poor health infrastructure did not get the required attention. Rather, the focus and effort was diverted to securing improved vital statistics information through developing alternative statistical methods, including sample registration, indirect techniques and surveillance undertakings that contributed little to the establishment of conventional CRVS systems in the region.

7. The various interim and/or provisional methods and approaches that were proposed and implemented for the past four to five decades only targeted the statistics aspects of civil registration system. Further cracks in the CRVS systems were developed by isolated efforts of different international organizations targeting only birth registration. Similarly there are organizations working on death registration alone. These event based interventions combined with the statistics sector's promotion of indirect estimation techniques, left the CRVS improvement agenda delinked from the

conventional CRVS principles and operational procedures promoted by the United Nations Statistics Division.

8. Currently, the regional CRVS initiative on improving CRVS systems was consolidated in a structured regional programme document, referred to as the Africa Programme on Accelerated Improvement of Civil Registration and Vital Statistics (APAI-CRVS) that provides the policy and implementation framework of CRVS systems in the region. The implementation of the policy document is supported by a regional MTP. The APAI-CRVS implementation framework provides a new policy direction for developing technical and management principles and frameworks that will lead to systematized and harmonized operational procedures for CRVS. Considering, the different levels of development of CRVS systems in the continent, APAI-CRVS proposes a phased-based implementation approach which is expected to be applied across all work streams of CRVS as a part of its reform process.

3) Objectives

9. This inception paper aims at setting the agenda for discussion on the rationale for death registration and proposes management, methodological and operational principles and procedures of registration of deaths, assigning and certifying cause of death and compiling death statistics as one component of the CRVS systems. The paper presupposes the need for reform of past practices and presents the technical and operational processes to be followed as per the APAI-CRVS policy framework. Specifically, the paper will cover the following major issues:

- Proposal on approaches and techniques of systematizing the management and operations of death registration; and
- Presentation of technical, management and operational issues that would serve in filtering policy and programmatic resolution points for the upcoming second ministerial conference and 8th ASSD meeting.

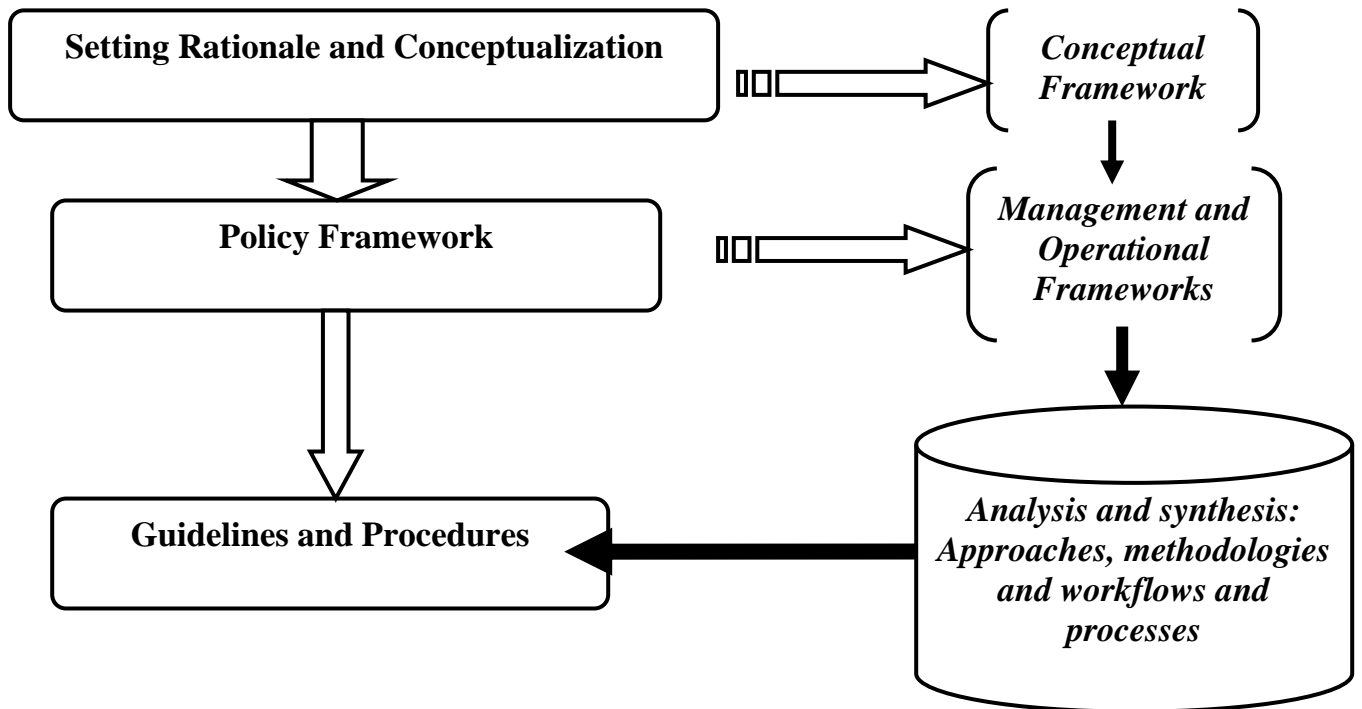
4) Setting Rationales and Conceptualizing Death Registration in Africa

4.1 General

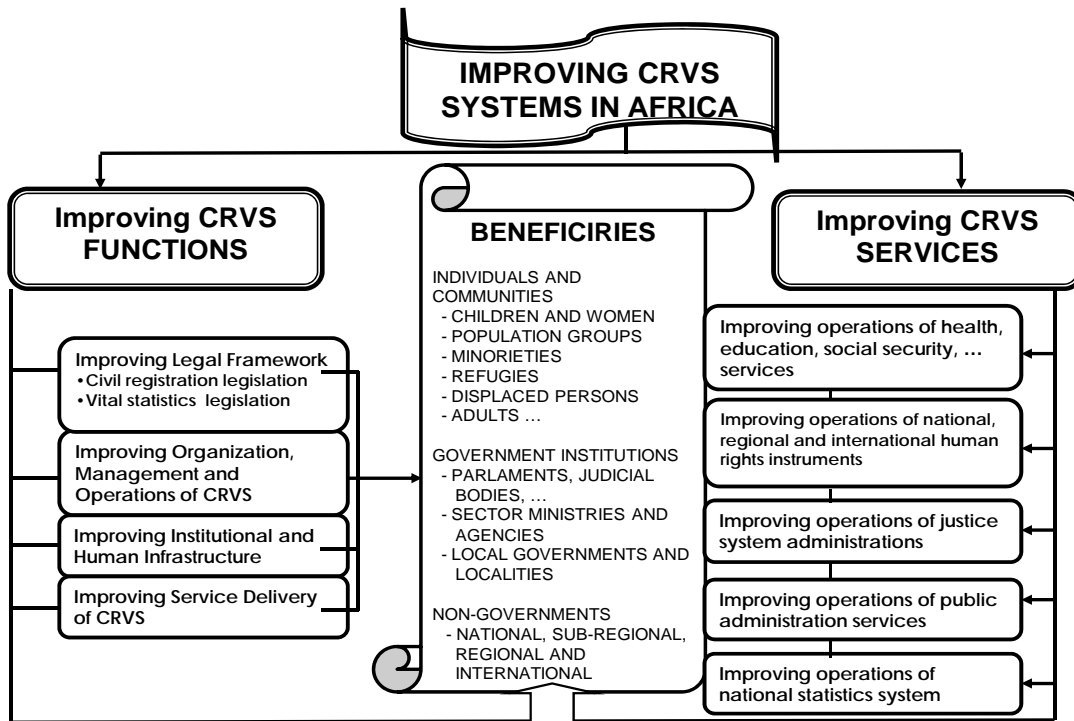
10. The rationale for registering vital events in a country and their functions and services from the international perspective are well defined and documented in the United Nations CRVS guidelines. The concepts and recommended methodologies of registration of vital events, which are the foundations for the development of the management and operational frameworks of the systems, are also presented in those documentations though so much work remains in aligning them to the current developments across countries and regions. Adoption of the international concepts, principles and rationales to national and regional contexts has not been properly articulated and documented in Africa. Initiatives without properly defined rationale will not have enough strength to sustain itself and owned by implementers. Furthermore, integration of operational and management processes and procedures to national administrative and political systems also depend on proper setting of rationales and conceptualization of operations and processes. In the majority of African countries, the building of rationale and conceptualizing the processes of CRVS systems seem to have been overlooked largely due reliance on past practices during colonial times. The Chart below schematically presents a process

of evolution of the CRVS framework that begins with building of rationale and finally developing the guidelines and procedures through well defined steps.

Chart 1: Framework for Setting Rationale and Conceptualizing CRVS Systems in Africa



11. One important attempt made at the regional level while developing the MTP was the review of the importance and necessity of CRVS systems in the African context. For instance, CRVS functions and services and their linkages to beneficiaries is depicted diagrammatically in the policy document of APAI-CRVS as presented in the following chart, which can be considered as one of the attempts of setting the rationale and conceptualizing the CRVS framework.

Chart 2: Work Processes towards Improved CRVS Systems

12. Setting rationale and conceptualizing have implications on the development of guidelines and manuals at regional as well as national levels. For instance, in the MTP, activities referring to the preparation of regional operational guidelines on various components of CRVS are included. Preparation of these guidelines call for a thorough analysis of the concepts, rationales and management and operational frameworks of the systems as per the African context. It also urges reviewing or redefining (if required) approaches and methodologies and defining workflows and processes of the different work streams of the systems. Similar exercises are also expected to be promoted at the country level as part of the preparatory process of the improvement of CRVS systems.

4.2 Specific

13. As presented in section two above, death registration is one of the major components of CRVS systems. The rationale for registration of death emanates from varied demands and various entities, which include individuals, societal groups and the State. The ultimate goal however is to achieve improved and sustained wellbeing and welfare of individuals and families. The governments need for establishing death registration originates from its interest in systematically manage economic and social transactions between citizens and state machineries through written and legally accredited documentations. Furthermore, accurate and timely statistics on mortality and its causes are essential for formulating, implementing, monitoring and assessing health programmes and policies. The socio-economic information obtained from death registration are required at various administrative levels for formulating and monitoring and evaluating policies, programmes and plans in the different sectors. Nevertheless, setting rationale and conceptualizing death registration goes beyond listing services and benefits. It should emanate from the country's political and socio-economic policy frameworks,

including the constitutional provisions and international obligations. The necessity of recognition of the death of a person by its government in a country should be good enough rationale for its registration. In other instances, social and economic implications of the death of a person on the family, community and the country at large may also be taken as the primary objective for rationalizing the need for CRVS systems in a country. Further work need to be done along these lines in supporting countries in defining the rationales and conceptualizing CRVS in their context.

4.3 Need for defining death registration

14. Building the rationale and conceptualizing death registration in the context of African realities is part of the whole process of understanding the management and operations of CRVS systems. Generally concepts are introduced through articulation of clear definitions that are all encompassing. They help develop guidelines on the principles and the management of operations. The United Nations publication on the Principles and Recommendations of Vital Statistics System recommended definition of “death” as an event, and of “civil registration” as a general registration framework. The definition of death and the other vital events were developed and recommended considering primarily their statistical importance and requirements. For instance, ‘death’ is defined as: “the permanent disappearance of all evidence of life at any time after live birth has taken place”, which may not fully address the administrative and legal understanding of death event. The definition of each of the vital events in the UN Principles and Guidelines was limited to the extent that it met the statistical and health information requirements. The approach followed at the international level in defining death and the other vital events fell short of addressing the legal, administrative and statistical purposes in a holistic manner.

15. The international principles while dealing with the major concepts of CRVS systems only defined the “civil registration” or “civil registration system” and skipped the definition of its components that is birth registration, death registration etc. Similarly, while delving on registration it only described the overall “civil registration method” and did not deal with each of its components, like method of registering death. Such an approach did not take into account the rationale for death registration and limited the understanding of the peculiar and distinct nature of issues related to death registration. Therefore, there was a need to develop guidelines on management and operations of death registration which had to be different from registration of birth. As part of the need to provide a rationale and conceptualizing CRVS systems in the African context, the following definition of “death registration” is proposed for further review and consideration. *“Death registration is defined as the legal and administrative recording of an event of death of a person so as to acknowledge his/her death irrespective of his/her age, sex and citizenship/nationality, in a defined territory through a defined legal, administrative and statistical processes and procedures.”* In the definition, the legal, administrative and statistical processes and procedures are included to underscore the rationale for a country to acknowledge a person’s death from legal, administrative and statistics perspectives. In other words, it implies that a person’s death should be acknowledged not only legally but administratively and statistically. Furthermore, the explanation goes beyond giving conceptual and operational guidelines, it also helps in removing misconceptions on certain aspects such as, the population to be covered in the registration, rights of persons and responsibilities of governments, and the procedures need to be followed. In the past , death registration as a concept used to be explained based on its benefits and uses, such as, inheritance, insurance, capacity to re-marriage, burial permit, clearance of administrative files, such as updating voters registration, tax payers, etc. This practice created misconceptions at the operational level, where there were practices of marginalizing population groups,

such as, infants and minors, stateless persons, migrants, criminal cases, war victims, low social status groups, etc.

16. In this connection, it is also important to state the objectives of death registration as sub-component of the CRVS systems. The UN Handbooks do not provide the objectives of death registration from the UN or international perspective and in fact even misses out on stating clearly the objectives of civil registration.

5) Need for Reform and Improvement

17. APAI-CRVS sets the conceptual and operational frameworks of the regional initiative on reforming and improving CRVS systems in Africa. It includes the regional MTP as the implementation roadmap in the first five year of the regional programme. Implementation of each of the activities in the Plan will be guided by the policy directives and managerial and operational frameworks of the regional programme. Among the activities in the plan, registration of death, assigning and certifying cause of death and compilation of death statistics find a prominent place. In almost all the African member States death registration coverage is low and there are little improvements in the past 50 years. The efforts made at various levels to improve the situation did not bring much change on the ground. The various interventions and support from relevant international organizations did not result any tangible output. There are a number of reasons being mentioned that contributed for the stagnation and low performance of death registration in the CRVS systems in Africa. Some of the reasons, such as lack of political commitment, absence of regional leadership and coordination and similar policy and programme related factors are in the process of being addressed through the current regional initiative. However, much of the methodological, technical and operational problems of death registration have not been addressed. This inception paper is one of the first attempts in making the case and presenting proposals for further systematic management of the problems and challenges of death registration in the region as per the APAI-CRVS.

18. The international standards and tools on death registration are largely based on practices followed in the more developed countries. The most recent UN principles and recommendations of vital statistics system and the handbooks on various aspects of the CRVS systems would not be expected to fully reflect the peculiar circumstances and realities of Africa. Therefore, there is a strong need to undertake a thorough diagnosis of the situations in various African countries in order to devise innovative processes, tools and operational procedures.

19. Improving birth and death registration largely depends on the engagement of the health sector. The existence of health facilities makes death registrations simple for the civil registration authorities as they provide the infrastructural requirements through the established health institutions and facilities. Hence, the level of development of the health service infrastructure in a country determines the role that the health sector plays in the operations of birth and death registrations. Specifically, the assignment of proper cause of death for each death event is highly dependent on the availability of qualified health personnel and structured health services accessible to households and communities. Nevertheless, presence of sufficient structures and facilities of the health system in an area could not be taken as a guarantee for capturing all deaths occurring in an area. By their nature health institutions only attend those deaths occurring and attended in the health facilities. Despite the presence of sufficient health facilities, there are instances where deaths that occur outside these facilities are not registered at all or not registered within the specified time limit. Hence, the development of methods, procedures

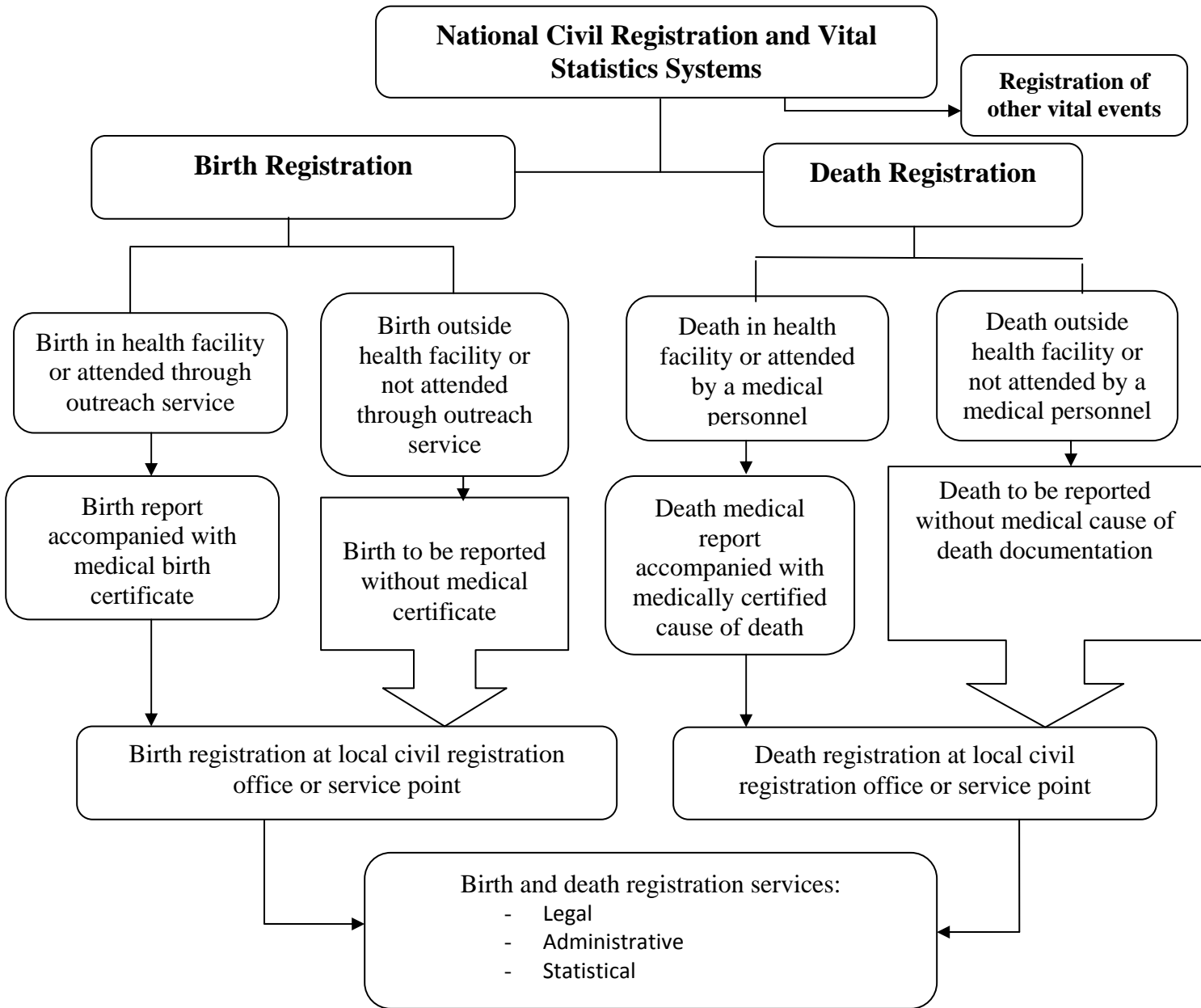
and tools of registering death and assigning causes of death in Africa, should take into account the availability and accessibility of health facilities and services in a country. As indicated above, it is not possible to apply standard WHO procedures and tools in areas with insufficient health facilities and structures. In such situations, beyond the development of the tools, a combination of different technical, logistical, administrative and operational protocols and procedures need to be developed and applied both in registering deaths and assigning causes of death.

20. Considering the strategic role of the health sector in registering death as briefly presented above, civil registration catchment areas in a country can broadly be categorized under three scenarios based on the prevailing health infrastructure settings. The three scenarios are the following:-

- a) Areas with sufficient coverage of health facilities and structures
- b) Areas with limited coverage of health facilities and structures
- c) Areas with no or barely any health facilities and structures

21. The first setting constitutes areas that would operate death registration as per the WHO standard, despite the differentials in the level of development of the health facilities and administrative and management settings, which in most instances would need further work in adapting the methods and tools to suit to the situation in the particular area. The second setting may need to operate using combination of tools and procedures: WHO standard tools for areas that are covered by the health facilities and services and for those areas that do not have accessible health facilities to adopt transitory method and procedure with appropriate tools (like the Verbal Autopsy tool for assigning cause of death). The third setting will wholly be using the transitory method indicated under scenario two above. Chart 3 depicts a strategic view of birth and death registration operations.

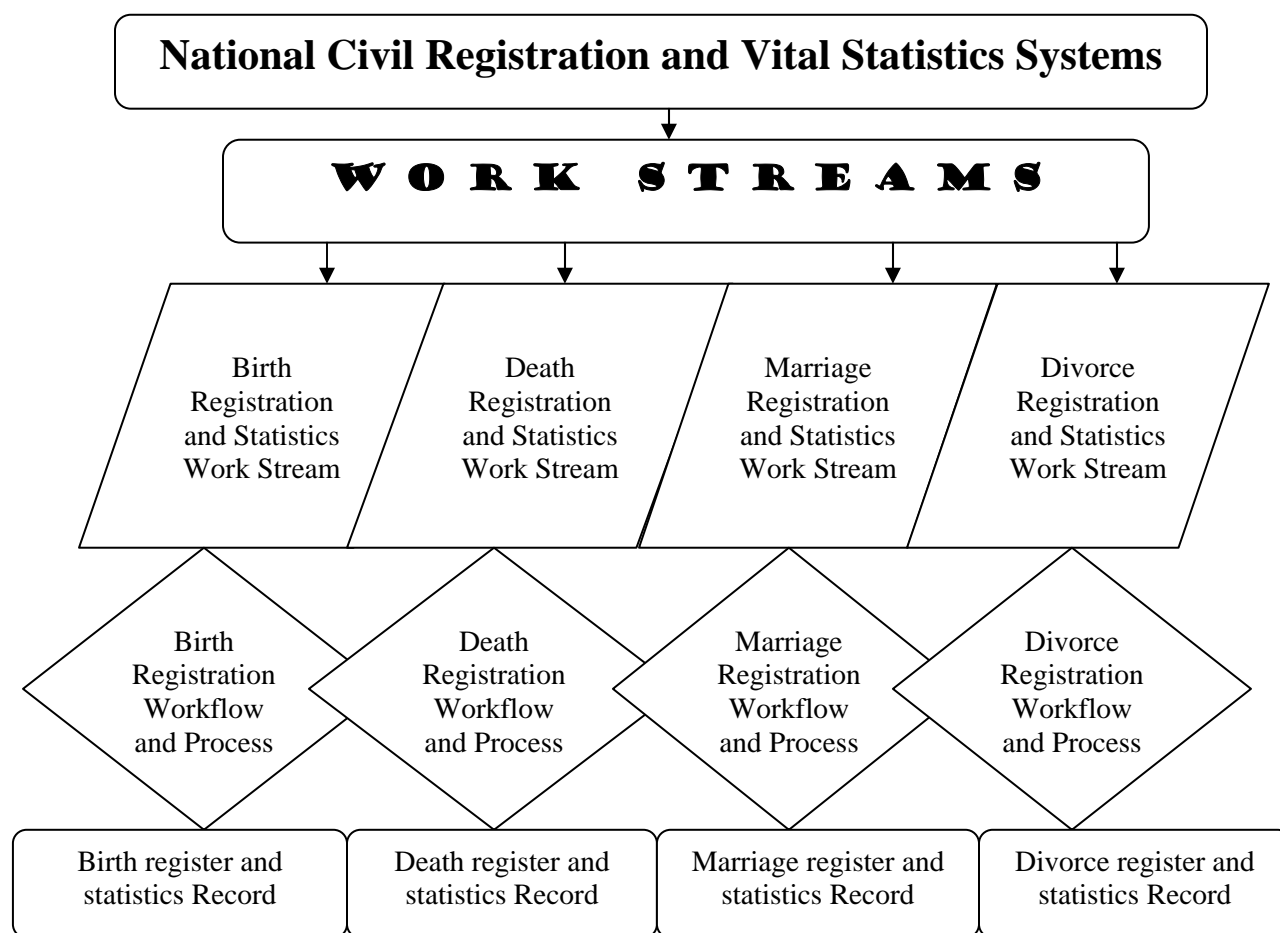
Chart 3: Strategic View of Birth and Death Operations



6. Development of Death Registration Workflows and Procedures

22. Civil registration is a continuous and permanent undertaking that requires the involvement of national and sub-national government structures and implores the participation of all population groups and residents of a country. Timely reporting and registration under the given legal provisions necessitates the establishment of service points accessible to the people in all parts of a country. Establishment of universal civil registration entails development of systematized and doable business processes that operates across all government administrative machineries of a country. Accordingly, a national civil registration authority should categorize, systematize and map the work processes for each of the events separately. CRVS operational undertakings in the African region do not seem to have passed through such stringent business management principles. Chart 4 proposes a general CRVS management framework that helps to initiate CRVS business process reengineering actions in countries. The Chart proposes organizing CRVS operations in four major work streams.

Chart 4: Mapping CRVS Operations into Work Streams



23. As presented in the above chart, death registration and related statistics forms one of the work streams of CRVS systems. Death registration management process involves arrangement of chains of operations and services. Such an exercise necessitates systematic analysis of the different operations and services and devising appropriate workflow and process layouts. Chart 3 provides two examples of such processes – one for deaths occurring in health facilities and the other for deaths occurring outside. The place of the occurrence of a death determines the way in which the technical and logistical arrangements of the registration operation will have to be organized. The designing of these processes will also have to take into account the capacity and location of health facilities. In addition, the type of death information planned to be recorded or collected and the corresponding tools have implications on the arrangement of registration operation procedures. Finally, the social, cultural and customary practices in the region have a strong bearing on designing such operational processes and procedures. Unnatural deaths have to be dealt differently depending on the legal and administrative arrangements in the country. A separate operational arrangement has to be in place for monitoring unregistered deaths and this will depend on the local arrangements of disposal of bodies.

24. The discussion above shows the importance and necessity of designing death registration workflows and processes as part of the management of death registration and statistics work streams of the CRVS systems. In the following chart, a death registration workflow and process description is presented (for a better visibility it will be converted into a layout form later).

Chart 5:
Death Registration Workflow and Process:
Description of operations and services

1. Registration of Death Occurred in Health Facility

PHASE I: Before Body Discharged from Health Facility

i. Case administration

- Natural cause
- Accident
- Crime
- other

ii. Process in health facility with qualified physician

- Prepare medical death record
- Prepare medical cause of death certificate as per the facility standard (if any or required)
- Prepare medical cause of death certificate as per the WHO standard

iii. Process in health facility with no qualified physician

- Prepare medical death record with no cause of death certification
- Conduct Verbal Autopsy (VA)

iv. Health facility providing medical documentations to families and other concerned bodies

- Natural cause – medical death certificate to families
- Unnatural cause – medical death certificate to families and other concerned bodies

v. Civil registration service – availability and accessibility

- Within the health facility
- Within local area
- Outside local area

vi. Health facility transmitting records to civil registration service

- Transmitting medical death record with cause of death certificate to civil registration service (*work process need to be developed for each of the following sites*)
 - o Within the health facility
 - o Within local area
 - o Outside local area
- Transmitting medical death record with VA (for health facilities with no qualified physician) to civil registration service
 - o Same as above

vii. Timeliness of registration

- Registration within the legally specified period

viii. Families informing the registration service

- Within local area
- Outside local area

xi. Families fulfilling burial permit requirements

- Within local area
- Outside local area

x. Inventory of unregistered deaths

Checkpoints for inventory:

- o Civil registration service
- o Health facility
- o Families/ institutions

END PHASE I: Body discharged from health facility

***PHASE II: After Body Discharged from Health Facility
– Before Burial***

i. Preparation for body disposal

- Burial
- Cremation
- Other means

Burial cases only considered in the chart

ii. Arrangement of burial place

- Cemeteries in religious grounds
- Cemeteries in other common grounds
- Cemeteries on individual/ private properties
- Other burial arrangements

iii. Families or other concerned bodies fulfilling civil registration requirements (*detail work flow and process need to be developed for the below undertakings*)

- Natural cause – families informing (duty of informant) the civil registration service

- o Within the local area
- o Outside the local area
- Unnatural cause – concerned institutions informing (duty of informant) the civil registration service
 - o Within the local area
 - o Outside the local area

iv. Fulfilling burial permit requirements – checking whether the death is registered and cause of death certified (*detail work flow and process need to be developed*)

- Families and other concerned bodies (specifically for unnatural deaths) securing burial permit document
- Common burial grounds requiring for burial permit document
- Private burial grounds requiring burial permit document

v. Inventory of unregistered deaths

Checkpoints for inventory:

- Civil registration service
- Health facility
- Families/ institutions
- Burial place administrators
 - o Religious authorities
 - o Municipal burial grounds
 - o Private burial grounds
 - o Other arrangements

END PHASE II: Burial concluded

PHASE III: After Burial

i. Inventory of unregistered deaths (*detail work flow and process need to be developed*)

Checkpoints for inventory:

- Families and institutions
- Health facilities
- Burial places to be monitored (*detail work flow and process need to be developed*)
 - o Religious authorities
 - o Municipal burial grounds
 - o Private burial grounds

- o Other arrangements

ii. Availability and accessibility of civil registration service (*detail work flow and process need to be developed*)

- Within the local area
 - o Registration within the legally prescribed period
 - o Late registration
 - o Delayed registration
- Outside the local area
 - o Same as above

2. Registration of Death Occurred Outside Health Facility

(at home, institutions, on the road, ...)

PHASE I: Before Burial

i. Case administration:

- Natural cause
- Accident
- Crime
- other

ii. Preparation for disposing body

Two parallel operations:

- Funeral preparation
- Civil registration service

iii. Families informing the civil registration service

Within the legally prescribed period

iv. Arrangement of burial place

- Cemeteries in religious grounds
- Cemeteries in other common grounds

- Cemeteries on individual/ private properties
- Other burial arrangements

v. Families or other concerned bodies fulfilling civil registration requirements (*detail work flow and process need to be developed for the below undertakings*)

- Natural cause – families informing (duty of informant) the civil registration service
 - o Within the local area
 - o Outside the local area
- Unnatural cause – concerned institutions informing (duty of informant) the civil registration service
 - o Within the local area
 - o Outside the local area

vi. Fulfilling burial permit requirements – checking whether the death is registered and cause of death certified (*detail work flow and process need to be developed*)

- Families and other concerned bodies (specifically for unnatural deaths) requiring burial permit document
- Common burial grounds requiring for burial permit document
- Private burial grounds requiring burial permit document

vii. Civil registration service

- Preparing death record and conducting VS
- Notification of death event
- Cause of death certificate (depending on country context)
- Provision of burial permit

viii. Inventory of unregistered deaths

Checkpoints for inventory:

- Civil registration service
- Health facility
- Families/ institutions

END PHASE I: *Burial concluded*

PHASE II: After Burial

i. Inventory of unregistered deaths (*detail work flow and process need to be developed*)

Checkpoints for inventory:

- Families and institutions (for unnatural causes)
- Health facilities
- Burial places to be monitored (*detail work flow and process need to be developed*)
 - o Religious authorities
 - o Municipal burial grounds
 - o Private burial grounds
 - o Other burial arrangements

ii. Availability and accessibility of civil registration service (*detail work flow and process need to be developed*)

- Within the local area
 - o Registration within the legally prescribed period
 - o Late registration
 - o Delayed registration
- Outside the local area
 - o Same as above

7. Way forward

25. While presenting the objectives of this inception paper in section two above, one of the points suggested was for the paper to serve as background document in devising improved CRVS management system for the African region. Accordingly, the paper attempts to build a rationale for death registration and then goes on proposing a concise definition for it going beyond the realm of statistics. The paper then proposes a CRVS business management framework within which suggests death registration workflows and processes. The issues and proposals presented in the paper is expected to contribute to better understanding of the depth and complexity of the problems and challenges of death registration and respond in systematic and pragmatic manner to accelerate improvement of death registration in African countries.

26. The paper brings out that challenges of death registration cannot be addressed in a run of the mill way and has to be tackled through implementation of innovative and well defined processes depending on the infrastructural situation, the legal and administrative framework and the local socio-religious milieu of the countries. The paper will be presented to key partners and stakeholders for further enrichment and endorsement before being submitted to regional technical and policy fora, including the forthcoming 2nd ministerial conference and the 8th Africa Symposium on Statistical Development (ASSD).