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**Civil Registration and Vital Statistics
Systems in Africa**

Report

I. Background

Civil registration is recognized as the most preferred source of vital statistics. Births and deaths data from the civil registration system can be used to determine population estimates in the interim years between census collections, and also for population projections. Governments require such data regularly for their daily planning, programme implementation and basic governance. They also require information on the number of children born in each village and town to plan and implement school education programmes. Health intervention programmes cannot be efficiently planned and implemented without data on deaths, their causes and where they occur. Most countries lack civil registration and vital statistics (CRVS) systems and therefore rely on infrequent and expensive population surveys for vital statistics and population data.

According to the United Nations, the role played by civil registration in proving and establishing, implementing and realizing many of the human rights embodied in international declarations and conventions is one of the Organization's most important contributions to the functioning of societies. Civil registration documents such as certificates of births, deaths, marriages and other vital events are of immense probative value for claiming benefits and privileges. Civil registration is designed to provide key public services directly or through other related systems, with such vital information.

With support from development partners, African countries have committed to strengthening and building complete systems that align with international standards and recommendations and reflect the specific circumstances and unique social and cultural context of the African continent.

The Economic Commission for Africa (ECA), the African Union Commission and the African Development Bank, with support from partner agencies, are spearheading the improvement of CRVS systems in Africa. Together, they form the regional CRVS core group. They have developed and are steering a continental CRVS programme, known as the Africa Programme on Accelerated Improvement of Civil Registration and Vital Statistics (APAI-CRVS). APAI-CRVS brings together various CRVS initiatives on the continent into a common and consolidated policy and advocacy framework. The programme was developed, based on international principles and recommendations on CRVS. The regional programme draws its mandate from the policy directives of African ministers responsible for civil registration.

The overall objective of APAI-CRVS is to provide management and programmatic guidance to African countries to improve their systems, using methodological materials and guidelines. The programme is implemented under a regional medium-term plan, which will run initially for five years (2010-2015). The regional plan focuses on six thematic areas of intervention as follows:

- Capacity-building
- Innovation and harmonization of techniques and approaches
- Promoting knowledge and sharing good practices
- Strengthening regional and national vital statistics production
- Promoting study and research
- Building partnerships and peer-support groups, and promoting country ownership

II. Key achievements in the implementation of the Africa Programme on Accelerated Improvement of Civil Registration and Vital Statistics

In the last two years, the regional programme has made significant strides in supporting the development of CRVS systems on the continent. Some of these are:

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

The Conference of African Ministers Responsible for Civil Registration has now been institutionalized as a standing platform of the African Union, to be convened every two years, to take stock of the regional CRVS programme and provide policy directives. The institutionalization of the conference was a decision of the nineteenth Ordinary Session of the African Union Assembly of Heads of State and Government, held in July 2012 in Addis Ababa, following recommendations by the Conference of African Ministers responsible for Finance, Planning and Economy. In line with the recommendation, the third conference of Ministers of Civil Registration will be held in early 2015.

The institutionalization of the ministerial conference provides significant opportunities for the success of the regional CRVS initiative, specifically in terms of having a permanent monitoring organ for the regional programme and ensuring its sustainability. In the past, lack of political commitment had hindered the establishment of proper CRVS systems on the continent. The ministers responsible for civil registration continue to pledge their support and commitment to the regional initiative and are playing a crucial role in charting the way forward by providing policy and strategic directives for the initiative. At their first conference held in 2010 in Addis Ababa, they endorsed the proposed regional CRVS improvement plan. At their second meeting held in 2012 in Durban, South Africa, the ministers specifically called upon all countries to undertake comprehensive assessments of their CRVS systems, as the basis for the development of their national plans of action.

B. Formation of the regional civil registration and vital statistics core group

A significant achievement in the establishment of the regional programme was the addition of other organizations to the initial three pan-African institutions which formed the core group. These organizations are: the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), the World Health Organization (WHO), the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), Plan International, the INDEPTH Network and the Secretariat of the African Symposium on Statistical Development, representing African countries. The regional CRVS core group brings together all the key actors of CRVS on the continent to work within a common framework. The objective of the group is to harmonize approaches, harness synergies and avoid duplication of efforts at the country level.

The core group provides financial and technical support to the regional CRVS secretariat for its programme implementation. Since its inception, the group has provided support for: the development of various technical resource materials and documents for the regional programme; the coordination of the programme's priorities at the country level; and the organization of key regional meetings. A memorandum of understanding is being prepared to formalize the terms of engagement between these institutions.

C. Capacity-building through operational manuals and guidelines

The core group has continued to implement its mandate to build the capacities of African countries in the management and operation of CRVS systems. In this respect, two regional operational guidelines namely: the “Regional Guideline for Civil Registration systems” and the “Regional Guideline for Vital Statistics systems” have been developed. The guidelines were developed to fill the need to adapt to international civil registration and vital statistics guidelines to address Africa’s specific contextual issues. The main objective of these operational guidelines is to build the knowledge and capacities of countries in systematic, integrated and efficient operations and management of civil registration and vital statistics systems. In addition to the operational guidelines, the core group has also produced a manual and guidelines on strategic planning in CRVS as well as a set of useful resource materials for country assessment of CRVS systems. These are outlined in paragraph D (b) below.

D. Providing guidance for a standards-based review of CRVS systems

The Second Conference of African Ministers Responsible for Civil Registration requested African countries to urgently undertake a comprehensive assessment of their CRVS systems and develop a reform action plan to strengthen the system, based on the findings of their assessment. The ministerial meeting also called upon the regional CRVS core group to provide technical support to countries. In response to that ministerial call, the Eighth Africa Symposium on Statistical Development (ASSD), held in November 2012, in Yamoussoukro, Côte d’Ivoire, agreed on a common strategy, which included a call to the regional CRVS secretariat to provide technical resource documents to support the assessment; and the development of a regional pool of experts to provide technical guidance to countries undertaking the assessment and planning processes. Below is a report on those two exercises:

(a) Development of a pool of African CRVS experts

The regional CRVS core group conducted a training programme from 20 to 31 May 2013 in Gaborone, to develop a pool of experts on CRVS. In consultation with the countries, 38 senior current or former African officers involved in civil registration and/or vital statistics, public administration and other related areas were selected and trained. Seven young African professionals of the ISIBalo capacity-building programme were also trained as part of the CRVS mentoring programme.

These experts will receive ongoing training and mentoring, and the pool will be expanded in due course, as part of the capacity development strategy for the continent. In addition, the core group will conduct a separate training programme for CRVS experts in French-speaking African countries (additional details on this training are provided in paragraph III. B. below).

(b) Development of regional guidelines and tools for the assessment

With support from the core group, the regional CRVS secretariat has developed the following resource materials to guide countries in conducting the comprehensive assessments and developing their national strategic and costed action plans: (i) Assessment tool for the civil registration and vital statistics system; (ii) Guidelines on how to undertake the comprehensive assessment; (iii) A guideline for strategic planning; and (iv) A facilitator’s handbook on strategic planning. These documents were reviewed by a team of experts in June 2014 and are currently under revision to factor in the inputs received.

To date, 10 countries have completed their assessments, using the regional resources available. Four of the countries have developed CRVS improvement plans. Ten other countries are in the process of undertaking the assessments.

E. Promoting cooperation among key civil registration and vital statistics actors

The regional CRVS initiative has continuously and successfully promoted collaboration among CRVS actors at the country level (mainly the statistics office and health and civil registration authorities). The seventh ASSD was the first ever continent-wide meeting between civil registration authorities and heads of national statistics offices. The meeting recommendations included strengthening coordination between national statistics offices and civil registration authorities and enhancing the roles and responsibilities of the two players in the operational aspects of CRVS at the country level. The eighth and ninth ASSD similarly brought the two players together and went a step further to involve some officials from the Health Ministry, in recognition of its role 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 actor in the accurate recording and certification of deaths and causes of death.

F. Rising global momentum of civil registration and vital statistics

Africa's regional CRVS initiative has significantly contributed to the rising global momentum of CRVS. Following a spate of activities at the global level in 2013, it became clear that a multisectoral and holistic approach should be adopted to improve CRVS systems at the national, regional and global levels. The CRVS improvement programme in Africa, initiated in 2010, followed by the recent efforts in Asia and other regions, helped to galvanize momentum at the global level. There is now a sense of urgency for the improvement of CRVS systems across the globe, a phenomenon that had never been witnessed before.

In light of the above, ECA, in collaboration with WHO, the World Bank, and the Canada Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development, hosted a global technical consultation meeting in April 2014, to discuss investment in an acceleration of CRVS strengthening in Africa and Asia. Among the core outcomes of the meeting was the development of a global CRVS investment framework (2015-2025) by the World Bank, which signaled a major breakthrough in terms of donor interest in a programme hitherto considered as a "donor orphan". Another outcome was the formalization of the terms of reference of a global CRVS working group led by the United Nations Statistics Division.

III. Current engagements

A. Providing technical support to countries in the assessment of civil registration and vital statistics systems

The regional CRVS core group continues to provide technical and financial support to countries undertaking CRVS system assessment and also in the development of national plans of action, as prioritized by APAI-CRVS. Some of the successes of the assessment process are: the expansion of the existing pool of African CRVS experts, following the training provided prior to the assessment; a mechanism and opportunities for collaboration among the core country actors of CRVS (mainly the statistics, health and civil registration authorities); and a platform for coordinating all development partners supporting CRVS initiatives at the country level.

B. Training and capacity-building for French-speaking Africa

Following an evaluation of the progress and achievements of the regional programme, the regional CRVS core group felt the need to review and modify the approach adopted to support countries in French-speaking Africa. It had been observed that French-speaking countries were lagging behind in undertaking comprehensive assessments, compared to their English speaking counterparts. In a bid to provide support that was tailored to the context and needs of those countries, in July 2014, the regional CRVS core group agreed to: (a) appoint the ECA Subregional Office for West Africa to lead the implementation of APAI-CRVS in French-speaking countries, through a subregional core group; (b) organize an initiation workshop to develop a strategy and action plan for the implementation of APAI-CRVS in French-speaking countries; (c) align the regional assessment tools to the context of French-speaking countries; and (d) identify an additional set of French-speaking experts and train them on CRVS. The secretariat is currently undertaking the relevant preparatory activities to facilitate the activities mentioned above.

C. Development of a web-based interactive database

The CRVS secretariat is in the process of establishing a regional CRVS web-based knowledge management platform to provide strategic guidance and oversight for the implementation of the regional CRVS programme in Africa. The knowledge management platform will be a one-stop access point for countries, development partners and training and research institutions. The platform will facilitate the sharing of knowledge and experiences across the continent, foster partnerships, networking and collaboration, facilitate resource management, monitor improvement efforts, coordinate the regional CRVS core group and other development partners, and support member States in reporting on their progress and improvement efforts.

IV. Challenges in the implementation of the Africa Programme on Accelerated Improvement of Civil Registration and Vital Statistics

Among the core challenges faced by the regional programme is the absence of systematic funding for implementation at the regional and country levels. Funding for the programme, largely sourced from development partners, has been inadequate and ad hoc in nature. This unpredictability of resources affects the smooth implementation of the programme, including sustaining the human resources required to run the Secretariat. With regard to the national implementation of the programme, based on current assessments, by 2015, over 20 countries should have comprehensive CRVS investment plans in place. Although the bulk of the funding for the plans will come from Governments, some countries will require catalytic funds to kick-start implementation, with support from the regional programme.

V. Conclusion

The ministerial statements made at the first and second CRVS conferences set out clear policy and programme directives for APAI-CRVS. Regional organizations and partners have continued to commit funds to support the implementation of the regional programme at the regional and national levels. There is, however, a need for a systematic and predictable pool of resources from partners and Governments in order to fully achieve the objectives of the programme at the continental and national levels.

The Commission is invited to consider the following for discussion and action:

(a) Countries should reaffirm their commitment to undertaking a comprehensive assessment of their CRVS system, in view of the important role such assessments play in informing the strategy and national plan development processes;

(b) Recognizing the critical role played by civil registration in governance systems, countries should consider establishing coordination mechanisms with key stakeholders of the systems (potential users of the products of the system). They should also take measures to review the feasibility of interoperability of civil registration systems with other relevant systems of government.

VI. Way forward

The regional CRVS secretariat plans to undertake the following core activities to tackle the challenges currently faced by the regional programme and to accelerate development of CRVS systems on the continent:

(a) Continue to provide technical support to countries through training, provision of platforms for knowledge and experience sharing, research and development of resource materials, among others;

(b) Continue to seek and establish partnerships with relevant donor and funding agencies in order to meet the existing resource gap.