

## **Shaking the Status quo: Urgent Need for Country Ownership and Leadership of National Civil Registration and Vital Statistics Systems in Africa**

Most African governments do not properly know the people they are accountable for. Public administrations and social service rendering institutions do not have basic personal data and information for managing and monitoring public resources. *Most people in Africa and Asia are born and die without leaving a trace in any legal record or official statistics making it difficult for the public sector to manage and monitor its human capital.* The Working Group on Monitoring Vital Events has called this “*A scandal of Invisibility*” because absence of reliable evidence and information for births, deaths and causes of death are the root causes that left *most of the world’s poor as unseen, unaccountable and hence uncounted.* Systematic recording of vital events, that is, births, deaths, marriages and divorces in some African countries goes back to the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries (few examples, Mauritius 1667, South Africa 1842, Ghana 1888 and Egypt 1839). Nevertheless, with the exception of 2 to 3 countries, none has maintained the civil registration system to the international standards that would lend its services to building modern public administrations and supporting the nations’ multi-sectoral development endeavors.

In Africa, absence of comprehensive civil registration has been and is continuously counteracting development efforts by handicapping countries in improving their public service efficiencies and deserting required data and information for managing development results, including the MDGs. Most African countries do not have proper and legal identity and citizenship documentary system for their people, which should have served as the basis for all public transactions at individual, community, national, inter-country, regional and international levels. National identification systems, passport and immigration controls, business transactions, protection of women and children from abuses and exploitation, court administration of civil and criminal cases, just to mention few, are highly dependent on properly functioning vital events registration system. African health service management and information system is the other huge development sector being affected by the absence or inadequate birth and death registrations and causes of death recording and compilation systems. Current decentralization programmes and democratization processes progressing in most African countries are being challenged by the absence of conventional and relevant population dynamics data from vital statistics systems.

For Africa it is the time for *breaking the silence on civil registration.* In most African countries, civil registration used to be structured under the responsibility of Ministries of Home Affairs or Interior or Justice or their equivalent. Likewise, the vital statistics derived from the civil registration system is managed by National Statistics Offices (NSOs) in almost all the member states. In the majority of countries the ministries or departments responsible for civil registration have been focused on the day-to-day operational duties without due attention to the macro level and multi-sectoral functions of civil registration. On the other hand, NSOs’ *attention has been focused on the products (i.e. vital*

*statistics) of the systems rather than on the systems themselves.*<sup>1</sup> These inherent problems that remained in existence for nearly half a century in the countries coupled with project-oriented and uncoordinated external interventions have dragged the systems in a vicious cycle of ignorance and stagnation.

After long years of ignorance, the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) in collaboration with the African Development Bank (AfDB) and key regional and international organizations have taken the first fundamental step in “shaking the status quo” in 2009. The first regional workshop on civil registration and vital statistics systems was convened in June 2009 in Dar-es-Salaam, Tanzania that brought the two responsible national organs: the National Civil Registration Authorities and NSOs in one meeting room. The workshop endorsed comprehensive recommendations that addressed advocacy, operational, technical and partnership issues that are currently serving as roadmap to civil registration and vital statistics interventions in the African region.

The Tanzania regional workshop identified lack of political commitment, country ownership and leadership in civil registration and vital statistics undertakings as one fundamental deterring factor in improving the systems in the region and strongly recommended the organization of a High-Level Ministerial Conference as soon as possible. The Second Meeting of the Statistical Commission for Africa (StatCom-Africa II) that was concluded in January 2010 has supported the workshop recommendation and endorsed in its resolution the organization of the High-Level Ministerial Conference.

Accordingly, the First Conference of African Ministers Responsible for Civil Registration is expected to address the long overdue fundamental challenges of civil registration and vital statistics systems in the region in its resolution that is meant to lead the region for the coming years. The Conference will be convened on the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> of August 2010 in the UN Conference Centre in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. The Conference will be preceded by an expert group meeting that will prepare technical materials and draft resolution and recommendation for the Ministerial Conference. The Theme for the High-Level Ministerial Conference is framed to reflect the integrity, interface and prospective engagements of the component functions and purposes of civil registration and vital statistics systems as: ***“Towards Improved Civil Status Information for Efficient Public Administration and Generation of Statistics for National Development and MDGs Monitoring in Africa”***. The choice of the theme is timely as the Conference will address issues pertaining to the monitoring and evaluation of progress or lack of progress made towards the MDGs at the 2010 review.

***Civil Registration is a public good!***

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<sup>1</sup> MoVE Working Group, Lancet Series 2007