



UNITED NATIONS
DEPARTMENT OF ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL AFFAIRS
STATISTICS DIVISION

**Conference of African Ministers Responsible for Civil Registration
Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, 13 - 14 August 2010**

Keynote Address

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Executive Secretary of the Economic Commission for Africa, Mr. Abdoulie Janneh,
Honorable Ministers in Charge of Civil Registration in Africa,
Colleagues, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is an honor to be invited to this august gathering of ministers in charge of civil registration as well as official statisticians from the continent of Africa. It is very rare that a statistician could have the opportunity to appear before a gathering of honorable ministers and to share with you the importance and potential of a particular area of statistics. My colleagues at the African Centre for Statistics and from many national statistical offices do indeed hope I could be persuasive.

Why would a statistician feel compelled to appear before you and argue for the importance of your area of responsibility on the registration of births, deaths, marriages and divorces – an area of work that touches the heart and soul of a society and its people?

The answer is very simple, and it lies in the undisputed and well-documented value of knowledge and understanding of the society that this registration procedure, simple as it is, could generate.

This knowledge comes from what we call vital statistics, a crucial set of statistics in every national statistical system. The importance of vital statistics runs deep in the decision-making processes at all levels. Without this set of numbers, for example, it is not possible to understand the full manifestation of population changes.

How many babies are born in a year? At what age do women, on average, start giving birth? Are there differences between provinces and/or ethnic groups? Measuring patterns of births, as you know well, is one of the most critical inputs in formulating population and family planning policies.

How would a country know how many schools, teachers and classrooms it needs in the coming years if it were not for the vital statistics? Compiling the numbers of newborns on an annual basis enables us to anticipate, with considerable precision, the number of first-graders and the necessary outlay required.

How long do people live, on average, in your country? What is the difference in life expectancy between men and women? What are people dying from? Cause-of-death statistics help us find answers to this question. Have death rates changed over time and do they differ among population subgroups? An accurate assessment of mortality trends is critical for the planning of government services, such as social security, public health and hospital facilities, to name a few.

Vital statistics, therefore, are critical in many planning efforts in the development process.

Excellencies, Colleagues,

This is where civil registration comes into the picture. Compared to two other sources of data – population and housing censuses and household surveys – civil registration has many advantages.

We, at the United Nations, define civil registration as a universal, continuous, permanent and compulsory recording of the occurrence of vital events pertaining to the population in accordance with the law of each country.

What distinguishes civil registration from other methods of data collection is that it is mandated by law, making it universal, continuous and permanent. Universality of civil registration refers to the inclusion of all vital events occurring on every geographic area and in every population group within national boundaries. Continuity refers to the registration of events as they occur, thus allowing for assessing short-term fluctuations, including seasonal movements, as well as longer-term trends. Permanency refers to the existence and the functioning of the system on an uninterrupted basis once it was set in motion.

These three features of civil registration make it the ideal source for vital statistics. The fact that civil registration is continuous provides a steady input of up-to-date records that enable the production of vital statistics. The fact that it is universal and that it covers the whole country makes it possible to generate small-area

statistics, an invaluable tool for local governance and for assessing the needs to adjust policies according to the profile of each separate region.

Equally and critically important, in the context of the United Nations, civil registration is an indispensable instrument to ensure the exercise of human rights promoted by all of us as ultimate standards. It is worth noting that, for example, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the more recent Convention on the Rights of the Child clearly stipulate that “*Every child shall be registered immediately after birth and shall have a name.*” An overwhelming majority of Member States ratified these treaties – but without the existence of a well-functioning civil registration they would not be able to implement this seemingly simple requirement.

Excellencies, Colleagues,

The concept of civil registration and vital statistics working together is straightforward: an event occurs, the registrar registers it, issues the pertinent legal document, fills the statistical forms and sends them to the national statistical authority. The national statistical authority validates the data, compiles them for the whole country, processes and disseminates the vital statistics. Why is it, then, so difficult to implement such a clear-cut concept?

Installing and running functional civil registration system requires a firm and permanent commitment of the government. As ministers in charge of implementing a civil registration system, you know very well the three prerequisites for a functioning system.

The first relates to the development and adoption of the law on civil registration that clearly and unambiguously lists the responsibilities of citizens and the civil service and gives the details of registration procedures. The law has to ensure the highest level of confidentiality of individual records; additionally, it needs to spell out the relationship between civil registration and national statistical authorities that would ensure the use of registration data for generating vital statistics.

Second, there must be an operational and functioning civil administration infrastructure. Vital events occur every second in all the corners of a nation; the civil service network needs to be well developed and accessible to all citizens to provide registration service on a permanent basis.

Third, the participation of the people is a crucial component of civil registration, and should be especially emphasized in societies where the benefits of registering births and deaths are not immediately obvious. While the mandatory nature of civil registration makes non-reporting of vital events illegal, it is not a very strong deterrent for non-compliance, especially when registering of births requires a lengthy commute to the registrar's office and paying a registration fee. Raising awareness of the population to the benefits of registering vital events is a far more important and effective approach in ensuring participation.

Intangible as it may be, the value of civil registration lies in its linkage between the government and the citizens, this being one of the few direct transactions between the government and the people. Ensuring efficient, smooth and user-friendly registration of vital events carries the added value of increasing the credibility of the authorities and their capacity to deliver services.

Excellencies, Colleagues,

Africa is now at a turning point in terms of civil registration and vital statistics systems. However, although we do see progress, the continent lags in the completeness of the registration of vital events and the resulting vital statistics. The coverage of the civil registration system is far from complete in an overwhelming majority of African countries. In many cases, the registration of births and deaths is restricted to the major city and surrounding areas. An extremely high number of births nationwide remain mostly unrecorded; and the situation is worse in regard to registration of deaths.

The coverage of civil registration in the majority of countries in the African continent ranges from just a few per cent to around thirty to forty per cent. These low coverage rates have an adverse impact on generating reliable and accurate statistics.

More importantly they reflect the inadequate functioning of one of the most visible services of the government.

Even when the coverage of the recording of vital events is high, the links between the civil registration and national statistical systems may not function adequately. This is sometimes due to inadequate provisions in the civil registration and statistical laws, thus preventing the establishment of channels for the submission of statistical forms from civil registration to national statistics. There are also examples of countries where the civil registration side does its part, by filling and sending the statistical forms to the national statistical authorities and then the forms stay unprocessed due to many different factors, such as lack of adequate knowledge, capacity, or human resources.

Having outlined some of the problems, it is important also to note that the development and improvement of the civil registration and vital statistics systems in Africa is gaining significant momentum in recent years.

As emphasized by the Executive Secretary of the Economic Commission for Africa, Mr. Abdoulie Janneh, at a workshop in vital registration a year ago in Dar es Salaam that we have seen a solid turning point in recognizing the need to develop civil registration and vital statistics in Africa. This important, unprecedented conference bears strong evidence to Mr. Janneh's observation that there is a strong commitment towards the goals of achieving and establishing functioning civil registration and vital statistics systems.

Equally important, we are witnessing success stories all over the continent. Our host, Ethiopia, is building civil registration bottom-up and their progress is notable. The law is now practically in place and the infrastructure is being developed, including the network of registrars. Links with the Central Statistical Agency are now being elaborated.

Malawi is also making strong inroads in establishing a functioning civil registration – the law on civil registration is now being put in place, for the first time

covering everyone in the country. Different mechanisms for ensuring complete coverage are now being debated and are on the verge of implementation.

South Africa increased the coverage of civil registration in the past decade to almost 90% of all events. Links between the registration system and Statistics South Africa are now functioning well, enabling the production and dissemination of up-to-date, accurate and reliable vital statistics.

The United Republic of Tanzania is re-engineering its civil registration system, taking full advantage of computerization and the links between the registration and statistics would be the next topic for consideration.

Lesotho has decentralized its civil registration system, making it potentially more flexible in terms of access and coverage. Botswana is routinely using civil registration data, although not complete in coverage, for the production of vital statistics.

The progress we have seen across the continent is being supported by the surge in the development and implementation of information technology. Computers are being put to work in many government offices and the proliferation of computers is often accompanied by increased efficiency in delivering results. The knowledge and application of information technology has been much improved in civil registration and national statistical offices. There is no doubt that the interface between these offices would be further enhanced with improvements in connectivity and better computer systems.

Excellencies, Colleagues,

We, at the United Nations Statistics Division, have in the past 40 years helped evolve a whole set of international statistical standards and guidelines on the use of civil registration for generating reliable and accurate vital statistics. These guidelines examine all components of civil registration and their impact on the accuracy of the registration and, consequently, the accuracy of statistics emanating from them. These

guidelines elaborate in detail on the elements of an effective relationship between the civil registration system and the vital statistics system and how to enhance the performance of both.

We will continue to support the development of both civil registration and vital statistics systems from the technical aspect, emphasizing best practices, establishing and maintaining networks of professionals at regional and international levels, and providing technical assistance as needed.

We are encouraged that there is now a very strong regional and international commitment and support towards the development and improvement of civil registration and vital statistics in Africa. It is also encouraging to witness such support at this Conference as well, by your presence here and by your interest and commitments to improve the civil registration systems in your countries.

It is now time for us to get to work, to work together to improve civil registration and vital statistics across the continent of Africa, to ensure the timely and accurate registration of each newborn and deceased, and to generate reliable vital statistics to guide social and economic development in each and every country.

Thank you.