



2009

African Statistics Day Celebrations

Technical Note

Strengthening Civil Registration and Vital Statistics
Systems in Support of National Development and
MDGs in Africa:

Towards New Initiatives and Approaches





United Nations Economic Commission for Africa
African Centre for Statistics

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Table of Contents

1	Introduction	1
2	Importance of Civil Registration and Vital Statistics Systems.....	1
3	Challenges and Consequences of Lack of Complete Civil Registration and Vital Statistics Systems in Africa	3
4	Opportunities for Improving Civil Registration and Vital Statistics Systems in Africa	7
5	A Medium and Long-term Program to be Conceived and Regional Network be Strengthened	10
Annex:	Key Recommendations of the Regional Workshop on Civil Registration and Vital Statistics Systems in Africa, 29 June – 3 July 2009, Dar es Salaam, Tanzania.....	13

1. INTRODUCTION

November 18 is African Statistics Day (ASD). This day was adopted in May 1990 by the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) Conference of African Ministers responsible for Economic Planning and Development to be celebrated each year in order to **“increase public awareness about the important role which statistics play in all aspects of social and economic life”** of our countries and the continent.

The theme for this year’s ASD is: **Strengthening Civil Registration and Vital Statistics Systems in Support of National Development and MDGs in Africa.**

At the mid-term evaluation of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), it is imperative that countries recognise that civil registration is a developmental and human rights issue and our ability to monitor progress in this regard will depend on the availability of functional civil registration systems and reliable and timely vital statistics. There are increasing concerns about the ability of African countries to reach most of the MDG targets by 2015. The fact that the international community misses essential data for monitoring its interventions in a timely and consistent manner is certainly contributing to this. In fact, at least six of the MDGs (i.e., eradication of extreme poverty and hunger; achievement of universal primary education; attaining gender equality; reductions in child mortality; improvements in maternal health; and reductions in prevalence of HIV/AIDS, malaria, and other diseases) rely on accurate data on fertility, mortality, and causes of death that should be primarily generated from civil registration and vital statistics systems. Moreover, vital statistics are crucial component of national statistical systems (NSSs) as they generate dynamics of the numerical profile of the human capital of the countries. Managing human capital appropriately, in turn, is an indisputable and most visible indicator of good governance or the lack of it.

2. IMPORTANCE OF CIVIL REGISTRATION AND VITAL STATISTICS SYSTEMS

The United Nations (UN) defines civil registration as the continuous, permanent, compulsory and universal recording of the occurrence and characteristics of vital events pertaining to the population as provided through degrees or regulation in accordance with the legal requirements of each country¹. The vital events considered in the registration system include live birth, death, foetal death, marriage, divorce, annulment of marriage, judicial separation of marriage, adoption, legitimization and recognition. Birth, death, marriage and divorce events comprise the priority vital events required by countries to be registered and the statistics to be produced in a continuous and permanent basis.

¹ UN, 2002: Handbook on Training in Civil Registration and Vital Statistics Systems.

According to the UN, civil registration has dual purpose: administrative and legal on the one hand, and statistical, demographic and epidemiological on the other. The legal and administrative purpose of civil registration mainly relates to the establishment of legal relationships between governments and their citizens that usually are manifested through legal provisions in national constitutions and laws, and international conventions and covenants. Civil registration records are the conventional instruments in ensuring the proper implementation of various human rights provisions embedded in national laws and international instruments. Moreover, civil registration systems have critical roles to play in the justice system, in social and administrative services and in decentralization and democratization processes of a country.

Vital statistics are used by demographers and statisticians to get precise and up to date measurements of demographic changes and for the study and analysis of trends that will be utilized in designing, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies and programs. Vital statistics generated from civil registration systems are also primary data sources for health managers and specialists in the implementation, monitoring and evaluation of varieties of health interventions and epidemiological studies. The details of the benefits and services of civil registration and vital statistics systems to the individual, households, the community and the public and the government in general, could be referred from the UN handbooks.

3. CHALLENGES AND CONSEQUENCES OF LACK OF COMPLETE CIVIL REGISTRATION AND VITAL STATISTICS SYSTEMS IN AFRICA

In the development of National Statistical Systems (NSSs) in Africa in the last 40 years, civil registration and vital statistics systems have not received the attention they deserve. As a result, the registration systems are largely incomplete, weak and unable to provide the routine vital statistics needed for policy and programme design, implementation and monitoring. Moreover, the administrative and judicial benefits and services the systems should render to citizens and governments have not been realized in Africa primarily due to lack of commitment from governments and ownership by the people. The key weaknesses of the systems include, among others:-

- lack of dynamism in their methods and techniques;
- lack of political commitment and support;
- outdated laws and procedures;
- poor linkages and coordination among relevant ministries and offices;
- inadequate and inaccessible registration facilities;
- limited expertise in civil registration and vital sta-

tistics;

- inadequate data security, processing and analysis tools; etc.

Unfortunately, few countries in Africa and Asia have complete civil registration systems. The Working Group on Monitoring Vital events has called this “A scandal of Invisibility” because “many people in Africa and Asia are born and die without leaving a trace in any legal record or official statistics. Absence of reliable data for births, deaths and causes of death are at the root of this scandal of invisibility, which renders most of the world’s poor as unseen, unaccountable and hence uncounted”. This situation has serious implications for vital statistics, human and constitutional rights, policy and national development. Acknowledging the above challenges and weaknesses of civil registration and vital statistics systems in Africa, the regional workshop on civil registration and vital statistics held in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania in June 2009 strongly recommended that the theme for 2009 African Statistics Day Celebrations be on this important subject.

The details of some of the major challenges and drawbacks created due to the inadequate nature of civil registration and vital statistics systems in Africa are presented below.

3.1 Most Civil Registration Laws in Africa are Still Outdated or Inherited from Colonial Powers

In Africa, the first general order requiring the clergy to keep a register of baptisms, marriages and burials was passed in 1667 in Mauritius under the French rule. Vital registration in Gold Coast (Ghana) began in 1888. However, at its inception, it was mostly restricted to the registration of expatriate workers of the then colonial government who were mostly resident in the few commercial towns in the country.

In the recent past, in South Africa, the National Population Register was implemented in 1972 for the white, coloured and Indian population groups. It was only from 1986 that the records included the black population group. In 1991, the Population Registration Repeal Act was passed to abolish the distinction made between population groups. The Births and Death Registration Act was passed in 1992, making registration universal to all citizens of South Africa.

Except very few African countries, most of them share similar experience indicated above in relation to installing civil registration laws and systems. In the past 50 years, most countries made amendments on the procedures, coverage and content of registration forms, which did not bring major structural improvement in making the laws effective and more relevant to the realities of the countries. Acknowledging the problems associated with the implementation of civil registration laws in Africa, the 40 African countries represented in the Dar es Salaam regional workshop reached a con-

sensus on the urgent need for countries to update or overhaul their civil registration laws supported with evidence and research.

3.2 Complementarities and Coexistence of Enumeration and Registration Methods Are Not Well Acknowledged in Africa

In most parts of Africa, the necessity for the coexistence and complementarity nature of civil registration, on the one hand, and population censuses and household surveys on the other, has not been acknowledged and understood as a requirement in addressing the data demands for development and monitoring of progress in Africa. From the statistics point of view, civil registration is meant to provide the ‘flow’ statistics that is required to generate primarily population dynamics information on a continuous and permanent basis. On the other hand, censuses and surveys are traditionally developed to provide the ‘stock’ statistics at specific point in time. The combination and availability of these two data collection methods simultaneously in a country is the minimum requirement in generating annual, routine and current population estimates and projections that would enable to calculate demographic and health indicators using conventional methods. Thus the lack of appreciation of the difference and complementarity’s of the two data sources left Africa to be dependent on household surveys and population censuses for vital statistics at least in the past four decades.

3.3 Provisional Data Collection Methods and Mathematical Techniques for Producing Vital Statistics Could Not Address the Data Requirements of Contemporary Africa

In the absence of adequate civil registration, various approaches and techniques for generating vital statistics were developed and applied in the statistically underdeveloped countries in the past 4-5 decades. The initiatives and premises of most of the methods rely on deriving the most plausible estimates from defective and inaccurate information collected through censuses and surveys using direct or indirect retrospective questions on fertility and mortality variables. It is a usual practice for countries to apply the retrospective fertility and mortality questions in their censuses and surveys to fill the data gap on population dynamics variables so that they would provide vital rates for the census or survey year and also to use them for making estimates and projections. In such exercises, it is a requirement to use the indirect techniques supported with demographic models highly complex to be understood and practiced by statistical practitioners and planners.

Nevertheless, country level current population and health data demands have surpassed what has been

introduced as provisional method for Africa and other developing countries in the 1960s². In the African region, development initiatives, decentralization and democratization processes and country level MDG measurement and assessment exercises require highly accurate and sustainable measurement tools that could not be addressed with ad-hoc and indirect data collection approaches being currently practiced in the developing world. Furthermore, there are critical data demands emerging at global, regional and country levels in relation to adult mortality, causes of death and maintaining updated causes of death classification that countries should collect, compile and disseminate to properly manage the huge health interventions currently underway in most African countries. In this respect, indirect techniques and data collection methods that are being practiced in censuses and surveys could not produce viable techniques for measuring variables like adult mortality and causes of death.

Some of the limitations highlighted above are more than indications for Africa and the rest of the developing world, calling that the time has come for countries to move swiftly towards the conventional system for the collection and compilation of vital statistics data. At this juncture, Africa, in particular, needs to learn how the United States of America and Canada have managed similar challenges they faced in the 1900s. The experience observed in these two countries to obtain national vital statistics from the population census enumeration using alternative methods, the limitations observed and measures taken in moving towards the conventional civil registration system is well documented in the UN handbook³. In Canada, the whole indirect method initiative was abandoned as stated in the handbook as follows: “... *It was thought that once every ten years this enumeration of births and deaths would provide an over-all check on the registration, but results were so poor that in 1911 the method was discontinued. From that time forward, every effort was devoted to establishing the registration method by improving and standardizing the provincial legislation with the aim of securing uniform registration laws and procedures throughout the provinces.*”

Likewise, in the United States after repeated piloting, comparison and analysis, it was concluded that: “... *It was abundantly clear that the census method would not give results comparable in accuracy with the method of continuous registration, and the mortality census schedule was abandoned after the census of 1900. From that time onwards, efforts were concentrated on developing vital statistics by the registration method.*”

2 Indirect techniques developed by Brass and others were introduced as provisional methods for Africa in the 1960s with the intention of filling the immediate data gaps for planning that Africa was facing during the post-colonization period. Nevertheless, that trend continued for over 40 years.

3 UN, 1955: Handbook of Vital Statistics Methods.

3.4 Lack of Coordination and Interface between Institutions Dealing with Civil Registration and Vital Statistics

The organizational and administrative arrangement of civil registration and vital statistics in African countries varies depending on the specific government structure and institutional setup of the countries. Nevertheless, in most African countries we usually find two separate institutions for civil registration and vital statistics, where in almost all cases vital statistics fall under National Statistical Offices (NSOs) and civil registration as a separate agency in the same or different ministry. In such situations, installation of proper strategies, mechanisms and institutional linkages in addressing the interface and integration requirements of the two institutions is a primary pre-requisite in attaining complete and universal civil registration and vital statistics systems in a country. However, one of the main reasons for staggering progress observed in the area of civil registration and vital statistics in the past has been the weak collaboration, coordination and integration between the organizations of civil registration and NSOs, perpetuating the countries' dependence on enumeration methods for generating population dynamics information.

The implication of lack of interface and integration between the two institutions and systems is so diverse, where in the first instance, the capacity in re-enforcing the expertise and knowledge that should flow from one agency to the other would be blocked. Such drawbacks will lead the civil registration agency to give low profile for vital statistics, and more ignorance on the part of the NSO for civil registration initiatives and activities. Here, it should be noted that the technical arm for civil registration is the statistics branch that has a huge role and responsibility in various capacity building activities and in the design, data management and compilation work of the civil registration information, both individual and aggregate data. Furthermore, the vital statistics compiling agency is expected to proactively intervene in setting data collection and compilation standards, partnering in operational, monitoring and evaluation activities and closely collaborating with health departments in managing causes of death information.

3.5 Lack of Government Commitment and Public Ownership for Civil Registration Systems in Africa

One of the distinct characteristics of civil registration is its advantage and convenience to serve as information source for individual use and to be compiled as aggregate data at community and various government structures. Government and public ownership of civil registration system depends on the systems responsiveness to the challenges African governments are facing in addressing legal and administrative information requirements in improving the efficiency and

effectiveness of, primarily the justice system, social and administrative services and decentralization and democratization processes. Unlike censuses and surveys, individual vital event records produced from civil registration are the major sources of information in the provision of social and other public administration services at community and household levels. An optimised and coordinated share of civil registration data among service delivery departments would improve efficiency and effectiveness of programs and enables maintaining accountability of duty bearers.

Traditionally, vital event records are primarily required for legal and administrative purposes for legal documentation of identity and as testimonies of civil status of persons in legal proceedings and administrative requirements. For instance, birth records are essential legal documents in testifying individual's name, date, time and place of birth, parents' name and nationality, date of birth, ancestry or lineage, sex and citizenship on which a wide array of individual and family rights and activities depend. These are the information basis required to properly manage justice system reform programs currently running in most African countries, where without such individual legal records the reform would result in a futile exercise. Again, these are the information basis in installing a conventional national identity system that most African countries lack in managing the day-to-day administrative and commercial transactions of its population and in taking national security measures.

The individual vital event records are also indispensable information sources in implementing social and economic programmes at community and household levels, such as, land ownership and claims by different population groups, identification and service provision in family allowance schemes, managing tax collection and benefits, educational services, care and protection of children, managing insurance, inheritance and property claims and benefits etc. Specifically, birth records are internationally recognized instruments in ensuring the proper implementation and safeguarding of various children's and women's human rights issues against abuse, exploitation and violence. Furthermore, birth records are information basis for many community based public health programmes, such as, post-natal care of mother and child, for vaccination and immunization, premature-baby care, assistant to disabled persons, etc.

In general, due to the absence of complete, continuous and sustainable civil registration systems in most African countries, the above very basic individual and aggregate information required to establish and maintain a modern and accountable public administration system could not be realized as required. These varied services and benefits are the basic requirements and incentives that would ensure government commitment and public participation and ownership of the systems.

3.6 Education, Advocacy and Incentive Mechanisms of Civil Registration Not Properly Articulated Based on African Realities

The improvement of civil registration and vital statistics systems in a country requires a reinforced participation of all concerned ministries, organizations and the general public: services acting on the recording of events (Ministry of Home Affairs or Justice or planning), on recording and compilation of deaths and causes of death (Ministry of Health), compilation and dissemination of vital statistics (NSOs), local governments, training and research institutions and the general public (reporting the events) and international, regional and civil society organizations (advocacy, support and partnership). However, in much of Africa, there has not been systematic and intensive studies conducted in revealing the roles and responsibilities of the different actors and how and when the products of the registration system benefit or affect the interests or activities of individuals and government departments. The judicial and administrative purposes and services of civil registration have not been properly used to demonstrate the advantages they would bring in managing and maintaining effectiveness and efficiency in various development endeavours. The difference between the availability or lack of civil registration records and vital statistics information have not been used as demonstrations in revealing the realities facing Africa.

It is a well acknowledged fact that in most African countries the majority of the population resides in a rural setting where public structure and services are remotely accessed. The predominantly practiced traditional public transactions and social norms still dominate the public administration currently descending to the rural communities of Africa. Nevertheless, current power devolution, decentralization and democratization processes going on in Africa are paving the way for participatory leadership and real exercise of modern public administration systems. Civil registration as presented above is the instrument that would facilitate and speedup these holistic social service programmes and reform processes.

Most of the well acknowledged legal and administrative benefits referred to as incentives for registering an event in the literature seem to be irrelevant to the majority of African rural population that did not have easy access to those benefits and services. There has not been serious attempt made to identify most relevant incentives that would fit to the current realities of Africa and that will help to rally the support and ownership of individuals and the public at large for improving civil registration systems. Civil registration education and advocacy guidelines have not been developed based on studies and researches that would reflect the interlinkages and interdependencies of registration records with the social and economic administrations, various service provisions and improving efficiency and effectiveness of service rendering departments and the public administration at large.

3.7 Lack of Current and Reliable Population Estimates and Projections

Vital statistics are an essential input for the planning of human resource and development of a country. Knowledge of the size and characteristics of a country's population on a timely basis is a prerequisite to socio-economic planning. Because a population increases by the addition of live births and decreases by the subtraction of deaths, information about the number of live births and deaths occurring in a population is crucial for estimating the natural increase (or decrease) and the annual change in population size and structure for that population⁴. Those African countries that have managed to conduct censuses decennially could not generally proceed to give current and dependable annual population estimates and projections during the inter-censal period for the nation as well as for lower administrative levels, due to lack of routine vital statistics and migration data. This explains, among other things, the limited use of the census data. On the other hand, those African countries that could not afford to conduct decennial censuses did not have other alternatives that would generate at least interim population estimates and basic demographic indicators for lower administrative units as they have not had routine vital statistics data. Consequently, NSSs of many African countries are being challenged by the high demand for current and routine population and health information that governments require for preparing annual development plans, implementation and monitoring of social services and public administration programmes for the whole country and lower administrative divisions.

Population and housing censuses are good data sources in generating a snapshot picture and profile of a country's population. They are best sources in providing enumerated population estimates disaggregated by various demographic and social variables for the census year. In order to ensure the timely provision of population estimates during inter-censal periods, the availability of vital statistics information that enables to calibrate the census static data is of paramount importance. However, the practice in most African countries could not evidently demonstrate the cost effectiveness of census; primarily the enumeration result could only be available after 2-3 years of the enumeration date, current population estimates could not be calculated and due to lack of routine vital rates projections would outdate in few years of the census date. In addition, it would be very difficult and sometimes impossible to generate plausible projections for lower level administrations in the absence of reliable, at least fertility and mortality estimates. This is a huge challenge for countries moving towards decentralized systems that require current and reliable annual population estimates and projections for planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of various development interventions at the local government administrations.

4 UN, Principles and recommendations for a Vital Statistics System

3.8 Lack of Reliable Vital Statistics Is Affecting the Health Information System of African Countries

Some of the primary beneficiaries from an adequate system of vital statistics are the population or demographic and health sectors. Vital statistics play a critical role and contribute to meet basic data and information requirements of a country's health information system. Birth and death records beyond serving as guiding tools in health service provision at community and household levels, are the statistical basis used in aggregating major national, regional and global health indicators, such as, infant and under-five mortality rates, maternal mortality ratios, etc. Information on death, classified by various characteristics of the deceased, especially age and sex, is necessary for calculating life-tables and estimating the probabilities of dying at various ages.

Vital statistics derived from civil registration are the only national source of information on mortality by causes of death. Such information is invaluable for the assessment and monitoring of the health status of a population and for the planning of adequate health interventions. The timely recording of deaths by cause can provide early insights into trends in disease prevalence, thus helping to design prevention or intervention strategies. Although alternative sources of information have been developed for the measurement of fertility and the analysis of its determinants, there is, to date, no adequate substitute for civil registration data for the direct measurement of adult mortality and the analysis of causes of death and their relationship with the characteristics of those who die⁵.

Again, vital statistics generated from civil registration data are the only source providing the basis for a variety of epidemiological studies, including the estimation of risks of premature death by sex and age, the estimation of relative risks of death among different subpopulations and the analysis of trends in the risk of dying because of particular causes⁶. Africa is lagging far behind in collecting and compiling causes of death information, which manifests the very poor condition of its health information system that left a big vacuum with no reliable checkpoints in designing, implementation and monitoring of the biggest human development intervention currently undergoing in all African countries. Again, Africa as a region needs fresh thinking and serious commitments in addressing the challenges facing the health information system due to the absence of complete, reliable and continuous vital statistics system.

5,6 UN: Principles and Recommendations for a Vital Statistics System, 2001.

3.9 Most MDG Indicators in African Lack Appropriate Data Inputs

MDGs are developed to manifest country, regional or global level situations whereby most of the measurements are selected to be used following standard methods keeping their flexibility in adapting them to specific country situations. Accordingly, most countries are taking them as national measurement standards in their national development plans and programmes. However, most developing countries are being challenged by the lack of appropriate data inputs in tracking progress and monitoring trends in a current and consistent manner. One of the primary causes or sources related to this challenge in the African context, emanate from the limited existence of appropriate and conventional demographic and health data collection methods. This situation can be demonstrated by taking some of the key MDG indicators and their data sources as an example here.

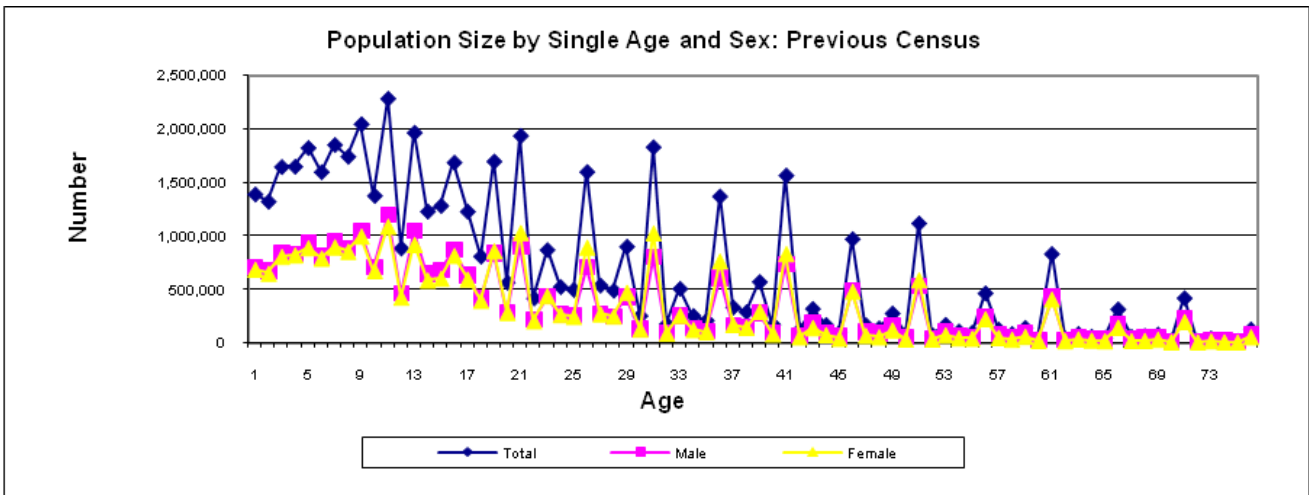
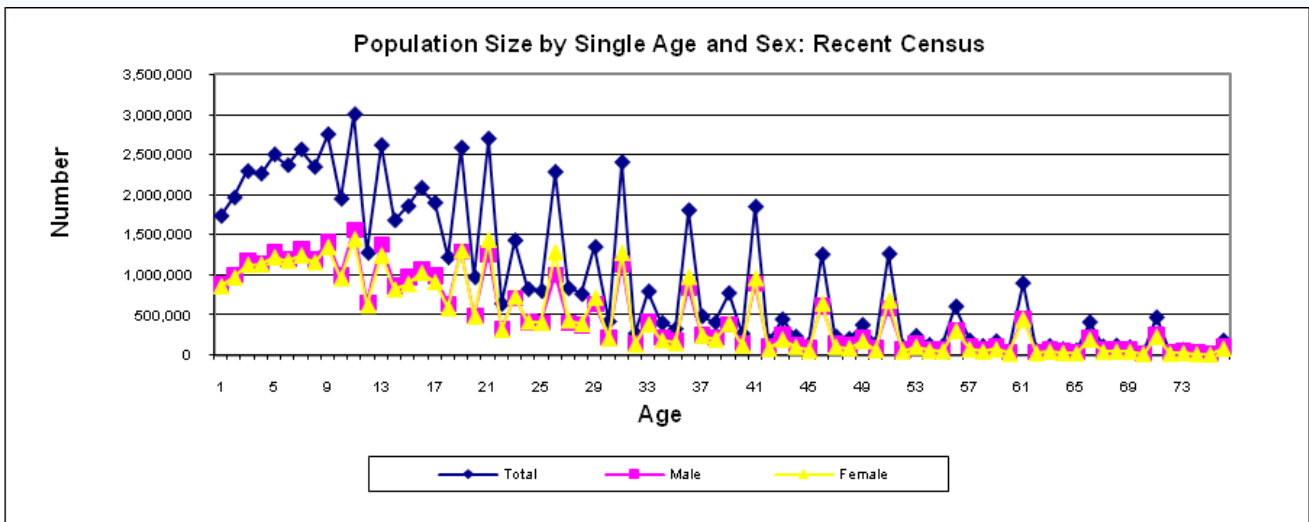
For instance, for a country to have a plausible and more accurate data for infant mortality rate, one of the key indicators for MDG4, two data items from the same data source are required for the numerator and denominator for a meaningful derivation of the figure. Conventionally the numerator, number of babies under age one who died in the past year should come from recorded deaths from the civil registration system and the denominator also requires total number of births for the same year, which in the same way could only be obtained correctly and routinely from civil registration records. In order for countries to track such sensitive demographic and health indicator in a manner that would effectively monitor progress, they would need annual based time series data for the nation and disaggregated at least by major sub-national divisions. However, due to the absence of complete civil registration systems, African countries are unable to properly and routinely track this very basic development indicator that is essential in the set of MDGs. The same goes with under-five mortality rate, maternal mortality ratio, causes of death associated to malaria, tuberculosis, HIV, etc. that totally depend for their numerators and denominators on good vital statistics systems. Most of the other MDG indicators (except MDG8) are also dependant on vital statistics data from civil registration for their denominator to base on updated and most plausible current population estimates.

Current attempts and practices in generating most MDG indicators in Africa at country and regional levels is facing serious challenges due to problems of quality, coverage and timeliness of data. In relation to the MDGs, African countries seem to be faced with two options to choose: either to continue with all the problems currently prevailing or to follow the 1900s Americans and Canadians route where to commit their resources in emanating their countries once and for all from such vicious circle that remained for over 40 years in the region.

3.10 Absence of Reliable Vital Statistics Is Affecting Statistical Systems in Africa

Vital statistics through the production of population dynamics information would enable to routinely update population size and distribution estimates that are the basis in drawing samples and renewing sampling frame databases that are used in all types of household survey undertakings of a country. In the absence of current population estimates, the robustness and accuracy of sampling frames would be jeopardised. In most African countries, population census enumeration figures are not updated routinely and consistently due to the absence of reliable vital statistics derived from civil registration systems. In NSOs, sampling exercises are usually left for samplers, where consequences of such problems and searching improvement mechanisms seem overlooked and hidden in NSSs development and assessments. On top of problems encountered in preparing and updating sampling frames, absence of reliable vital statistics have huge implications in overloading census and survey questionnaires as NSOs are obliged to include additional fertility and mortality questions.

On the other hand, in Africa, improvements in quality and coverage of some critical demographic variables collected in censuses and surveys could not be improved due to the absence of adequate civil registration systems. In this regard, the age variable or data is a good example in revealing the depth and seriousness of the effect of inadequacies of civil registration in the statistical data collection systems. The effects and defects of age reporting in census and survey data collection and compilation operations have severe consequences in the application of the information in the planning, implementation and monitoring of policies, programmes and strategies. Specifically, education and health indicators, service and intervention programmes are usually challenged in using census data which in most cases is highly affected by age heaping or misreporting problems. For demonstration purpose graphs showing single age distribution of two consecutive census results of an African country is revealed below.



In addition to age, household composition, infant, adult and old age personal characteristics inquiries in censuses and household surveys are highly affected by memory lapse and related problems due to the absence of appropriately documented personal data, which makes the data collection and processing operation very difficult and cumbersome, resulting to rely on data not verified by either the respondent or the collecting agency.

Moreover, one of the other purposes of vital statistics in the statistics systems lies in its service in assessing and evaluating the coverage and quality of census and survey undertakings. Countries without adequate civil registration systems, generally rely on mathematical methods or post-enumeration survey results that usually did not bring evidences that would enable the NSO to confidently defend and convince on various issues and concerns raised by census commission officials and various stakeholders. It is evident enough that as the public and the government becomes more informed and familiar with census and survey data and information, such quality and coverage queries would reach a level where NSOs could not defend the professional integrity of their institutions.

4. OPPORTUNITIES FOR IMPROVING CIVIL REGISTRATION AND VITAL STATISTICS SYSTEMS IN AFRICA

At the dawn of this 21st Century information age, data and information generation could benefit a lot from the ever-growing availability of information and communication technologies (ICT) in government systems. Government programmes targeted in decentralizing services and public administrations towards communities and individuals are bringing the technologies to the grassroots level without much effort from data and information generating institutions. Global and regional development organizations are aggressively pushing governments in adapting pro-poor development programs that would enable to benefit the most disadvantaged rural communities and the common urban dwellers of the developing world. Such global and national undertakings, for information generation schemes like civil registration will lend golden opportunities in sharing the resources available at lower administrations and community organizations. Nevertheless, most civil registration systems and NSOs in Africa will require them to re-orient and re-align the at-

titude and behaviour of their experts and re-visit their structural arrangements in grabbing these opportunities. Civil registration and national statistics offices in Africa need to view civil registration not standing in the past world but rather should mirror themselves in the current and future information technology world.

4.1 Booming Situations in the Application of Information Technology Solutions in Africa

The historical development of civil registration in the contemporary developed nations reveals that information transfer and data storage has been major challenges in achieving speedy progress and incurring high operation cost to the system. In addition, manual compilations and management of the huge registration data and presenting and disseminating vital statistics were among the major factors that dragged the progress of the systems for so many years in most European and North American countries. In the contemporary world, these challenges are left for history to document them, as the modern and fast moving computer technology and user friendly communication facilities have resolved them forever. In this information age, a single personal computer could be designed to store and manage the civil registration information flow of the total population of any nation in the world. A developing country with well designed network system can access any information in a country in a fraction of seconds with the support of varied optional communication technologies.

The opportunities created for civil registration from the parallel IT expansion programs going on in other sectors were well addressed by the Minister of Justice of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia in his opening statement in the June 2009 Tanzania civil registration and vital statistics workshop in as follows: "The government of Ethiopia gives more emphasis and priority to the application and adaptation of latest information and technology solutions ... The government already started implementing wereda/district-net program that will connect the over 700 districts in the country with IT that in the near future will scale up to cover and connect over 20 thousand kebele/local administrations. Such parallel technological advancements will lend its resources to civil registration operations at the local level that will highly reduce the cost of civil registration to the lowest level."

As presented above, IT has brought optional opportunities for African civil registration and vital statistics systems in alleviating major challenges hanging the progress of the systems in the past decades. It is up to the national registration and statistics offices to proactively mobilize their resources and engage with key partners in bringing change to their civil registration and vital statistics systems with the support of IT solutions available to them.

4.2 Decentralization and Democratization Processes

Most African countries are in the process of decentralization of basic services, infrastructural developments and public administration structures. This will bring a huge opportunity and advantage for civil registration and vital statistics systems, where their services were hanged in urban centres and district level administrations that are far away from the rural community. Civil registration structures should proactively follow these government trends and should refrain from creating parallel structures for civil registration rather should be able to integrate both human and physical resource with the public administration structures.

Birth, death, marriage and divorce records are the basic legal documents required in the day-to-day court proceedings of family and property civil and penal matters and in facilitating public administration services at the local administration levels. In the decentralization program, most civil status judicial cases will be managed in local courts where families would have access to utilize the vital records as testimonies of their cases. Similarly, the local administration will be mandated to issue identification services, managing family allowances and administering land and other property ownership and administration responsibilities, which requires legal vital event records produced from the civil registration system.

Decentralization devolves power to the local administration in managing basic social services, such as, health and education services. In such situations, the first requirement for the local administration is to know its current population size and distribution and accordingly devise a plan and then continue implementation and monitoring the progress on a continuous and permanent basis. These whole basic public administration engagements for the local administration would be a challenge without the concomitant availability of the stock and flow statistics. Therefore, civil registration administrations should be proactive enough to visualize every possible benefit and opportunities availed to them in the decentralization process in mainstreaming civil registration and vital statistics operations in national and sectoral development schemes.

Civil registration systems have primary roles in availing vital event records and their services to the general public and the administration as the proper implementation tools for most human rights provisions endorsed in national laws and international conventions that are highly dependent on the availability and safety of these legal records. Again, civil registration systems in Africa should cautiously follow the democratization progress and support governments in the provision of vital records to be utilized as per the UN principles and recommendations⁹ in ensuring and safeguarding the proper implementation of rights and privileges of citizens.

4.3 Regional and International Support and Commitment

The MDGs are the global and regional platforms as well as national forums in mobilizing support and commitment from development partners in support of improving civil registration and vital statistics systems in Africa. The UN and its commissions and agencies have been supporting and continue to support countries with incomplete and inadequate civil registration and weak vital statistics systems. Moreover, regional, multilateral and bilateral organizations, study and research institutions and developed countries are showing their commitments to support Africa in all its endeavours in improving the long over-due problems of civil registration and vital statistics systems. Africa should put itself in a position to benefit and properly and effectively utilize resources coming from these development partners. The ECA in close collaboration with the headquarters and regional partner organizations should be bold enough in taking the lead role in coordinating and managing the support and commitment in a systematic and sustainable manner that would ensure proper implementation of the programmes and strategies developed for improving the systems and achieving desired results.

4.4 Using National and Regional Training Institutions in Improving the Knowledge Base for Civil Registration and Vital Statistics Systems

Africa has lost much of the opportunities in the past in building the knowledge base for civil registration and vital statistics by using the available resources in already running national and regional training institutions. Civil registration is not taught in any of the universities as a separate or integral component of courses given at undergraduate or graduate levels. If one observes the huge global, regional and national implications it had and the knowledge resources available in the different UN handbooks (the 7 handbooks) prepared on civil registration and vital statistics systems, it is evidently clear that there should have been serious considerations in developing appropriate curricula for teaching the subject at training institutions and universities.

Civil registration system in the currently developed countries has already reached a level where it does not need such full-fledged trainings for civil registration or vital statistics personnel. However, developing countries including Africa require placing civil registration and vital statistics systems in the formal school system that would provide short and long-term trainings for students and practitioners in various government departments. Such trainings should be supported with IT solutions and innovative methods of improving the systems in various country settings.

4.5 Key Messages in Improving Civil Registration and Vital Statistics Systems in Africa

This technical note has emphasized on selected key issues about the importance of registering and collecting data on vital events and the challenges facing Africa in improving the systems and opportunities for improvement. From the above presentation, the key messages are summarized as follows:

- a. Civil registration—unlike all other information systems—can provide benefits to individuals and communities by producing evidences of civil status, parentage, identity, nationality and facilitate access to various human rights provisions;
- b. Vital statistics derived from civil registration systems are global public goods that governments and development partners need for generating comprehensive and detailed demographic and health data for the implementation and monitoring of national and sectoral interventions;
- c. Statistics on numbers and dynamics of births, deaths and medical causes of death are key components of demographic data and crucial for good public-health decision making; and civil registration is the conventional and most effective and efficient method of generating these vital statistics;
- d. From a public-health perspective, there are interim solutions that yield data relevant to policy-making, for example on infant and child mortality; however, these are no substitute for statistics derived from functioning civil registration systems that are continuous and comprehensive;
- e. Current developments and expansions of applications of IT solutions in sectoral and national development endeavours of countries is a huge opportunity for civil registration and vital statistics improvement and efficiency;
- f. Current decentralization and democratization processes going on in Africa are opening incentives and opportunities for accessing civil registration services for the public residing in the predominantly rural and remote settings of Africa;
- g. Population census are too scarcely organised and household surveys that are generally conducted on ad-hoc basis do not allow consistent monitoring of demographic and health trends; only the civil registration and vital statistics allow comparable estimates in time and thus enable realistic evaluation of public policies;
- h. The complete registration of births and deaths with accurate ascertainment of cause of death—products of a fully functional civil registration system, is an essential component of any health information system;
- i. Contemporary Africa needs more qualified, disaggregated and time series demographic and health statistics for monitoring policies and programmes, including MDGs, that could only be ensured with the availability of routine and reliable vital statistics;
- j. Systematic evaluation studies and comprehen-

sive assessments of the state of civil registration systems in various countries and regions have to be implemented consistently;

- k. International agencies should maintain their support for coordinated data collection and sharing activities and for specialised training, while increasing efforts to achieve a fully functional civil registration system;
- l. In the interim, more intensive and better funded research programmes are needed to improve and refine the methods of analysis for converting incomplete or indirect information about mortality and causes of death into valid measures of population and health for policy making and planning.

The achievement of comprehensive civil registration systems will certainly require consistent government commitment and investment, primarily in human capital, which require well designed medium and long-term programs. There are also immediate actions that need to be taken in strengthening capacity in birth and death registration and cause-of-death certification, thus ensuring long-term sustainability. In conclusion, this implies among others, strong political commitment, supportive legal framework, allocation of roles and responsibilities among stakeholders, mobilisation of human and financial resources, and, most critically, ensuring public trust. Accordingly, African countries need to note of the importance and implication of the above issues and concerns in their endeavour in improving civil registration and vital statistics systems.

5. A MEDIUM AND LONG-TERM PROGRAM TO BE CONCEIVED AND REGIONAL NETWORK BE STRENGTHENED

Following the regional workshop, a regional network has been established, workshop materials have been uploaded on the ECA knowledge management portal, key workshop recommendations⁸ have been finalized and distributed to all African countries and to development partners, and a comprehensive report of the workshop is under preparation. In addition, country action plans developed during the workshop will be finalized by countries in close collaboration with workshop sponsors, and a medium-term regional programme will be developed by the ECA and the African Development Bank (AfDB) in close collaboration with partners.

Committed towards implementing the recommendations of the Tanzania Regional Workshop on Civil Registration and Vital Statistics Systems in Africa, African Centre for Statistics (ACS) will work on immediate and long-term programs that would bring sustainable improvement and progress towards universal civil registration and vital statistics systems in Africa. ACS will continue serving as a regional platform in managing and facilitating the regional civil registration and vital statistics network and liaison and coordinate international and regional support in implementing the

recommendations of the regional workshop. ACS in partnership with the United Nations Statistics Division (UNSD) and other regional and international organizations would advocate and produce supplementary guidelines and tools on civil registration and vital statistics systems for African countries, including proper IT software.

This year's ASD aims to take civil registration and vital statistics systems as one important pillar in the strategy to change the statistical landscape in Africa in order to meet the statistical challenges of the 21st century including data for informing national development policies and programs as well as the MDGs. It is time for action and, in this connection, it is hoped that the future African Civil Registration and Vital Statistics Network (AfCRVSN) will provide a regional platform for policy dialogue, exchange of views, ideas and best practices on this important subject in Africa. The continued costs of ignorance borne by countries without firmly founded vital statistics far outweigh the affordable necessity of action. Everyone counts and the international community should set a future date for ensuring that everyone is counted.

The UN Economic Commission for Africa wishes you success in all the activities you will undertake in the celebration of African Statistics Day.

8 See Annex

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ANNEX

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

of the

Regional Workshop on Civil Registration and Vital Statistics Systems in Africa

Dar es Salaam, Tanzania
29 June – 3 July 2009

PREAMBLE

A Regional Workshop on Civil Registration and Vital Statistics Systems in Africa, was held in Dar es Salaam, United Republic of Tanzania from 29 June – 3 July 2009. The workshop was organized jointly by the UNECA - African Centre for Statistics (ACS), UN Statistics Division (UNSD), African Development Bank (AfDB) and InWent of Germany and jointly hosted by the National Bureau of Statistics and the Registration, Insolvency and Trusteeship Agency (RITA) of the United Republic of Tanzania. The workshop was initiated by the ACS and the UNSD to address what has been called a Scandal of Invisibility because **“many people in Africa and Asia are born and die without leaving a trace in any legal record or official statistics. Absence of reliable data for births, deaths and causes of death are at the root of this scandal of invisibility, which renders most of the world’s poor as unseen, unaccountable and hence uncoun- ted”** – a scandal with serious implications for vital statistics, human and constitutional rights, property rights, policy and national development as well as MDG monitoring.

The regional workshop was attended by 140 participants drawn from national civil registration offices and National Statistics Offices (NSOs) of 40 countries and 5 regional training institutions, the UN Statistics Division, the African Development Bank, the World Bank, HMN/WHO and other development partners resident in Tanzania (the full list of countries and institutions represented at the workshop is attached). Among the participants were a number of Heads of NSOs and the Minister of Justice of Ethiopia.

The workshop noted that a fully functioning civil registration system is the source of legal identity and related information for the individual, the community and the government in claiming and safeguarding rights and privileges enshrined in national laws and international conventions and covenants. Civil registration is an instrument in facilitating health, education and other social services to individuals, families and communities. Civil registration is also the conventional and most appropriate source of vital statistics. Vital statistics are crucial and irreplaceable component of national statistical systems as they generate numerical profile of the most precious resource of any country – its human capital. Managing human capital appropriately, in turn, is an indisputable and most visible indicator of good governance or the lack of it.

The workshop noted, with utmost concern, the fact that in the majority of countries in Africa, and in almost all the countries in sub-Saharan Africa, the civil registration system operates on a sporadic and incomplete basis. In those countries, there are no adequate systems that enables citizens be recognized by the state and hence the justice system and public administration services could not be improved in a manner that promotes development and security of citizens. Because of low coverage of civil registration systems in most African countries, some important vital rates such as life expectancy at birth, infant and child mortality rates could not be measured from vital statistics. Household surveys and censuses have been undertaken to fill the information gaps created by lack of effective vital registration systems. These are largely ad-hoc exercises and interim measures that should not be taken as long-term solutions for generating vital statistics.

Of the many components of both civil registration and vital statistics systems, only a handful of African countries can confidently claim to have well functioning systems. Whether it is the lack of adequate legal framework, low coverage of civil registration due to a number of circumstances, the non-existence of cooperation and coordination between civil registration and official statistics, low statistical capacity or simply lack of awareness of the need to develop both in a simultaneous manner, the outcome is disappointedly the absence of coherent, functioning and regular generation of accurate, reliable and timely vital statistics from the civil registration system.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

The workshop adopted the following recommendations:

ADVOCACY

- Dedicate the Theme for the 2009 African Statistics Day to civil registration and vital statistics systems;
- All African governments are called upon to take appropriate measures in availing the necessary resources and support to civil registration and vital statistics systems;
- Explore the possibility of organizing a high-level Ministerial Conference on Improving Civil Registration in as near-future as possible to maintain the momentum.

OPERATIONAL

- Civil Registration Offices and National Statistics Offices, development partners and regional training institutions are urged to actively participate in the regional Network on Civil Registration and Vital Statistics Systems in Africa;
- Countries are encouraged to use as opportunities sectoral reform programs, democratization and decentralization processes currently going on in Africa to bring civil registration services to their populations;

- All governments are strongly encouraged to revisit the topic of fees for issuing documents based on civil registration records – the Workshop reiterated that the United Nations recommend that the registration is always free of charge and that the fee for documents should be as low as possible;
 - The African Development Bank, being a regional development bank, is requested to continue its support for African countries and devise a special program that promotes speedy improvements for civil registration and vital statistics systems in Africa;
 - Regional training institutions are urged to take the initiative in developing appropriate curriculum for improving civil registration and vital statistics systems in Africa and to actively participate in evaluation studies and research undertakings and also in strengthening the aforementioned Network;
 - Countries need to proactively interact with each other to share knowledge, experience and resources using various mechanisms, such as, study tours, workshops, technical support, ...;
 - Organize biennially the regional workshop on civil registration and vital statistics systems;
 - African Centre for Statistics to continue leading and serving as regional platform for civil registration and vital statistics systems and in leveraging resources, technical support and coordination among countries in Africa;
 - UN Statistics Division to continue its support and, in close collaboration with regional institutions in Africa and other partners, devise a special programme for Africa in general and fragile states in particular;
 - African Centre for Statistics and the African Development Bank in collaboration with other development partners to develop a medium-term programme for the improvement of civil registration and vital statistics systems in Africa;
 - Countries to finalize their country action plans (drafted at the workshop) and submit them to African Centre for Statistics.
- vital statistics systems;
 - Countries are encouraged to use conventional methods in evaluating their civil registration and vital statistics systems and to take measures in ensuring proper utilization and documentation of their data and information;
 - Countries are encouraged to use UN guidelines and recommendations as a basis for their civil registration and vital statistics improvement programme;

PARTNERSHIP

- African Centre for Statistics and UN Statistics Division need to strengthen institutional linkages in facilitating integration, harmonization and coordination of efforts currently going on by various organizations at country and regional levels in order to promote cost-effective mechanisms and avoid duplication of efforts;
- Donors, UN agencies, consortiums, education and training centres, NGOs and other development partners are urged to support Africa in the area of capacity building, such as, provision of training, public education, IT development, data capturing, coding, processing and analysis and provision of other capacity building materials and financial support.
- Countries are urged to mainstream civil registration and vital statistics systems in their national statistical development programmes;

FOLLOW-UP

A full workshop report is under preparation. In addition, a compendium of civil registration and vital statistics systems in Africa will be prepared as part of the post-workshop activities. The compendium will comprise the status of country civil registration and vital statistics systems together with an action plan for the improvement of the systems. It will be used in the preparation of the medium-term regional programme for the improvement of civil registration and vital statistics systems in Africa.

TECHNICAL

- Countries are advised and encouraged to revisit and update their civil registration laws and statistical legislations in-line with current developments and take measures that ensure their proper implementation;
- Countries need to identify underlying reasons for the low level of civil registration in the rural areas and design strategies to overcome this low coverage, including the introduction of mobile registration units in nomadic and hard to reach areas;
- It is indispensable to ensure that both civil registrars and statisticians are fully cross-trained in basic concepts, definitions and procedures in both areas;
- Civil registration offices and NSOs are urged to collaborate and interface, and the NSOs are urged to play an active role in setting national standards and methods for civil registration and