



**Conference of African Ministers
Responsible for Civil Registration**
Sixth session
Expert segment

Addis Ababa, 24–28 October 2022

Item 3 of the provisional agenda for the expert segment**

**Panel discussion: Ten years after the establishment
of the Africa Programme on Accelerated Improvement
of Civil Registration and Vital Statistics Systems and
eight years to 2030 – Are we on track to realizing our civil registration
and vital statistics commitments?**

Concept note

A decade into the Africa Programme on Accelerated Improvement of Civil Registration and Vital Statistics Systems: reflecting on progress and accelerating efforts towards 2030 through transformed systems

I. Background to the Conference of African Ministers Responsible for Civil Registration

1. The year 2022 marks 12 years since the high-level policy gathering on civil registration and vital statistics was first convened in Africa. The first session of the Conference of African Ministers Responsible for Civil Registration, which was held in Addis Ababa in 2010, led to the establishment of the Africa Programme on Accelerated Improvement of Civil Registration and Vital Statistics Systems, a continental framework designed to provide coordinated and integrated support to African countries in strengthening their civil registration and vital statistics systems. This initiative emerged out of a critical need to address what was referred to

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by authors of the *Who counts?* series in *The Lancet* as the “scandal of invisibility”.¹ The authors described it as a phenomenon in which the identities of a majority of individuals lacked legal recognition by governments because their key vital events were not recorded. As a result, there was an absence of reliable data and statistics on births, deaths and causes of death, which were needed for numerous purposes, such as to guide health policy and planning.

2. The first session of the Conference of African Ministers Responsible for Civil Registration convened to address some of the fundamental bottlenecks that were constraining the development of civil registration and vital statistics systems in Africa, including: a lack of political will and support for the civil registration and vital statistics systems agenda; low awareness of the importance of these systems among individuals and governments; a lack of technical know-how at the national level and a lack of leadership at the regional level, including the absence of a systematic regional framework and resources through which countries would receive technical and other forms of support to reinvigorate their systems. During the first session, African ministers initiated a myriad of development efforts to further the civil registration and vital statistics agenda on the continent, including the institutionalization of the Conference of African Ministers Responsible for Civil Registration, which would meet every two years.

3. At its second session, which was held in Durban, South Africa, in September 2012, the Conference launched the regional civil registration and vital statistics system framework known as the Africa Programme on Accelerated Improvement of Civil Registration and Vital Statistics Systems and, as an initial step, urged all countries to undertake a comprehensive assessment of their system and to develop a national strategic action plan that would guide systematic progress.

4. At its third session, held in Yamoussoukro, Cote d’Ivoire, in February 2015, the Conference addressed the various technical aspects of the development of civil registration and vital statistics systems, such as the use of information and communications technology, the collection of information on causes of death, and interoperability between civil registration and identity management systems.

5. Following the third session, the Assembly of Heads of State and Government of the African Union, at its twenty-ninth ordinary session, held in Kigali, Rwanda, in July 2016, declared the period 2017-2026 as the “decade for repositioning civil registration and vital statistics in Africa’s continental, regional and national development agenda”. This culminated in the development of the costed strategic plan of the Africa Programme for the period 2017-2021 to serve as a guiding framework for the improvement of civil registration and vital statistics systems during the first half of the decade.

6. The fourth session was held in Nouakchott, Mauritania, in December 2017. African ministers made several recommendations in the Nouakchott Declaration, including on the need to ensure that the strategic plan of the Africa Programme 2017-2021 was implemented, with appropriate support from States members of the African Union and development partners; the need to establish a subcommittee responsible for civil registration and vital statistics systems under the relevant specialized technical committee of the African Union ; the need to improve

¹ For further details, see Philip W. Setel and others, “A scandal of invisibility: making everyone count by counting everyone”, *The Lancet, Who counts?* Vol. 370, No. 9598 (October), pp. 1569-1577.

the technical capacity of staff working for the secretariat of the Africa Programme; and the need to improve the civil registration coverage of internally displaced persons and refugees.

7. The fifth session was held in Lusaka, Zambia, in October 2019. The theme “Innovative civil registration and vital statistics systems: foundation for legal identity management” provided strategic and policy guidance on pathways towards establishing holistic, innovative and integrated systems for civil registration and vital statistics and for digital identity management to close the identity gap in Africa and thus contribute to the implementation of Agenda 2063: The Africa We Want, of the African Union and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, in particular target 16.9 of the Sustainable Development Goals.

8. The sixth session is scheduled to be held in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, in October 2022. The African ministers who will attend will be faced with the critical question of whether the ambitions and dreams that were born in Addis Ababa in 2010 (and at sessions held every second year since then) have been realized. They will also have to determine whether the regional initiative is still on course. If it is not, they will need to reflect on the critical challenges that constrain progress and identify effective strategies for the future, including taking note of the challenges brought about by the ongoing coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic.

II. Sixth session of the Conference of African Ministers Responsible for Civil Registration

9. The past two years have been devastating, with many lives lost in all parts of the world as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Even more people are still at a continued risk of exposure to the disease. The pandemic has disrupted and overstretched economies and critical national resources and infrastructure, especially in the health sector. There has also been a resounding impact on the psychological, economic and social well-being of individuals (including children) and a projected rise in the levels of poverty and health vulnerabilities, especially among the world’s poorest populations. In Africa, the impact of the pandemic has been unprecedented and the search for effective strategies to contain it continues to be the most widely discussed and debated topic at all levels.

10. From a statistical perspective, perhaps more than at any other time in recent history, the ongoing pandemic has provided an important opportunity for governments, the international community and the general public to appreciate the importance of having robust national statistical systems to support critical governance functions, such as providing factual information about the scale of a disease in different regions of the world, and the importance of being able to quickly identify regions and population groups that need specialized interventions. Over the past year or so, developed and developing countries alike have been required to publish regular, up-to-date, accurate reports of their mortality and morbidity incidence and prevalence rates for COVID-19. These rates have been used to facilitate international comparisons of the disease burden and to determine global policy relating to the pandemic.

11. In the prevailing context, in which the coordination of national surveys and census-type activities (especially those requiring face-to-face interactions) is limited or impossible, administrative data² have been the main source of the information needed by governments to

² “Administrative data” refers to data that are collected as part of regular activities that occur during programme implementation.

manage the pandemic across various sectors. As the most pivotal sources of data on mortality and causes of death, civil registration and vital statistics systems and health information systems have constituted a critical infrastructure for governments during this time. Countries in which both types of systems function well have benefited from their true value, as they have supported accurate, almost real-time analysis of mortality and morbidity information. Identity documents issued through civil registration and vital statistics systems have also been used to support vaccine administration efforts in some countries.

12. Although statistics systems have been demonstrably crucial during this time, the maintenance of the systems has been considerably affected by the pandemic. In some countries, especially at the onset of the pandemic following the mitigation measures that governments imposed to stop the spread of the disease, civil registration services were declared non-essential and civil registration offices were therefore closed, which halted their crucial role in maintaining records of important vital events (especially births and deaths). Unless these closures are addressed urgently, their impact will be felt in the long term, as such countries will have notable gaps in their records, thus affecting the quality of their vital statistics. Most countries have faced substantial disruption in the implementation of improvement strategies and plans for their systems. This disruption poses a real risk to the progress that countries have made in the recent past.

13. As leaders, including at the highest levels of government, intensify their efforts to identify effective strategies to manage the pandemic, this is an opportune time for stakeholders in the national civil registration and vital statistics systems and the community at large to advocate the importance of such systems and the need for increased investment, and to highlight the costs of not investing. It is also a crucial time to demonstrate how useful these systems are in meeting the needs of government, especially through making civil registration data available to be used as required. Furthermore, it is important to be conscious of the disruption that the pandemic has caused to the development of these systems and the problems it has created in sustaining the progress that had been achieved in the recent past. In this context, it is an important time for African countries to identify strategic approaches to mitigate further failures.

III. Theme of the sixth session: key areas of discussion and emerging topics

14. The sixth session of the Conference of African Ministers Responsible for Civil Registration will be held under the theme “A decade into the Africa Programme on Accelerated Improvement of Civil Registration and Vital Statistics Systems: reflecting on progress and accelerating efforts towards 2030 through transformed systems”. The African ministers are expected to reflect on the progress that has been made in the development of civil registration and vital statistics systems over the past 10 years, especially in celebration of the decade since the birth of the Africa Programme and the regional policy forum provided through the biennial ministerial gatherings. In addition, they are expected to deliberate on new and emerging developments, along with related challenges (including the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic), and to make recommendations on how these developments should be addressed by countries and partners. Ultimately, the session will provide an opportunity for the African ministers to develop policy directions for the next phase of implementation of the strategic plan of the Africa Programme. Background on some of the key themes to be discussed during the Conference is provided below.

A. Decade of progress: reflecting on the achievements made and areas of improvement in the Africa Programme on Accelerated Improvement of Civil Registration and Vital Statistics Systems initiative

15. In the past 10 years, there have been numerous initiatives at the national and regional levels to accelerate progress in the improvement of civil registration and vital statistics systems in Africa. At the regional level, the Africa Programme secretariat and the regional civil registration and vital statistics core group have continually provided technical assistance and guidance to African countries and have supported them in their efforts to implement various national projects. The key activities undertaken by the secretariat and the regional core group include the development and dissemination of various guidelines and technical resources on civil registration and vital statistics systems, the provision of technical assistance to African countries on specific national projects, and the provision of training to build the capacity of national systems staff. Some development partners of the regional core group have also provided direct financial assistance (complementing national resources) to support African countries in implementing national projects.

16. Considerable progress has also been made at the national level. As of September 2020, some 42 African countries had conducted comprehensive assessments of their systems, with 32 having completed the development of their national strategic action plans. This marks a significant milestone in the development of civil registration and vital statistics systems and the findings of the assessments will provide the foundation for identifying strategic approaches to strengthening the systems. The production of civil registration-based vital statistics has also been considerably improved. A survey conducted by the Economic Commission for Africa in August 2019 showed that 68 per cent of the 40 countries that responded to the survey had compiled vital statistics on births and deaths based on civil registration data and 38 per cent of the respondents produced regular vital statistics reports. The results of the survey, which also addressed the digitalization status of the civil registration and vital statistics systems, showed that approximately 50 per cent of the countries that responded to the survey had a fully or partially computerized registration system and 12 countries had a fully digitalized system. Only 28 per cent of the respondent countries were able to capture death records electronically.

17. Important national projects that were ongoing were focused on the improvement of stakeholder coordination; the decentralization of civil registration services; the improvement of national registration forms and guidelines; community public education and advocacy; and digitalization, including better interoperability with the national health system and other national systems.

18. With regard to quantitative measures of progress, the levels of coverage and completeness of vital events registration are important indicators of the level of development of national civil registration and vital statistics systems. Universal coverage means that all vital events occurring in every geographical area and in every population group of the country have been registered; complete registration means that all vital events that have occurred among the members of the population of a particular country (or area) within a specified time period have been registered in the system. According to data published by the Statistics Division in 2021, only a few African countries had achieved more than 90 per cent registration completeness for births, with most countries falling below 50 per cent. Regarding completeness in the registration of deaths, it was notable that the majority of countries had not provided any data to enable an accurate assessment of the indicator.

19. As countries advance in their efforts to develop national civil registration and vital statistics systems, it is important that adequate measures be put in place to monitor progress in the levels of coverage and completeness of vital events registration, including at the subnational level. Countries are encouraged to put in place national mechanisms to facilitate such monitoring and to make the data available for international reporting. Such measures are not only useful in determining the progress made under the Africa Programme initiative, but are also crucial in enabling the monitoring of the progress made towards achieving target 16.9 of the Sustainable Development Goals, to “provide legal identity for all, including birth registration”, and indicator 17.19.2, which measures the “proportion of countries that (a) have conducted at least one population and housing census in the last 10 years; and (b) have achieved 100 per cent birth registration and 80 per cent death registration”.

B. Impact of the coronavirus disease pandemic on civil registration and vital statistics systems: reflections on key lessons learned and recommended strategies for progress

20. As discussed in previous sections, the COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated the crucial role that civil registration and vital statistics systems play in providing a holistic source of mortality data (data on deaths occurring within and outside health facilities), which governments and multilateral organizations have needed as they have crafted public health policies in response to the pandemic. At the same time, the pandemic has devastated these systems, with vital statistics offices having closed in some countries. There are several lessons that the civil registration and vital statistics systems community can learn from these recent experiences and consider in their future implementation efforts. These lessons include the following:

(a) Disaster planning and business continuity plans are crucial in helping practitioners in civil registration and vital statistics systems to build resilient systems, that is to say, systems that can anticipate shocks and that have sufficient resources to continue to operate despite such shocks;

(b) Related to disaster planning is the importance of digitalizing registration systems and ensuring that they can operate outside a physical office, as required, such as during a national disaster. It is notable that several countries that had fully digital systems were able to continue civil registration operations, even though offices were closed and movement was restricted, as digital systems enable registration applications to be conducted and processed electronically;

(c) It is important to strengthen stakeholder collaboration. Intersectoral coordination, especially with health ministries and local government offices, is crucial. When governments closed most of their offices, health ministries continued to function, and they are likely to remain functional during most disasters. Establishing a strong collaborative arrangement between the offices of civil registration and vital statistics systems on the one hand and the health ministry on the other is imperative for complete registration to be achieved. Similarly, local government offices can support crucial efforts to report events that occur outside health facilities.

IV. Objectives of the sixth session

21. The following objectives have been set for the sixth session of the Conference:

(a) Review progress in the development of civil registration and vital statistics systems over the past 10 years. The session will provide an opportunity for participants to reflect on key achievements and challenges and on strategies for accelerating progress in the coming eight-year period leading up to the deadline for implementing the 2030 Agenda;

(b) Share knowledge and experience on best practices and innovations in the development of civil registration and vital statistics systems, including experience relating to the impact that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on these systems and key lessons learned on how to strengthen their resilience;

(c) Recommend policy directives on priority measures and strategies to accelerate the improvement of civil registration and vital statistics systems, with the new regional strategy and plan taken into account.

V. Organizers

22. The sixth session of the Conference is being organized by the African Union Commission in collaboration with the Economic Commission for Africa and the African Development Bank, with support from the following development partners of the regional civil registration and vital statistics core group: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention of the United States of America, Global Partnership for Sustainable Development Data, International Organization for Migration, International Organization of la Francophonie, Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, United Nations Children's Fund, United Nations Development Programme, United Nations Population Fund, World Bank, World Health Organization and Vital Strategies.

VI. Participants

23. The session will bring together ministers responsible for civil registration, ministers responsible for health, directors of civil registration offices, directors of national statistical offices, civil registration and vital statistics experts from Member States in Africa, development partners (specialized agencies of the United Nations system and intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations), academics, practitioners, eminent policy and opinion leaders, representatives of civil society organizations and the private sector, and other stakeholders.

24. In accordance with COVID-19 protocols, attendance will be limited to a maximum of three experts per country. This allows each country to be represented by the director of civil registration, the director of the national statistical office and the relevant director of the health ministry or the national identification authority. All African ministers responsible for civil registration and for health are expected to attend the ministerial segment, to be held on 27 and 28 October 2022.

VII. Format and programme of work

25. The session will be conducted in two distinct segments: the experts segment and the ministerial segment. Discussions during the session will be held in the form of plenary meetings, panel discussions and parallel breakout meetings. The experts segment will be conducted on days one, two and the morning of day three. A briefing of ministers by country experts will be conducted on the afternoon of day three. The ministerial segment will be conducted on days four and five and will entail only plenary sessions.

VIII. Working languages

26. The working languages of the session will be Arabic, English, French and Portuguese. Interpretation services will be available. Meeting documents will be available in the four languages.

IX. Contact details

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