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**Statutory issues: Report on the evaluation of the Africa Programme on Accelerated Improvement of Civil Registration and Vital Statistics Systems (2010–2020)**

## **The role of national statistical offices in improving and generating vital statistics in Africa**

### **I. Introduction**

1. Complete and timely vital statistics are important for policymaking, programme formulation and monitoring of the Sustainable Development Goals. A comprehensive and sustainable civil registration and vital statistics system provides significant benefits for legal identity management and administrative, statistical and policy purposes.

2. The main source of vital statistics are civil registration registers, that is to say, population registers. Accordingly, the improvement of civil registration and vital statistics systems, which is recognized as one of the targets of the Sustainable Development Goals, has been an important endeavour over the past decade. As a crucial component of development planning, evidence-based policies, and monitoring progress in achieving the Goals, the generation of vital statistics from civil registration and vital statistics systems entails the continuing need to modernize such systems.

3. Coordination among various actors, including those working with national statistical systems, the adoption of technology and enhanced digitalization are some of the factors that

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enable modern civil registration systems and high-quality vital statistics. The overarching goal of those efforts is to guide national statistical offices in the production and dissemination of high-quality and timely vital statistics on the basis of data obtained from civil registration systems.

4. Vital statistics systems are not stand-alone systems; they are complementary to other statistical systems, the development of which can directly or indirectly contribute to vital statistics. Thus, coordination among stakeholders involved in national statistical systems and the placement of vital statistics in that regard are important. There are different approaches to organizing a vital statistics system, one of which is to organize it under the national statistical office.

## **II. Approaches to managing vital statistics**

5. The management of a civil registration and vital statistics system is a continuous undertaking. The system needs to be implemented and maintained in a permanently established organization and supported by an appropriately organized administrative structure and a well-established management system. Appropriate organizational, administrative, management and operational structures need to be set up to compile and process vital statistics data collected through civil registration systems.

### **A. Organization of vital statistics systems**

6. Civil registration and vital statistics systems are expected to have a nationwide organizational structure that, whether part of the civil registration organization or the national statistical office, reaches down to the lowest administrative levels. In addition, while most lower-level functionaries in the civil registration system would be involved in activities related to civil registration, the organization responsible for vital statistics needs statistical professionals. This is important regardless of how the management of vital statistics is structured.

7. Vital statistics systems can be centralized at the national level or decentralized and situated at the level of major subnational divisions, such as states, provinces or departments, or at lower administrative levels, such as districts. The arrangement depends on the country's judicial, political and administrative structures. It may also be influenced by other factors, such as the country's geographic and population size and the capacity of subnational administrations to collect and compile vital statistics from civil registration systems.

8. The following are additional factors that are important to consider when deciding on an organizational set-up for the compilation of vital statistics:

- (a) The ease in which records are transmitted from registration centres to the agency responsible for vital statistics;
- (b) The established points of interaction between civil registration and vital statistics agencies;
- (c) The involvement of staff of the organization responsible for vital statistics in efforts to improve data quality, starting with data collected from the registration of vital events.

## **B. Centralized systems for the management of vital statistics**

9. In a centralized system, a national agency is assigned the responsibility of compiling, directing, coordinating and monitoring the countrywide activities related to vital statistics. The local agencies responsible for the registration of vital events collect the vital-events data, compile them in a report and transmit the report, which contains data from each subnational level, to the national agency on a regular basis through established channels. The national agency then compiles, processes and publishes the vital statistics for the entire country and for each subnational level.

10. In a centralized system, the definitions, concepts, procedures and methodologies pertaining to the collection of vital events, whatever the source of the data, emanate from the national statistical office. A centralized system therefore facilitates efforts to standardize procedures, definitions of concepts, the development of instruction manuals and the collection, classification, compilation and dissemination of data.

## **C. Decentralized systems for the management of vital statistics**

11. In a decentralized system, vital statistics are compiled for each subnational level, and vital statistics for national purposes are compiled at the national level by combining vital statistics collected by the subnational statistical offices. Some countries with a federal or decentralized system of government adopt such a system. However, there should be an established agreement between the national and subnational administrations on the statistical standards, rules and regulations to be followed by the subnational governments, including regarding the maintenance of uniformity in the definitions, procedures and types of data to be registered.

12. The different organizational approaches for managing vital statistics systems have inherent advantages and disadvantages that need to be thoroughly evaluated before deciding on the approach to take. An advantage of a decentralized system is that it allows for the compilation and dissemination of data that is specifically relevant to a given subnational administrative region. A disadvantage is the possibility of inconsistent tabulation procedures and a lack of uniformity in concepts and definitions, unless strict rules and regulations are set up and supervision is conducted. A country with a centralized or decentralized system of government may adopt either a centralized or a decentralized vital statistics system. The choice will depend upon the country's political structure, the availability of resources and its geographic and population size.

## **D. Administration of vital statistics systems**

13. Administrative arrangement refers to the designation of responsibility for compiling, processing and disseminating vital statistics. As with a civil registration system, the organization of a vital statistics system is the responsibility of the national Government, which assigns responsibility for compiling, processing, disseminating and managing vital statistics to a specific government institution, as provided by law.

14. The administration of a vital statistics system can be organized in various ways. One approach is to delegate the responsibility for managing the system to the national statistical office, where it becomes part of the general statistical programme. Most African countries have such an administrative arrangement in place. It is essential that the vital statistics system be clearly defined and that the national statistical office has sufficient resources for its administration. Moreover, a national statistical act or other regulation must designate the organization responsible for the compilation of vital statistics from civil registration systems.

15. In most cases, it is a body at the national level that conducts such functions as cleaning, coding and processing of data, preparing tables and charts, conducting statistical and trend analyses, publishing reports and conducting related research. A national body then distributes that information to local government units. This approach ensures consistency in the data and information at the national level. Local agencies can then use such data for local programmes, planning and population-related activities.

16. Another approach is to place the administration of vital statistics within the organization responsible for civil registration. Kenya is one of the few African countries to have done so. An advantage of such an arrangement is that it shortens the process of transmitting records or information from local registration units to the office that compiles and disseminates the vital statistics. However, the organization responsible for civil registration needs to establish a statistical division that is fully capable of administering the vital statistics system.

17. Under another approach, it is the responsibility of various government ministries or agencies to carry out vital statistics functions related to their respective areas of work. In Rwanda, for example, the Ministry of Health collects and processes data on births and deaths occurring in health facilities, and the courts collect and process data on marriages and divorces. Placing the compilation of vital statistics under different institutions could bring the attention that is needed to the vital statistics relevant to each institution and increase their use. However, the disadvantage of this approach outweighs the advantages because the mechanism that ensures uniformity and consistency in the definitions, concepts and procedures concerning vital statistics would be weak, and the resulting lack of national and international comparability would lead to a decrease in the use of the statistics.

#### **E. Management of vital statistics by national statistical offices**

18. There are a number of reasons why national statistical offices need to produce vital statistics: (a) to monitor trends in key population indicators; (b) to assess the strengths of and the gaps in the civil registration and vital statistics systems; (c) to provide demographic and epidemiological measurements for planning purposes; and (d) to establish benchmarks for future reports.

19. Although vital statistics stem primarily from civil registration records, a number of national statistical offices in Africa have been generating vital statistics from other sources, mainly from household surveys and population censuses. As a result, the role that such offices can play in further improving and managing vital statistics is very significant. Moreover, given the mandate of national statistical offices and their role in coordinating the national statistical systems, they are well placed to enhance the quality, coverage and timeliness of vital statistics. While taking the lead in the compilation of vital statistics, national statistical offices should also establish a well-defined working relationship with civil registration agencies.

20. Designating the national statistical office as the institution responsible for the compilation of national vital statistics has a comparative advantage over assigning the responsibility to other government organizations. This is because national statistical offices are responsible for population and housing censuses and demographic and other socioeconomic surveys, and therefore have accumulated more experience than other institutions. With sufficient qualified personnel and an adequate budget allocation, the statistical office would easily be able to absorb the management of vital statistics and produce timely, reliable and high-quality statistics that contribute to informed decision-making by governments and allow for the monitoring of progress in relation to international development agendas, such as the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and Agenda 2063: The Africa We Want, of the African Union.

### III. Resources for vital statistics

21. The following resources are available to guide countries in the management of vital statistics:

(a) *Production of a Vital Statistics Report: Guide*, published by the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, the Economic Commission for Africa, Statistics Norway and Vital Strategies;

(b) Generic Statistical Business Process Model, version 5.1, published by the Economic Commission for Europe in January 2019;

(c) The regional guideline on the preparation of national operational manuals for vital statistics collected from civil registration systems of the Africa Programme on Accelerated Improvement of Civil Registration and Vital Statistics Systems.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Available at [https://archive.uneca.org/sites/default/files/uploaded-documents/Statistics/CRVS/improving\\_national\\_vital\\_statistics\\_systems\\_en.pdf](https://archive.uneca.org/sites/default/files/uploaded-documents/Statistics/CRVS/improving_national_vital_statistics_systems_en.pdf).