



APAI-CRVS
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**Decade for Repositioning
of Civil Registration and
Vital Statistics in Africa
2017-2026**

**Fourth Conference of African Ministers Responsible
for Civil Registration
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Nouakchott**

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Concept note

Theme: Accelerating a coordinated improvement of civil registration and vital statistics for implementation and monitoring of the development agenda in Africa: Review of progress and the way forward



I. Civil registration and vital statistics: Africa's development imperative

In September 2015, 193 Member States of the United Nations adopted General Assembly resolution 70/1, committing themselves to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The 2030 Agenda, which is rooted in universal rights and driven by the key principle of “leaving no one behind”, contains 17 Sustainable Development Goals and 169 targets. It builds on the Millennium Development Goals, which expired in December 2015. The Sustainable Development Goals are ambitious, universal and transformational, aimed at balancing economic growth, social development and environmental protection.

In respect of the continent, 2015 also saw the adoption of Agenda 2063: The Africa We Want and the first Ten Year Implementation Plan (2014-2023). Agenda 2063 is Africa's transformative development framework to achieve accelerated, sustained and inclusive economic growth that leads to sound, resilient and inclusive socioeconomic development on the continent in the next 50 years.

A complete and efficient civil registration and vital statistics (CRVS) system is essential for the implementation and monitoring of both the continental and the global agendas. A national identity system intrinsically linked to a well-functioning civil registration system identifies and recognizes every individual in the society but can also provide basic population data in a dynamic way at all administrative levels. A fully functional civil registration and vital statistics system forms the basis for answering these three basic questions about people: who, where and how many. Such basic information is crucial for planning and programme implementation at the local level. It also ensures that public services pertaining to education, health care and social grants reach the most vulnerable and marginalized populations. Collecting and disseminating real-time cause-of-death information, which is acquired as part of the death registration process, can help to address many of the health and environment-related Sustainable Development Goals and targets, in particular those that require an emergency response. A civil registration and vital statistics system is, therefore, indispensable for the effective implementation of universal and inclusive policies and programmes, which in turn are essential to achieve the goals and targets of the 2030 Agenda and Agenda 2063.

Moreover, registration of vital events, whether directly or indirectly, helps to prove, establish, implement and realize many of the human rights embodied in international declarations. The right to be registered immediately after birth with a name and the right to acquire a nationality, pursuant to article 7 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, is an example of a human right that derives directly from civil registration. Similarly, article 6 of the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child provides that every child must be registered at birth and has the right to a name and a nationality. Civil registration also helps realize human rights, the exercise of which may depend on events having been registered, such as the right to vote, which is enshrined in article 21 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. At the fifty-third ordinary session of the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights, member States were requested to take the necessary measures to strengthen their civil registration services to ensure the prompt registration of all births in their territory, without discrimination.

According to “Principles and Recommendations for a Vital Statistics System”, a seminal publication on statistics by the Department of Economic and Social Affairs, civil registration is the best and preferred source of vital statistics. The vital statistics compiled from civil registration are relatively free from certain types of response errors, are not subject to any sampling errors and can be obtained at low cost. Statistics on the numbers of births, deaths, marriages and divorces, fertility, age and cause-specific mortality rates compiled at the national level are extremely beneficial in evidence-based policymaking and programme development, particularly in the area of public health. Civil registration and vital statistics systems provide vital statistics at all levels of administration on a continuous basis, which is crucial for programme implementation and monitoring of development targets, including the Sustainable Development Goals, at the local level.

In order to implement fully the 2030 Agenda and Agenda 2063, establishing and maintaining a CRVS system is a non-negotiable imperative. The principles of universality of CRVS are upheld by the key mantra of Agenda 2030 – “leaving no one behind” and realization of human rights.

In March 2016, at the forty-seventh session of the Statistical Commission, it was decided that a global indicator framework should be introduced. Consisting of 230 indicators, the framework is intended to be a practical starting point for the 2030 Agenda. Two of the indicators are directly related to civil registration and vital statistics systems (see table).

Table

Civil registration and vital statistics systems in the global indicator framework

<p><i>Target 16.9</i> By 2030, provide legal identity for all, including birth registration</p>	<p><i>Indicator 16.9.1</i> Proportion of children under 5 years of age whose births have been registered with a civil authority, by age</p>
<p><i>Target 17.19</i> By 2030, build on existing initiatives to develop measurements of progress on sustainable development that complement gross domestic product, and support statistical capacity-building in developing countries</p>	<p><i>Indicator 17.19.2 (b)</i> Proportion of countries that have achieved 100 per cent birth registration and 80 per cent death registration</p>

The First Ten-year Implementation Plan¹ also identified an indicator on birth registration under Goal 18 (“Engaged and empowered youth and children) and Target 5 (End all forms of violence, child labour, exploitation, child marriage and human trafficking), which is “Proportion of children whose births are registered within the first year”.

¹ Available at <http://www.un.org/en/africa/osaa/pdf/au/agenda2063-first10yearimplementation.pdf>.

The importance of birth registration for ensuring the legal identity of an individual is widely recognized, as evidenced by target 16.9 and indicator 16.9.1. Indeed, according to the 2016 edition of the Sustainable Development Goals report, “registering children at birth is the first step in securing recognition before the law and safeguarding individual rights and access to justice and social services. However, the births of more than one in four children under age 5 worldwide go unrecorded. In sub-Saharan Africa, the share is over half (54 per cent). In least developed countries, one in two children have not been registered by their fifth birthdays. Globally, children living in urban areas are around 1.5 times more likely to be registered than their rural counterparts. And in most regions, birth registration rates tend to be highest among the richest 20 per cent of the population.”

Without basic information on the numbers of births, deaths, marriages and divorces, it would be difficult for any country to measure and implement human development programmes at the national and local levels. Such numbers, obtained through civil registration systems, help to identify the target population and determine appropriate denominators required for the measurement of population-based indicators at all administrative levels. The choice of this simple indicator set seems to be appropriate for Goal 17 on strengthening the means of implementation. Indeed, indicator 17.19.2 (b) overlaps with indicator 16.9.1,² although the former also calls for efforts to be intensified in the area of death registration, which in most countries lags far behind birth registration. Globally, over the period 2010-2014, death registration data were available from only 145 countries and territories out of a total of 230. Moreover, of those, only 128 countries and territories had data that were at least 75 per cent complete. According to the 2016 edition of the Sustainable Development Goals report, just 9 African countries reported 75 per cent completeness in death registration.

In addition to the direct indicators related to performance measures for civil registration and vital statistics, several indicators in the global Sustainable Development Goals indicator set can be directly measured from civil registration and vital statistics, such as child mortality rates, maternal mortality ratios and about a dozen indicators on cause-specific mortality rates for which both the numerators and denominators can be obtained from civil registration and vital statistics systems. Furthermore, population registers, when updated continuously, through births and deaths recorded in CRVS systems can provide population data in a dynamic way that can be used as denominators for measuring all the population-based indicators in the global set of Sustainable Development Goal indicators. While surveys and census-based estimates can be used for many of the population-based Sustainable Development Goal indicators, civil registration and vital statistics systems are the only way to measure directly the indicators on a regular and disaggregated basis at all administrative levels.

² The birth registration indicator under target 16.9 relates to the status of registration of children under the age of five. Such information would be obtained from a Demographic and Health Survey and a Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey, and would therefore be retrospective in nature. The indicator on birth and death registration completeness under target 17.19 has to be measured directly from civil registration and vital statistics systems as the number of births and deaths registered in a calendar year against the expected number of such events in the same year. This is a current measure and is necessary to monitor the performance of civil registration and vital statistics systems on a regular basis and at all administrative levels. Civil registration offices have the primary responsibility for measuring this indicator.

II. Implementation of the Africa Programme on Accelerated Improvement of Civil Registration and Vital Statistics Systems

A. Achievements and progress so far

Africa recognized civil registration and vital statistics systems as a development imperative as early as 2010, as reflected in the statements delivered at the first session of the Conference of African Ministers responsible for Civil Registration. At this historic Conference, ministers emphasized the centrality of civil registration and vital statistics systems for Africa's development and laid the foundation for securing much-needed political commitment to accelerating the improvement of such systems in African countries. They took note of the holistic nature of civil registration and vital statistics and proposed a coordinated and integrated approach for the strengthening of such systems in countries. They further called on the three pan-African institutions, the African Union, the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA), and the African Development Bank, and to support the initiative in partnership with United Nations agencies and other organizations.

The second session of the Conference, which was held in 2012, saw countries committing to undertake comprehensive assessments and develop costed action plans supported by the regional civil registration and vital statistics core group. It marked the transition from the discussion on principles and expressing commitment to committing to very tangible actions. The third session, held in 2015, the first held under the auspices of the African Union Commission, covered various technical aspects of civil registration and vital statistics systems, such as the use of information and communications technology, cause-of-death information, vital statistics and linkages with national identity cards, as well as the importance of such systems for upholding human rights.

The guidance provided by the ministers at the various sessions over a period of six years has proved crucial for securing political commitment and ensuring leadership at the highest level, as well as steering the Africa Programme on Accelerated Improvement of Civil Registration and Vital Statistics Systems (APAI-CRVS) to an unprecedented level of maturity at the regional level and in a large number of countries on the continent, and in influencing global civil registration and vital statistics improvement initiatives. Today Governments are providing leadership in the development of civil registration and vital statistics systems through a more coordinated approach, backed by capacity-building and technical and normative support from the regional civil registration and vital statistics core group. Much progress has been made thanks to the Africa Programme on Accelerated Improvement of Civil Registration and Vital Statistics Systems. Some of the key achievements are highlighted below.

(a) The Conference of African Ministers responsible for Civil Registration is now a permanent forum. Sessions are held biennially under the auspices of the African Union Commission. In July 2016, Heads of State and Government declared 2017-2026 to be the "Decade for repositioning civil registration and vital statistics in Africa's continental, regional and national development agendas" and said that 10 August every year would be marked as civil registration and vital statistics day.

(b) There has been sustained political commitment at the country level, with Governments showing leadership and taking ownership of the process of strengthening their respective civil registration and vital statistics systems. To date, 28 countries have conducted assessments of their civil registration and vital statistics systems, while 21 have completed comprehensive assessments and 7 countries have carried out rapid assessments. A total of 25 countries have developed strategic improvement plans and some have begun to implement them. A further 16 countries have at least initiated the process of conducting comprehensive assessments. Governments are also increasingly committed to funding their own civil registration and vital statistics improvement plans, decreasing their dependence on external assistance.

(c) In line with the guiding principle of the Africa Programme on Accelerated Improvement of Civil Registration and Vital Statistics Systems, most countries have adopted a holistic approach to improving their civil registration and vital statistics systems. The tools and guidelines for assessing civil registration and vital statistics systems and drawing up national action plans developed by the Programme secretariat in collaboration with the regional civil registration and vital statistics core group are designed to facilitate this integrated approach. While these tools are aligned with the principles, standards and methodologies set out in “Principles and Recommendations for a Vital Statistics System” and various other manuals developed by the Statistics Division of the United Nations, efforts have been made not to lose sight of Africa’s social and cultural context.

(d) Starting in 2012, a series of five Africa Symposia for Statistical Development (ASSD) have been held, with a focus on civil registration and vital statistics. This has forged and crystallized the important linkages among the civil registration and vital statistics compiling offices (mainly national statistical offices), which in the past had been disengaged from one another. It has also provided a unique opportunity for much-needed synergies between these two agencies to learn and orient themselves on various technical issues related to civil registration and vital statistics.

(e) Further to the guidance and advice provided by the ministers at the previous three sessions of the Conference and advocacy on the part of the regional civil registration and vital statistics core group, there has been increased engagement and involvement of the health sector in improving birth and death registration coverage.

(f) Most of the countries that have conducted assessments identified existing civil registration laws as one of the major impediments in the process of registration and have taken steps to amend them, simplifying the registration process while taking into account the local culture, social norms, evolving needs and additional requirements related to digitization of civil registration and vital statistics systems.

(g) Improving coordination at the regional and country levels is another important guiding principle of the Africa Programme on Accelerated Improvement of Civil Registration and Vital Statistics Systems. The regional civil registration and vital statistics core group has proved to be very effective in coordinating the Programme across the continent. It has also provided integrated and holistic support to countries through critical capacity-building, technical assistance, advisory services and the promotion of South-South cooperation. In most countries, particularly those that have begun the process of improving their civil registration and vital statistics systems, high-level

interministerial steering committees and technical committees have been constituted to provide oversight and assist with implementation. In many countries, joint United Nations support for the process has also been secured.

(h) Several documents have been developed by the regional civil registration and vital statistics core group for use by countries. These include comprehensive assessment tools and guidelines, strategic planning guidelines, a guidebook on digitizing civil registration and vital statistics, a template and guidelines for the development of vital statistics reports, a manual for trainers on the production of vital statistics from civil registration records, a strategy on mortality statistics in Africa, and a practical guide on death registration and cause-of-death information processes. More such guides and handbooks will be developed in the future.

(i) One important step for building sustainable capacity in Africa in the field of civil registration and vital statistics was the development of a pool of regional civil registration and vital statistics experts. These experts, who were trained in all aspects of civil registration and vital statistics, including the use of comprehensive assessment and planning tools, have been helping countries to undertake assessments and develop national action plans. These experts have also trained many national civil registration and vital statistics officials, resulting in in-country knowledge transfer. These civil registration and vital statistics champions have emerged from countries, and they are gradually being deployed to support other countries in the region.

(j) Since the beginning of programme implementation, two countries have compiled their first ever vital statistics reports based on civil registration (Kenya and Botswana) and many other countries are in the process of compiling one.

(k) Given the special legal and technical requirements of French-speaking African countries, a regional support group on civil registration and vital statistics for French-speaking countries was established in early 2015, that is led by the subregional office of ECA and which, in addition to the regional offices of the World Health Organization (WHO), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), includes the African Development Bank and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). The establishment of the group has proved extremely successful, as since its creation 11 French-speaking countries have approached the regional civil registration and vital statistics core group for support in carrying out civil registration and vital statistics assessments and planning.

(l) Several training workshops on various aspects of civil registration and vital statistics have been held to train civil registration and vital statistics experts as part of capacity-building efforts in the region.

(m) An exclusive web portal for the Africa Programme on Accelerated Improvement of Civil Registration and Vital Statistics Systems has been launched. In addition to being a repository of documents and materials related to the Programme, it also serves as an interactive platform for the sharing of knowledge and national best practices as well as monitoring.

(n) A few countries have started innovating their civil registration operations with a view to reaching marginalized and vulnerable groups.

B. Challenges and lessons learned

There is no doubt that the systematic implementation of the Africa Programme on Accelerated Improvement of Civil Registration and Vital Statistics Systems since 2010 has helped to build unprecedented momentum towards the creation of efficient and complete civil registration and vital statistics systems on the continent. Sustained political commitment at the national level coupled with regional technical and capacity-building support have helped countries make a paradigm shift from a fragmented and siloed approach to a more holistic and integrated one.

However, there is a lot more that Africa must do to achieve the vision of “making everyone visible in Africa”. There is an urgent need to take stock of the challenges currently being faced in the implementation of the Africa Programme on Accelerated Improvement of Civil Registration and Vital Statistics Systems and to make strategic course corrections if required, not only to sustain momentum but also to catapult the Programme to the next level of maturity.

The strategy adopted following the second session of the Conference of African Ministers responsible for Civil Registration in terms of country-level support for the improvement of CRVS was straightforward. Much like a waterfall solution, the strategy consisted of conducting a comprehensive assessment, analysing the information to produce an assessment report, developing a costed action plan and finally implementing it. The strategy was aligned with the key principles of the Africa Programme on Accelerated Improvement of Civil Registration and Vital Statistics Systems (APAI-CRVS), namely, country ownership and leadership, capacity-building and improved coordination among government agencies and United Nations agencies. Overall, most of these principles were achieved. However, it is increasingly clear that developing an evidence-based action plan is not the end of the process, because countries also have to contend with getting the plans validated, implemented and financed. In addition, in some cases, the developed plans were not feasible or practical. Indeed, despite considerable efforts to provide the necessary support, closer review of national plans revealed gaps in quality. There is a need for the regional civil registration and vital statistics core group to engage more intensively with countries until each is able to establish and maintain a well-functioning civil registration and vital statistics system.

Several challenges were encountered during the implementation of the Africa Programme on Accelerated Improvement of Civil Registration and Vital Statistics Systems at the regional and country levels. They can be divided into technical, logistical and administrative challenges. Some of the key challenges are discussed below.

(a) In some countries, particularly in West and Central Africa, national leadership and ownership remain a challenge.

(b) Coordination at national level among ministries, departments and development partners has not reached desired levels in many countries.

(c) The coverage and quality of assessments and plans have not always met the standards required. For example, in some countries, the element on cause-of-death information was missing completely. In most countries, the “as-is” and “would be” business process mappings were not carried out, resulting in inadequate strategies leading to the CRVS systems improvement vision.

(d) There was not enough guidance on implementation, including on issues such as who should take the lead, where to start, how to start and what to prioritize.

(e) At the recent experience-sharing workshops, a number of countries and regional civil registration and vital statistics senior advisers provided inputs about the shortcomings of the assessments and the planning tools and guidelines.

(f) Establishing civil registration and vital statistics systems, with its multi-faceted nature, requires technical support in different areas, which cannot come from a single source, and which cannot come from one single kind of technical support. For example, technical support for the amendment of a law is completely different from the technical support needed to set up a cause-of-death system and cannot be provided by one consultant. There is very little in-country capacity available in such technical areas.

(g) With civil registration and vital statistics gaining momentum in Africa, various donors and development partners have started showing interest and proposing funds for various technical aspects of civil registration and vital statistics systems, albeit with strings attached. While these kinds of donor interventions have on occasion helped the cause of APAI-CRVS, they have also occasionally proved counterproductive, diverting the attention of countries away from civil registration and vital statistics improvement processes. Countries that have shown leadership were able to bring together the individual interests of donors and advocate for a more integrated approach, or sourcing the already existing CRVS plan. Some countries managed to negotiate with donors to use part of the funds initially planned for national identification or health-related projects for assessment and planning leading to a systemic improvement of civil registration and vital statistics.

(h) Most countries do not have a monitoring and evaluation system as a part of their civil registration and vital statistics plan. Only a few have systems for counting even the basic number of vital events registered and the rate of completeness of coverage cannot, therefore, be measured for most countries.

(i) Lastly, current APAI-CRVS resources, both human and financial, at the level of the secretariat (ECA) is highly inadequate and is proving to be a major impediment on smooth implementation of APAI-CRVS.

C. Way forward

Given these challenges, which are by no means exhaustive, a number of priority actions have been proposed and will be discussed at the Conference. These actions are discussed below.

(a) Countries that have not yet undertaken a comprehensive assessment of their civil registration and vital statistics systems will be encouraged to do so as soon as

possible and countries that have prepared costed action plans should be encouraged to start implementation.

(b) The availability of a civil registration and vital statistics plan based on a comprehensive assessment can no longer be taken as an indicator of the successful implementation of the Africa Programme on Accelerated Improvement of Civil Registration and Vital Statistics Systems in a country. A clearer, results-based framework needs to be introduced and discussed to take the Programme to the next level. The strategic plan for 2017-2021 developed by the regional civil registration and vital statistics core group should be the basis for this discussion.

(c) Consideration should be given to setting up a review mechanism process through which a template-based review can be carried out at the country level, if required, through a peer-review process. Such reviews should not be just fact- or fault-finding exercises; they should have the scope to propose changes and provide clear directions for the implementation of civil registration and vital statistics systems, followed by technical assistance wherever required. The process should involve a mixed skill team that can review and provide guidance on the legal, statistical (including cause-of-death information) and technological aspects.

(d) A bureau of the Conference of African Ministers responsible for civil registration should be established to oversee and monitor activities in between the biennial sessions.

(e) The strategic plan for 2017-2021 developed by the regional civil registration and vital statistics core group has not been translated into action because of a lack of resources. There is an urgent need to reiterate the importance of establishing a trust fund through the pan-African organizations. Such a fund should have clear terms of reference delineating areas of responsibility and should report to the bureau of the Conference.

(f) Existing guidelines and tools on civil registration and vital statistics should be reviewed to ensure they include business process mapping, which is an integral part of the process. There is also a need to develop a set of strategic guidelines for implementation of the plans.

(g) A monitoring framework should be developed and implemented. Such a framework should consist of two essential components: a measurement of registration coverage on a regular basis and a template-based annual review of progress made in implementing civil registration and vital statistics plans by national stakeholders in collaboration with local development partners.

(h) A donor mapping exercise should be carried out using the website of the Africa Programme on Accelerated Improvement of Civil Registration and Vital Statistics Systems. There should also be more active engagement with major donors. The proposal of creating a multi-donor trust fund for the resourcing of the regional strategic plan should be considered.

(i) Pools of experts should be created. Such experts would specialize in various aspects of civil registration and vital statistics, such as law and policy, vital statistics, cause-of-death information and digitization. Such pools could be used to help countries

during the implementation phase. Expertise should not be provided in isolation. The existing pool of civil registration and vital statistics experts should also be expanded by including the experts who emerged as CRVS champions from countries.

(j) Consideration should be given to developing a strategy for deploying long-term advisers in countries to support the implementation of the civil registration and vital statistics improvement plan. Such advisors need to be connected to a group of skilled experts in specific fields who they can contact for advice during implementation.

(k) A strategy and action plan on sustainable capacity development in civil registration and vital statistics in Africa should be developed. It should include academic and in-service training in the field of civil registration and vital statistics. Such training could be delivered through universities, statistical training centres, public administration and public health training institutions.

(l) Freely available, standards-based, fully interoperable software should be developed to help countries to digitize their civil registration and vital statistics systems and automate processes.

(m) South-South cooperation should be promoted through, among other initiatives, the creation of centres of excellence in country-based institutions.

(n) The reform process of civil registration and vital statistics systems in Africa should continue to be discussed in various forums, including the Statistical Commission for Africa and the African Symposium on Statistical Development.

III. Objectives

The overall objective of the session is to discuss possible ways of making strategic shifts to move the Africa Programme on Accelerated Improvement of Civil Registration and Vital Statistics Systems to the next level of maturity by taking stock of the Programme achievements so far and the challenges encountered.

Specifically, the objectives will be to:

(a) Contextualize the Africa Programme on Accelerated Improvement of Civil Registration and Vital Statistics Systems against the backdrop of the 2030 Agenda and Agenda 2063, in line with national development plans and international human rights instruments;

(b) Identify key challenges in the implementation of the Africa Programme on Accelerated Improvement of Civil Registration and Vital Statistics Systems at the regional and national levels and propose solutions;

(c) Review the current tools and guidance provided under the Africa Programme on Accelerated Improvement of Civil Registration and Vital Statistics Systems and discuss possible corrective measures for improving programme delivery.

IV. Expected outcomes

The fourth session is expected to result in the following:

(a) Improved understanding of the centrality of civil registration and vital statistics in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and Agenda 2063 and international human rights instruments;

(b) Agreement on what strategic direction to take to revitalize the Africa Programme on Accelerated Improvement of Civil Registration and Vital Statistics Systems through a systematic review and improved coordination, monitoring and reporting;

(c) Endorsement of the civil registration and vital statistics strategic plan for 2017-2021 and approval of the establishment of an African fund for the improvement of civil registration and vital statistics systems.