

UNITED NATIONS ECONOMIC COMMISSION FOR AFRICA

African Centre for Statistics

2009 African Statistics Day Celebrations

Communiqué

STRENGTHENING CIVIL REGISTRATION AND VITAL STATISTICS SYSTEMS IN SUPPORT OF NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND MDGs IN AFRICA

November 18 is African Statistics Day. 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.

Importance and status of civil registration and vital statistics systems in Africa

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

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

priority vital events required by countries to be registered and the statistics to be produced in a continuous and permanent basis.

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 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.

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

The achievement of comprehensive civil registration systems will certainly require long-term commitment and investment. However, there are immediate actions that will help strengthen capacity in birth and death registration and cause-of-death certification, thus ensuring long-term sustainability. This implies political commitment, supportive legal framework, allocation of roles and responsibilities among stakeholders, mobilisation of human and financial resources, and, most critically, ensuring public trust.

Challenges and opportunities for improvement of civil registration and vital statistics systems in Africa

Lack of complete civil registration and vital statistics (CR&VS) systems have multifaceted consequences primarily in a country's national and sectoral development planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation undertakings as well as regional and international developmental monitoring and evaluation systems, including the MDGs. It has also adverse implications on the decentralization and democratization processes and sectoral reform programs currently underway in almost all African countries. Nevertheless, 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.

As we celebrate this year's ASD, we should take note of the following key messages that African countries should consider in their endeavour in improving CR&VS systems; that:

- 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. 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;
- e. 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;
- f. 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;

A medium and long-term program to be conceived

Following the regional workshop, a regional network has been established, workshop materials have been uploaded on the ECA knowledge management portal, key workshop recommendations have been finalized and distributed to all African countries and to development partners, 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.

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 will provide a regional platform for policy dialogue, exchange of views, ideas and best practices on this important subject in Africa.

The African Centre for Statistics (ACS) of the UNECA has also prepared a technical note to serve as a background document accompanying this Communiqué.

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