Speech by the Executive Secretary,
United Nations Economic Commission for Africa

H.E. Inonge Wina, Vice President of the Republic of Zambia

Excellences,

Distinguished Guests

Ladies and gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure for me to welcome you to the fifth Conference of African Ministers responsible for Civil Registration and to be participating in this important gathering, which will deliberate on the theme **"*Innovative Civil Registration and Vital Statistics systems as a foundation for legal identity management*"**.

This is a subject that is of crucial importance to Africa's economic and social development, and that is at the core of the realization of our ambitions to eradicate poverty, and to achieve inclusive and sustainable development and respect human rights. It is for this reason that this conference is also being attended Ministers for Health, ICT and ID management as well as for E-Governance.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Africa, which is home to 1.3 billion people, is faced with a critical legal identity gap, whereby many exist without being known to their governments and without any means to prove who they are. According to UNICEF, the births of 2 in 3 infants in Africa south of the Sahara remain unregistered, and 3 out of every 4 lack a birth certificate. It is further projected that if the current trends continue, the number of unregistered children aged below 5 in the region will soar to nearly 115 million by 2030. The World Bank complements these estimates reporting that half of the estimated 1.3 billion people that lack proof of legal identity live in Africa.

Ladies and gentlemen,

To lack a legal identity means that you do not exist at all in the eyes of the state, a scenario that is critically alarming and that contravenes each of our human development efforts.

Undocumented persons who are often women, children, refugees and migrants face critical challenges in exercising basic human rights, in participating in society and seeking protection by the law, a situation that only worsens their vulnerability.

At an aggregate level, universal and complete legal identity records facilitate important governance processes ranging from electoral processes, taxation, pension schemes, social security programmes among others. The lack of these records in many cases prompts the creation of independent and multiple silo databases which are expensive to manage, and that have been linked to immense loss of government revenue.

From a statistical perspective, as Peter Drucker would put it- "*If you can't measure it, you can't improve it.*" Without knowing the numbers and characteristics of the residents of a country, governments cannot plan neither can they craft adequate policies or monitor progress. This steers us further away from achieving our human development commitments as set out by the Africa agenda 2063 and the 2030 sustainable development agenda.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Legal identity is established through the civil registration of a birth, a process in which the government records important biographic information about the occurrence and characteristics of birth and persons experiencing the event. This record is routinely updated with important changes in civil status, such as marriage and divorce, and is retired upon the civil registration of death and by the issuance of a death certificate.

Linked to civil registration is civil identification (also referred to as national identification), a process that is aimed at verifying and authenticating the identities of persons, with the goal to unique identify one individual from another. Unique identification is an aspect that is of increasing importance in today's society, as populations grow and with increasing internal and cross border migration.

Civil identification involves the collation of biographic information and in many cases spans the collection of biometric information and the issuance of a physical or digital identity token.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Today, we face fundamental challenges in our bid to address the legal identity gap in Africa. **One among these challenges,** is that of weak and archaic civil registration systems that fail to achieve key principles of completeness, universality and accuracy. Many countries run fragmented paper-based systems, with a huge burden of reporting placed on the public, and with a requirement to travel long distances to access registration services.

This manual nature of civil registration databases in many countries limits their ability to support other important government functions therefore contributing to their under-resourcing and underutilization by governments.

The other challenge, which is of growing concern is the notable increase in investments made by many African governments towards sophisticated civil identification systems that are delinked from civil registration systems.

Allow me to underline that robust civil identification databases can only be sustained when linked and updated with timely birth and death data that flows from civil registration. This necessitates that the architecture of civil registration databases be modern, innovative

and able to correspond to that applied for civil identification. Moreover, these systems must be supported by appropriate legal and institutional frameworks for their efficient functioning.

Excellences,

We stand at an important time in history whereby the legal identity agenda is preeminently reflected in the 2030 sustainable development agenda, including through a goal of its own, and where there is increasing interest from various fronts to support this agenda. It is pertinent that we make use of this window to make all the relevant progress and in particular to harness the best for our identity management ecosystems systems without leaving either behind.

As we make head ways with this conference, I wish to urge for your continued concerted efforts and support in moving forward this agenda including in facilitating its prioritization within your national development agendas for adequate financing. Further, I wish to reiterate the importance of equal investments in modernizing civil registration systems as these provide a critical foundation for reliable civil identification and other e-governance programmes.

Excellences,

As I conclude, let me also inform you that as part addressing the challenges I have highlighted, the United Nations in September 2018 launched Legal Identity Agenda to support member States in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals through meeting target 16.9 *by 2030, provide legal identity for all, including birth registration*. The UN legal identity consists of the lifecycle, "birth-to-death", and holistic approach to civil registration, vital statistics including causes of death and identity management.

The UN agencies, and in Africa the CRVS Core Group coordinated by ECA, will continue to drive a coherent and effective response in supporting member states to achieve the goal of *leaving no one behind* by addressing the root causes of exclusion. In coordination with UN DOC, ECA working with AUC, other UN agencies and World Bank will continue to support member states with a benchmark goal of reducing the global legal identity gap by over 300 million within four years. Pilot countries have been identified to participate in the implementation of the UN Legal Identity Agenda. The plan is to have all countries in the region to implement the UN Legal Identity agenda by end of 2020.

In conclusion, experts from the region and international organization have worked in the last 3 days to provide input for your deliberations. The sessions reviewed progress made, shared best practices and identified strategic approaches and proposed solutions towards addressing key challenges in the regional and national legal identity initiatives for your considerations.

This conference is expected to provide directions on pathways towards achieving holistic, innovative and integrated CRVS and digital identity management systems in our countries, with the goal of closing the identity gap in Africa. ECA, which is the Secretariat of the Africa Programme for the Accelerated Improvement of Civil Registration and Vital Statistics is ready to support countries strengthen their systems. The Secretariat is driving the process by developing the guidelines and handbooks, working with partners in developing ICT assets that will enhance interoperability among government systems and integrating civil registration and identity management.

I therefore urge us to leave this conference with strong resolutions that will strengthen the identity management ecosystems of our respective countries, and that will usher us into a new era of human development in Africa, and the Africa we want.

Let me end by thanking our gracious hosts, the Government of Zambia and her people. Madame Vice President, we will make this event memorable and historical as important decisions and resolutions will be made here, which will take civil registration and identity management to greater heights.

I wish you very fruitful deliberations.