

# The Scandal of Invisibility: Making Every African Count

Addis Ababa, 21 May 2013 – As Africa marks 50 years since the establishment of the Organization of African Unity and the Africa Union, a partnership between the African Union, the African Development Bank, the UN Economic Commission for Africa and UN agencies is urging African Heads of State and Government to make effective civil registration and vital statistics systems a political priority.

With a growing population, more than one billion people in Africa, and 60 per cent of whom are under 18 years old, systems to make sure everyone is counted and vital statistics linked to birth and death is a critical investment in the future. Currently, only 44 percent children under five in Africa are registered and millions more are not protected with legal identity documents.

“We must remember that integration of Africa is not just about political and economic integration. The free movement of our people is equally important and crucial for our integration. This cannot be managed effectively if we do not know who our citizens are,” said H.E. Dr. Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma, Chairperson of the African Union Commission.

“I am sure you do not need convincing of the importance of vital statistics generated through the civil registration systems. We should embark on a serious continent wide campaign to conscientise and raise awareness amongst our citizens, so that working together with governments, we can improve the compliance with civil registration and vital statistics,” she added.

For many years, countries have grappled with non-functioning statistical systems that made it difficult to collect real time information on populations. The advent of new technology, especially the extensive coverage of mobile phones, along with better integration between different government departments, has led to new opportunities to fast track progress.

“For this continent to realize its full potential, we need every country to invest in holistic systems of data collection that keep track of vital statistics to make sure each citizen has their legal identity guaranteed and safeguarded, but also track demographic trends and help them to provide data on a continuous basis to plan a better future for them,” said Carlos Lopes, Executive Secretary, United Nations Economic Commission for Africa.

As the African Union seeks closer economic and social integration, modern registration systems that provide proof of legal identity and legal documentation will be a valuable contribution to facilitate the movement of people, opening of cross border trade and the transfer of skills and knowledge between nations.

Many people, especially the poorest and most marginalized, are often hindered from acquiring a birth certificate by distance, cost and administrative hurdles.

“The future well-being for a child starts with a legal identity. This right is enshrined in the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child,” said Dr. Martin Mogwanja, UNICEF Deputy Executive Director. “Registering a child at birth lays the foundation for their future as citizens. It is a vital ingredient to make sure they have access to basic services and can protect them during childhood.”

Already many countries are integrating services in the health systems to make sure there is a centralized mechanism to track births, deaths and disease. Many health centers are now sites where registrars can collect information and also facilitate the time and effort for families to use these services.

Despite efforts to get countries to cost their plans, more resources are needed to make sure the administrative systems are strengthened across countries, especially with population growth, so that the need can match the demand and the large number of people who needed to be serviced.

The Africa Programme on Accelerated Improvement of Civil Registration and Vital Statistics, initiated in 2010 jointly by the African Union, UNECA, AfDB and other UN partners namely UNICEF, UNFPA, UNHCR, WHO and HMN aims at working with governments to build fully functional and comprehensive CRVS systems through a more holistic approach that is built on strong legislative provisions, efficient operations and management systems within the given administrative and political structure of the country.

**NOTE TO EDITORS:** As part of celebrations to commemorate the 50th Anniversary of the Organization of African Unity/African Union, a High Level Panel on Civil Registration and Vital Statistics, under the theme, *THE SCANDAL OF INVISIBILITY IN AFRICA*, will be held on Tuesday, 21 May 2013, from 15:00hrs to 17:00hrs, at the new AU Conference Centre, in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. The Panel will be moderated by Uduak Amimo, a prominent African news journalist, who has extensive experience reporting on the continent. A broadcast quality audio recording will be made available to media partners by Channel Africa Radio, part of South African Broadcasting Corporation. The Panel will also be live-streamed and webcast by the AUC, as well as receive audio-visual coverage.

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**Esther Azaa Tankou**, Directorate of Information and Communication, African Union Commission, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, Telephone: +251-11-551-4555, Mobile: +251-911-361-185, E-mail: [yamboue@africa-union.org](mailto:yamboue@africa-union.org) [1]

**Mercy Wambui**, External Communications and Media Relations Section, United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, Mobile: +251-921-014-767, E-mail: [mwambui@uneca.org](mailto:mwambui@uneca.org) [2]

**Anthony Mwangi**, Public Affairs Manager, UNICEF Liaison Office to the AU and UNECA, Telephone: +251-11-518-4223, Mobile: +251-911-513-058, E-mail: [amwangi@unicef.org](mailto:amwangi@unicef.org) [3]

**Shantha Bloemen**, Chief of Communications, UNICEF Africa Service Unit, Mobile: +27 (0) 79 495 5938, E-mail: [sbloemen@unicef.org](mailto:sbloemen@unicef.org) [4]

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