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UNITED NATIONS ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COUNCIL



Distr.
LIMITED
E/CN.14/CAS.4/VS/4
16 November 1964
Original: English

ECONOMIC COMMISSION FOR AFRICA
African Seminar on
Vital Statistics
Addis Ababa, 14-19 December 1964
Item 4 on the provisional agenda

THE STATE OF VITAL STATISTICS IN AFRICA

1. At the Seminar on Population Problems in Africa held in Cairo in October-November 1962, explicit recognition was given to the inadequacies of the existing data on population size, structure and changes. ^{1/} The Third Conference of African Statisticians took note of the recommendations of the Population Seminar and specifically requested that a meeting should be held on the problems of vital statistics collection and of extending and improving civil registration in Africa. ^{2/}
2. The inadequacies of basic demographic statistics in Africa persist even though in the last decade African countries have made considerable progress in filling some of the major gaps. It is in field operations that the notable advances have been made but so far little has been achieved in the more difficult process of setting up continuing sources of information on current natural increase and on migration.
3. Important as is the latter for many African countries, it must be left aside for the moment in order to emphasize the even more important question of obtaining reliable data on fertility and mortality.

^{1/} Report of the Seminar on Population Problems in Africa, E/CN.14/186, E/CN.9/CONF.3/1, paras. 20 to 26 and 66.

^{2/} Report of the Third Conference of African Statisticians, E/CN.14/255, E/CN.14/CAS.3/22, para. 83.

4. Where administrative systems are long established and uniformly effective over a national area, vital statistics are usually available as a by-product of a system of civil registration which has emerged from the needs of the administration itself and as a means of establishing the status and rights of each individual in the community. African countries are not yet favourably situated in this respect and it is in only a few countries, representing about 35 percent of the total population of the region, that registration of births and deaths is compulsory and general, ^{1/} though partial registration exists in many areas. In the great majority of the countries of the region registration of births is grossly incomplete: only 7 have anything approaching complete registration and these 7 include 3 small population living in restricted geographical areas unrepresentative of African conditions. It is significant that in the U.A.R. (Egypt) and Madagascar (both of which are included in the 7) registration of births is thought to be only about 80 per cent complete although legal provisions have made it compulsory and general since 1839 in the former case and since 1878 in the latter. The level of completeness of registration of deaths is even less satisfactory.

5. As a result, substitute methods have been sought for obtaining immediate estimates of the main vital rates, and the most popular so far have been retrospective field inquiries into births and deaths occurring in a fixed reference period preceding the date of the inquiry. In some cases these inquiries have been of restricted geographic scope but of the 40 countries reviewed in the paper Methods and Problems of African population censuses and surveys, 1955-64, 22 used the national census or national sample survey as a means of collecting current data on births and deaths while 27 included questions on total fertility and 22 on total mortality. ^{2/} The effect has been that the large-

^{1/} Methods and problems of civil registration and vital statistics collection in Africa, E/CN.14/CAS.3/8, Paras. 27 and 28.

^{2/} E/CN.14/CAS.3/3/Rev.1, Tables 11, 12 and 13.

scale periodic demographic inquiries have been required to fulfill not only the traditional census function of providing data on the size and structures of populations but also the function of providing data on population movement.

6. This is an expedient which does not touch upon the ultimate objective, which must be the achievement of civil registration of each vital event. Nevertheless, the retrospective (sample) inquiry has become an accepted technique for the immediate provision of statistics and its continued use in African countries has been recommended. The recommendation of the Cairo Population Seminar to this effect was accompanied by an emphatic statement of the necessity for evaluating the results obtained: "--- the participants united in urging that adequate provisions for verification of accuracy should be regarded as an indispensable adjunct of projects in this field. There is an urgent need for experiments with methods of such verification in various circumstances." ^{1/}

7. One of the principal tasks of the present seminar is to consider the nature and sources of the errors in retrospective surveys and the devices which may be adopted to minimize them, ^{2/} as well as analytical methods of deriving estimates of the main vital rates from census or survey data ^{3/} which, in comparison with the results of retrospective or other inquiries, provide checks of accuracy or of consistency. The reports of field experiment in a number of countries will, it is hoped, give the first real assessment of the techniques and problems of collecting and verifying vital statistics in Africa by combining retrospective inquiries with follow-up surveys, repeated observation and/or other devices.

1/ Report of the Seminar on Population Problems in Africa, E/CN.14/186, E/CN.9/CONF.3/1, Para. 22.

2/ Technical paper on non-sampling errors and biases in retrospective demographic enquiries, E/CN.14/CAS.4/VS/3 and Methods of obtaining vital data in developing countries, E/CN.14/CAS.4/VS/5.

3/ Uses of census or survey data for the estimation of vital rates, E/CN.14/CAS.4/VS/7

8. These country experiments are important also for the second main objective of the Seminar: the investigation of methods which will assist the countries of the region with the improvement or implementation of civil registration as and when they can find resources to devote to such projects. Because of the many obstacles which for the present appear to stand in the way of complete coverage of vital events through registration procedures in Africa, the idea of selecting as registration areas a national probability sample of (small) administrative areas has been suggested as a starting point. Intense effort in these areas could produce statistically reliable estimates of the vital rates as well as giving a conceptual framework for the later expansion of the sample to cover the whole country. Additional benefits would be derived from using any suitable combination of other techniques (including matching of events) with the sample registration project in order to assess the completeness of the registration.

9. Since the collection of vital statistics, whether through a civil registration system or through field inquiries, is intended to complement the data on size and structure of the population, the programme of collection of demographic statistics must be planned as a whole, closely integrated in both content and in form. Specifically, (a) concepts and definitions must be standardized and (b) if a project such as the establishment of civil registration sample is under consideration, it would be both logical and economical to institute it at the time of the national census or national sample survey, thus providing a base population for the calculation of vital rates.

10. Almost every country in Africa participated in the 1960 World Census Programme by conducting an inquiry of the census type in the period 1955-64. From this beginning, it will be possible to plan for the 1970 Census Programme in a more comprehensive fashion designed to provide the necessary demographic data at a higher level of accuracy and in a more continuing basis. The provision of more satisfactory vital statistics will be an essential part of the Programme.