

Regional Workshop on Civil Registration and Vital Statistics Systems in Africa

Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, June 29–July 3, 2009

A Regional Workshop on Civil Registration and Vital Statistics Systems in Africa, was held in Dar es Salaam, United Republic of Tanzania from June 29 to July 3, 2009. The workshop was organized jointly by the UNECA–African Center for Statistics (ACS), UN Statistics Division (UNSD), African Development Bank (AfDB) and InWent of Germany and jointly hosted by the National Bureau of Statistics and the Registration, Insolvency and Trusteeship Agency (RITA) of the United Republic of Tanzania. The workshop was initiated by the ACS and the UNSD to address what has been called a “*Scandal of Invisibility*” because “many people in Africa and Asia are born and die without leaving a trace in any legal record or official statistics. Absence of reliable data for births, deaths and causes of death are at the root of this scandal of invisibility, which renders most of the world’s poor as unseen, unaccountable and hence uncounted.” This scandal has serious implications for vital statistics, human and constitutional rights, property rights, policy and national development as well as MDG monitoring.

The regional workshop was attended by 140 participants drawn from national civil registration offices and National Statistics Offices (NSOs) of 40 countries and 5 regional training institutions, the UN Statistics Division, the African Development Bank, the World Bank, HMN/WHO and other development partners resident in Tanzania. Among the participants were a number of Heads of NSOs and the Minister of Justice of Ethiopia.

The workshop noted that a fully functioning civil registration system is the source of legal identity and related information for the individual, the community and the government in claiming and safeguarding rights and privileges enshrined in national laws and international conventions and covenants. Civil registration is an instrument in facilitating health, education and other social services to individuals, families and communities. Civil registration is also the conventional and most appropriate source of vital statistics. Vital statistics are a crucial and irreplaceable component of national statistical systems as they generate a numerical profile of the most precious resource of any country – its human capital. Managing human capital appropriately, in turn, is an indisputable and most visible indicator of good governance or the lack of it.

The workshop noted, with utmost concern, the fact that in the majority of countries in Africa, and in almost all the countries in sub-Saharan Africa, the civil registration system operates on a sporadic and incomplete basis. In those countries, there are no adequate systems that enable citizens to be

recognized by the state and hence the justice system and public administration services could not be improved in a manner that promotes development and security of citizens. Because of low coverage of civil registration systems in most African countries, some important vital indicators such as life expectancy at birth, infant and child mortality rates could not be measured from vital statistics. Household surveys and censuses have been undertaken to fill the information gaps created by lack of effective vital registration systems. These are largely ad hoc exercises and interim measures that should not be taken as long-term solutions for generating vital statistics.

Of the many components of both civil registration and vital statistics systems, only a handful of African countries can confidently claim to have well functioning systems. Whether it is the lack of adequate legal framework, low coverage of civil registration due to a number of circumstances, the non-existence of cooperation and coordination between civil registration and official statistics, low statistical capacity, or simply lack of awareness of the need to develop both in a simultaneous manner, the outcome is disappointingly the absence of coherent, functioning and regular generation of accurate, reliable and timely vital statistics from the civil registration system.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

The workshop adopted the following recommendations:

Advocacy

- To dedicate the theme for the 2010 African Statistics Day to civil registration and vital statistics systems.
- All African governments are called upon to take appropriate measures in availing the necessary resources and support to civil registration and vital statistics systems.
- Explore the possibility of organizing a high-level Ministerial Conference on Improving Civil Registration as soon as possible to maintain the momentum.

Operational

- Civil Registration Offices and National Statistics Offices, development partners and regional training institutions are urged to actively participate in the regional Network on Civil Registration and Vital Statistics Systems in Africa.

- Countries are encouraged to take full advantage of the sectoral reform programs, democratization and decentralization processes currently ongoing in Africa to bring civil registration services to their populations.
- All governments are strongly encouraged to revisit the topic of fees for issuing documents based on civil registration records – the Workshop reiterated that the United Nations recommends that the registration is always free of charge and that the fee for documents should be as low as possible.
- The African Development Bank, being a regional development bank, is requested to continue its support for African countries and devise a special program that promotes speedy improvements for civil registration and vital statistics systems in Africa.
- Regional training institutions are urged to take the initiative in developing appropriate curricula for improving civil registration and vital statistics systems in Africa and to actively participate in evaluation studies and research undertakings and also in strengthening the aforementioned network.
- Countries need to proactively interact with each other to share knowledge, experience and resources using various mechanisms, such as, study tours, workshops, technical support, etc.
- Organize biennially the regional workshop on civil registration and vital statistics systems.
- The African Center for Statistics should continue serving as a regional platform for civil registration and vital statistics systems and in leveraging resources, technical support and coordination among countries in Africa.
- The UN Statistics Division to continue its support and, in close collaboration with regional institutions in Africa and other partners, to devise a special program for Africa in general and fragile states in particular.
- The African Center for Statistics and the African Development Bank in collaboration with other development partners should develop a medium-term program for the improvement of civil registration and vital statistics systems in Africa.
- Countries to finalize their country action plans (drafted at the Workshop) and submit them to African Center for Statistics.

Technical

- Countries are advised and encouraged to revisit and update their civil registration laws and statistical legislations in line with current developments and take measures that ensure their proper implementation.

- Countries need to identify the underlying reasons for the low level of civil registration in the rural areas and design strategies to overcome this low coverage, including the introduction of mobile registration units in nomadic and remote areas.
- It is vital to ensure that both civil registrars and statisticians are fully cross-trained in basic concepts, definitions and procedures in both areas.
- Civil registration offices and NSOs are urged to collaborate and interface, and the NSOs are urged to play an active role in setting national standards and methods for civil registration and vital statistics systems.
- Countries are encouraged to use conventional methods in evaluating their civil registration and vital statistics systems and to take measures in ensuring proper utilization and documentation of their data and information.
- Countries are encouraged to use UN guidelines and recommendations as a basis for their civil registration and vital statistics improvement program.

Partnership

- The African Center for Statistics and the UN Statistics Division need to strengthen institutional linkages in facilitating integration, harmonization, and coordination of efforts currently being undertaken by various organizations at country and regional levels in order to promote cost-effective mechanisms and avoid duplication of efforts.
- Donors, UN agencies, consortiums, education and training centers, NGOs and other development partners are urged to support Africa in the area of capacity building, e.g. through the provision of training, public education, IT development, data capturing, coding, processing and analysis and provision of other capacity building materials and financial support.
- Countries are urged to mainstream civil registration and vital statistics systems in their national statistical development programs.

FOLLOW-UP

A compendium of civil registration and vital statistics systems in Africa will be prepared as part of the post-workshop activities. The compendium will comprise the status of country civil registration and vital statistics systems together with an action plan for the improvement of the systems. It will be used in the preparation of the medium-term regional program for the improvement of civil registration and vital statistics systems in Africa.