
Regional strategy for the improvement of civil registration and vital statistics systems

Executive summary

1. The policy environment for civil registration and vital statistics is currently characterized by a sense of urgency and of gathering momentum at national regional and global levels. This momentum is driven by the recognition of the importance of legal identity by the international development and human rights communities, the need to monitor progress towards the Millennium Development Goals and to better understand emerging epidemiological transitions, and the heightened need for legal identity for global and national security. The spread of internet and mobile technologies offers opportunities for designing better integrated, and more efficient, cost-effective and convenient means of registering and monitoring vital events. Advances in biometrics and the possibility of unique identifiers for entire populations, have the potential to enable further efficiencies in civil registration and vital statistics systems.

2. The challenges facing civil registration and vital statistics systems in the Region can be summarized as follows: lack of awareness of the importance of civil registration and vital statistics and the consequent lack of high-level political support; inadequacy of the legal framework under which civil registration and vital statistics operates; weakness of registration infrastructure and capacities and unavailability of resources to support them; inadequate governance, coordination and organization, associated with the multi-stakeholder nature of the civil registration and vital statistics systems; inadequate quality of the registration process and its legal and statistical products; incompleteness and poor quality of death certificates.

3. The goal of the regional strategy for the improvement of civil registration and vital statistics systems is, through improved civil registration and the increased availability and use of reliable vital statistics, to contribute to the improvement of evidence-based policymaking, efficiency in resource allocation and good governance, as well as the progressive realization of the basic rights of all individuals. The strategy is intended to guide and support the improvement of civil registration and vital statistics systems in the Region over the period 2014–2019. It is built around seven strategic domains and comprises a menu of interventions from which Member States can draw based on the level of development of their civil registration and vital statistics systems, country contexts, resources and capacities. A strategic plan outlines both country actions and supportive activities at regional level. A monitoring and evaluation framework is also outlined including country and regional indicators.

Introduction

4. Civil registration is defined as the compulsory, permanent, continuous and universal recording of the occurrence and characteristics of vital events (1). Through the official recording of births, deaths, marriages, divorces and adoptions, individuals have the documentary evidence they need to secure recognition of their legal identity, their family relationships, their nationality and their ensuing rights. In addition, the system generates administrative, social and health data that can be compiled to produce vital statistics that serve the needs of almost all development sectors including health.

5. The policy environment for civil registration and vital statistics is currently characterized by a sense of urgency and of gathering momentum at national regional and global levels. The recognition of the importance of legal identity by the international development and human rights communities

has led to a higher profile for birth registration. The need to monitor progress towards the Millennium Development Goals and to better understand emerging epidemiological transitions has led to growing attention to the importance of the registration of all deaths by age, sex and cause. The heightened need for legal identity for global and national security is also creating demand for complete and effective civil registration systems. The spread of internet and mobile technologies offers extraordinary opportunities for designing better integrated, and more efficient, cost-effective and convenient means of registering and monitoring vital events. Advances in biometrics and the possibility of unique identifiers for entire populations, have the potential to enable further efficiencies in civil registration and vital statistics systems.

6. As a result of these developments, a growing and diverse group of United Nations and international agencies have recognized the importance of civil registration and vital statistics, including the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), the Human Rights Council, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), World Health Organization (WHO), World Bank, African Development Bank, Asian Development Bank, InterAmerican Development Bank, United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), Interpol and the International Civil Aviation Authority (ICAO).

Situation in the Region

7. Within the Eastern Mediterranean Region, assessment of country civil registration and vital statistics systems, which was coordinated by WHO during 2012, showed the following.

- Only 6 countries (26%), accounting for 5% of the Region's population, have well-functioning civil registration and vital statistics systems.
- Another 8 countries, accounting for 42% of the Region's population, have civil registration and vital statistics systems that can be described as functional but the performance of which is inadequate, especially in relation to the quality of death registration and of mortality statistics.
- The rest of the population of the Region (316 million, 53%) live in the remaining 8 countries with civil registration and vital statistics systems described as dysfunctional and weak.
- Annually, more than 6 million births, constituting approximately 40% of total annual births in the Region, are not legally recognized or captured by registration systems.
- Annually, at least 3 million deaths or two thirds of total annual deaths in the Region, are not being registered. Of the deaths that are registered, it is estimated that 56% were medically certified and coded according to the International Classification of Diseases (ICD). However, assessment of the quality of coding in a number of countries showed that a substantial proportion of deaths are coded to inappropriate or ill-defined causes.

8. The challenges facing civil registration and vital statistics systems in the Region can be summarized as follows: a) lack of awareness of the importance of civil registration and vital statistics and the consequent lack of high-level political support; b) inadequacy of the legal framework under which civil registration and vital statistics operates; c) weakness of registration infrastructure and capacities and unavailability of resources to support them; d) inadequate governance, coordination and organization, associated with the multi-stakeholder nature of the civil registration and vital statistics systems; e) inadequate quality of the registration process and its legal and statistical products; f) incompleteness and poor quality of death certificates.

Purpose and scope of the regional strategy

9. Following a review of the findings by civil registration and vital statistics stakeholders from Member States and representatives of international development partners at regional meetings during 2013, consensus was reached on the need to develop a regional strategy to guide and support countries to improve their civil registration and vital statistics. In September 2013, the regional partners discussed and endorsed the draft strategy. The goal of the regional strategy is, through improved civil registration and the increased availability and use of reliable vital statistics, to contribute to the improvement of evidence-based policymaking, efficiency in resource allocation and good governance, as well as the progressive realization of the basic rights of all individuals. In support of this goal, the aims of the regional strategy are to:

- mobilize high-level political commitment and support for civil registration and vital statistics improvement at regional and country levels and provide guidance to inform policy decisions in this regard;
- provide a framework to guide and support the development of national civil registration and vital statistics improvement plans and identify options for action from which countries can select those most relevant and appropriate to their circumstances;
- provide development partners, regional organizations and donors involved in the regional strategy formulation with a framework around which they can align their inputs in support of civil registration and vital statistics systems in the Region; and
- enable the monitoring and evaluation of progress in strengthening civil registration and vital statistics systems on a comparable basis over time and between countries.

10. The strategy is intended to guide and support the improvement of civil registration and vital statistics systems in the Region over the period 2014–2019. It is built around seven strategic domains and comprises a menu of interventions from which Member States can draw based on the level of development of their civil registration and vital statistics systems, country contexts, resources and capacities. A strategic plan outlines both country actions and supportive activities at regional level. A monitoring and evaluation framework is also outlined including country and regional indicators.¹ The strategic domains are as follows.

- Ensure a sound legal and regulatory framework for civil registration and vital statistics systems.
- Strengthen registration infrastructure, resources and capacities.
- Remove barriers at all levels to registration and the issuance of related legal documentation.
- Improve mortality certification and coding practices.
- Improve production, use and dissemination of vital statistics.
- Improve intersectoral coordination and alignment among civil registration and vital statistics stakeholders.
- Maintain and strengthen the existing regional and global partnerships in support of country strategies.

¹ For further details see the full strategy

Key country actions

11. The experiences of countries that have successfully embarked on efforts to improve civil registration and vital statistics systems demonstrate that, although circumstances and starting points vary, there are common actions to be taken, which can happen in parallel and in an iterative manner. The strategy will guide countries through the implementation of several key actions. These are:

- conduct a standards-based assessment of current status, capacities and resources;
- use the results of the assessment to generate high-level political commitment and cross-sectoral support for improving the civil registration and vital statistics system;
- establish, or strengthen an existing, national coordination and oversight mechanism to ensure productive collaboration across various government departments, foster involvement of nongovernmental entities, including civil society representatives, and monitor progress;
- formulate a multisectoral national action plan that addresses the range of challenges and includes defined feasible, measurable results within the framework of the outcomes of the regional strategic plan;
- mobilize the resources needed, including human, technical and financial resources;
- implement the multisectoral national action plan, document experiences and lessons learnt, and monitor and evaluate progress.

12. Broad-based and high-level political support is necessary for the successful implementation of multisectoral national action plans, especially with regard to resource allocation and legislative review. Pathways and time-scales for the multisectoral national action plans will vary across countries depending on the current status of their civil registration and vital statistics systems, institutional, legal and administrative characteristics, and capacities and stage of development.

13. The establishment of a national multistakeholder mechanism to coordinate the assessment and the development and implementation of a multisectoral national action plan is of critical importance for ensuring sustainability and the attainment of measureable improvements. The coordination mechanism should be able to directly involve or reach out to all relevant stakeholders. Core agencies at the national-level comprise those with responsibilities for registration, such as: civil registration offices, local government, and ministries of justice or the interior; those responsible for the production and dissemination of vital statistics; and the health sector, which has a particularly important role to play in the notification of vital events and in the accurate determination of causes of death. Other important stakeholders and potential partners include: ministries of education, labour, interior, public information or foreign affairs; academic institutions and researchers; religious authorities; the business, insurance and private sectors; donors and development partners; civil society and nongovernmental organizations, and representatives of communities. Each country will determine the precise nature and composition of the coordination body, using existing coordination mechanisms when possible.

Regional action

14. WHO has chosen to pioneer the work for the improvement of the civil registration and vital statistics systems as part of its focus on specific identified priorities for its work in the Region over the coming years. At the top of these priorities is the strengthening of health systems and the building of regional information capacities. The weakness of the civil registration and vital statistics systems in the Region is having a negative impact on the type and quality of information available to support health development activities in the Region.

15. Action at the regional level for the implementation of this strategy will be initiated by the endorsement of the strategy by the WHO Regional Committee for the Eastern Mediterranean. Other regional activities will be organized for mobilization of technical and other resources by WHO and partners to support country implementation of the strategy. Coordination between Member States and exchange of experiences and good practices will also be facilitated at the regional level.

16. WHO and participating agencies intend to sustain and strengthen the partnership approach at the regional level and to extend the approach to support for countries. The Regional Office is taking steps to strengthen its own capacities and is establishing a network of regional experts to respond to technical support needs from Member States. The roles of WHO and its partners in support of this strategy can be summarized in three functions: a) advocacy to mobilize political, technical and material support; b) coordination to harmonize inputs and support from different international agencies and development partners (each according to its mandate) at regional and country levels; and c) technical support and capacity-building in line with each country's priorities.

Options for governance and coordination

17. WHO is fully cognizant of the multistakeholder and pluralistic nature of civil registration and vital statistics systems and the need for the participation of all interested parties in improvement efforts. Thus the Regional Office planned from the start to involve relevant agencies and partners at the regional level in this regional initiative, such as: the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (UNESCWA), United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP), United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA), UNFPA, United Nations Human Rights Council, UNICEF, UNHCR, United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA), CDC, League of Arab States and African Development Bank in addition to WHO/HQ and WHO Regional Offices.

18. In order to provide overall strategic guidance and oversight to the implementation of the regional strategic plan, consideration may be given to the establishment of a regional coordination group, which would function within the framework defined by the regional strategic plan, consistent with the mandates of the governments and national and international development partners involved. Such a group would bring together country implementing agencies, development partners, training and research institutions and nongovernmental organizations. The group would help foster coordination and integration of the implementation of the regional strategic plan with other relevant capacity development activities with a view to synergy, complementarity and greater impact. An additional useful mechanism would be a regional repository that would promote and facilitate the exchange of expertise, experiences, resources and other information on improving civil registration and vital statistics systems. Such a body could report on accomplishments, compile lessons learnt and foster South–South and peer-to-peer cooperation to improve systems. The repository could manage a web-based information forum, organize knowledge exchange seminars and facilitate exchange visits. It could also develop a directory of stakeholders, such as development partners and experts, and a resource base, comprising training and advocacy materials, computer-based resource kits, and assessment and analysis tools. It could also maintain a database of completed assessments of civil registration and vital statistics systems and national action plans. The repository could be hosted by one of the regional development partners committed to the regional strategic plan.

Conclusions and the way forward

19. The formal registration of the important events in people's lives is critical for the protection of rights, a core component of good governance and sound administration, and crucial for producing reliable statistics on the demographics and health of the population. The improvement of civil registration and vital statistics systems is thus a development imperative and will be central to the achievement of the health and development agenda post 2015, including universal health coverage.

This regional strategy for the Eastern Mediterranean Region is intended to stimulate and support countries in taking the actions needed to strengthen civil registration and vital statistics systems.

20. The regional strategy launches a collective intervention across the Region to improve civil registration and vital statistics systems in ways that are efficient and evidence-based. It offers a systematic approach to addressing the widespread fragmentation, weak infrastructure and poor quality outputs of the current systems in the Region. Partnership between stakeholders and development partners is a key prerequisite for the successful implementation of this strategy at both country and regional levels.

21. Ministries of health in the Region will need to assume stewardship, brokering and interlocutor roles in partnership with other actors within their respective governments. It is essential that a collaborative multi-agency approach is adopted, emphasizing the roles of different stakeholders and the particular responsibilities of the public health sector in terms of the notification of vital events, the certification of causes of death and the production of vital statistics. Overall, the proposed strategy provides a framework of action for the period of 2014–2019, illustrating the roles and responsibilities of all pertinent stakeholders nationally and regionally, including countries and WHO.

References

1. United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs Statistics Division. *Principles and recommendations for a vital statistics system (Revision 2)*. New York, United Nations, 2001. Available at: http://unstats.un.org/unsd/publication/SeriesM/SeriesM_19rev2E.pdf Accessed 22 August 2012.