Economic Commission for Africa
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Africa Programme on Accelerated Improvement of Civil Registration and Vital Statistics Systems

Progress report

I. Introduction

1.   The Africa Programme on Accelerated Improvement of Civil Registration and Vital Statistics Systems was launched in 2012 at the second session of the Conference of African Ministers Responsible for Civil Registration. Since then, systematic and coordinated implementation of the Africa Programme has helped to build significant momentum towards the improvement of civil registration and vital statistics systems across the continent. The Africa Programme is currently being implemented on the basis of policy and programmatic guidance provided in the resolutions adopted at the five sessions of the Conference of African Ministers Responsible for Civil Registration.

2.   At the first session, held in Addis Ababa in 2010, ministers underscored that civil registration and vital statistics were a development imperative for Africa and made a strong commitment to improving practices in that regard in their countries. At the second session, held in Durban, South Africa, in 2012, ministers recommended specific and practical steps to be taken, with a view to establishing comprehensive and efficient civil registration and vital statistics systems; urged three pan-African institutions, namely, the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA), the African Union Commission (AUC) and the African Development Bank (AfDB), to support the Africa Programme, and called upon other development partners to participate in that regional initiative. At the third session, held in Yamoussoukro, Côte d'Ivoire, in 2015, it was recommended, among other things, that a system for the registration in real time of death and cause of death should be established, that strong links should be established between national civil registration and national identity systems, and that statistics from civil registration systems should be analysed and disseminated appropriately. At the fourth session, held in Nouakchott in 2017, the civil registration and vital statistics strategic plan (2017−2021) was endorsed and the establishment of the Africa Civil Registration and Vital Statistics Systems Improvement Fund was approved. The fifth session was held in Lusaka in 2019 under the theme "Innovative civil registration and vital statistics systems: foundation for universal identity management".

3.   The political commitment to the Africa Programme at the national level, coupled with regional technical and capacity-building support, has helped

countries to make a paradigm shift from a fragmented and ad hoc approach to more holistic and integrated efforts. Most African countries today have civil registration laws for systematically registering vital events, including births, deaths, fetal deaths, marriages and divorces. A recent report by the United Nations Children's Fund showed that there had been improvement in the registration of vital events in Africa in the past 5 years, which now stands at 52 per cent for birth registration and about 40 per cent for death registration. However, there is need to double efforts in that regard to achieve Sustainable Development Goal target 16.9 (by 2030, provide legal identity for all, including birth registration).

4.	The present report contains a review of the progress made in the implementation of the Africa Programme in the period from October 2018 to October 2020, in the light of the commitments made by the African ministers responsible for civil registration.

## II.	Fifth session of the Conference of African Ministers Responsible for Civil Registration

5.	The Economic Commission for Africa, in collaboration with the African Union Commission and the African Development Bank, as well as other partners, organized the fifth session of the Conference of African Ministers Responsible for Civil Registration, held in Lusaka from 14 to 18 October 2019 under the theme: "Innovative civil registration and vital statistics systems: foundation for legal identity management". The Conference was attended by 27 ministers or deputies responsible for civil registration, health, identification management or information and communications technology, and over 1,200 experts representing 53 member States and a number of regional and international organizations. A total of 41 recommendations were issued during the expert segment, which were subsequently endorsed by the ministers during the ministerial segment.

6.	Some of the key messages from the Conference were as follows:

(a)	To make systemic improvements in registration offices, there is a need to apply a process-centric approach to assess, analyse and redesign civil registration and vital statistics business processes to improve overall efficiency, and, where digital solutions are deemed appropriate, to ensure that platforms are fit-for-purpose, and that standards are compliant, locally configurable and administrable, avoid vendor lock-in, and are financially sustainable, with a clear total cost of ownership.

(b)	There is need to develop holistic identity systems that use civil registers that include all vital events, as the source of identity data for the issuance of identification credentials and identity management. The systems should be integrated, interoperable and linked by a unique identification number, to bring efficiency in the provision of services across different government functions and the private sector.

(c)	There is need to harmonize legislation governing civil registration and digital identity management, to ensure the interoperability of systems by using appropriate information and communications technology assets.

(d)	There is need to strengthen investments in digitizing civil registration and vital statistics systems to facilitate interoperability between the national civil registration and vital statistics systems and identity management systems, within a framework of strong data protection policies.

(e)	Member States should be encouraged to routinely publish vital statistics based on the civil registration records of births, marriages, divorces and deaths, including causes of death, even if incomplete, and this should be

adopted as a strategy for strengthening civil registration and vital statistics systems;

(f)   Member States declared their commitment to ensuring that integrated civil registration and vital statistics systems and digital identity management systems reached their full potential (to be measured in terms of progress in achieving the Goals of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the aspirations of Agenda 2063: The Africa We Want).

(g)   Member States proposed to establish an expert group on civil registration and vital statistics and digital identification integration.

7.   In addition, the ministers requested the secretariat of the Africa Programme, in collaboration with the interim Committee of African Registrars General, to report periodically to the Chair of the Bureau of the Conference on the progress made in respect of the recommendations. In that regard, as assessment of progress towards the implementation of the resolutions that emerged from the fifth session will be undertaken in the first quarter of 2021, in preparation for the presentation of a status reporting at the sixth session of the Conference, to be held in Maputo in October 2021.

8.   In the interval between the fifth and sixth sessions, an online meeting of permanent secretaries and registrars general of all African member States was held in September 2020 under the chairmanship of the representative of Zambia. The goals of the meeting were as follows:

(a)   To review the progress made since the fifth session of the Conference of African Ministers Responsible for Civil Registration;

(b)   To review the impact that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on civil registration systems in Africa and to devise a plan for rebuilding these systems given the severe disruption caused by the pandemic;

(c)   To discuss plans for the forthcoming sixth session of the Conference, to be held in Maputo in October 2021.

9.   The September meeting was a precursor to a meeting of African ministers responsible for civil registration to be held at the end of 2020.

III. Progress in implementing the Africa Programme on Accelerated Improvement of Civil Registration and Vital Statistics Systems

10.   Since its inception, the Africa Programme has made significant progress in strengthening civil registration and vital statistics systems across the continent. The number of countries that have conducted comprehensive assessments of their civil registration and vital statistics systems has increased from 32 in May 2018 to 42 in September 2020. The Africa Programme has contributed immensely to that process by supporting the development of resource materials and helping governments to mobilize the financial resources needed to conduct their civil registration and vital statistics assessments and formulate civil registration and vital statistics improvement plans. The status of each country's assessments and plans is detailed in the table below.

Table
Status of national assessments of civil registration and vital statistics systems

No.	Country	Assessment	Plan
1.	Algeria	Rapid assessment completed	Developed
2.	Angola	Comprehensive assessment completed	Developed
3.	Benin	Rapid assessment completed	Developed
4.	Botswana	Comprehensive assessment completed	Developed
5.	Burkina Faso	Comprehensive assessment completed	Developed

6.	Burundi	Comprehensive assessment completed	Developed
7.	Cameroon	Comprehensive assessment completed	Developed
8.	Cabo Verde	Not initiated	
9.	Central African Republic	Civil registration authority sources indicate that the assessment has been conducted, but no report has been seen	Not known
10.	Chad	Comprehensive assessment completed	Developed
11.	Comoros	Not initiated	
12.	Congo	Not initiated	
13.	Côte d'Ivoire	Comprehensive assessment completed	Developed
14.	Democratic Republic of the Congo	Initiated	Developed
15.	Djibouti	Rapid assessment completed	Developed
16.	Egypt	Rapid assessment completed	Developed
17.	Equatorial Guinea	Not initiated	
18.	Eritrea	Not initiated	
19.	Eswatini	Comprehensive assessment completed	Developed
20.	Ethiopia	In progress	In progress
21.	Gabon	Initiated	
22.	Gambia	Comprehensive assessment completed	Developed on the basis of the rapid assessment
23.	Ghana	Comprehensive assessment completed	Developed
24.	Guinea	Initiated	Developed
25.	Guinea-Bissau	Initiated	
26.	Kenya	Comprehensive assessment completed	Developed
27.	Lesotho	Comprehensive assessment completed	Developed
28.	Liberia	Comprehensive assessment completed	Developed
29.	Libya	Not initiated	
30.	Madagascar	Completed	Completed
31.	Malawi	Rapid assessment completed	
32.	Mali	Comprehensive assessment completed	Developed
33.	Mauritania	Initiated	
34.	Mauritius	Not initiated	
35.	Morocco	Rapid assessment completed	Developed
36.	Mozambique	Comprehensive assessment completed	Developed
37.	Namibia	Comprehensive assessment completed	Developed
38.	Niger	Comprehensive assessment completed	Developed
39.	Nigeria	Comprehensive assessment completed	Developed
40.	Rwanda	Comprehensive assessment completed	Developed
41.	Sao Tome and Principe	Not initiated	
42.	Senegal	Comprehensive assessment completed	In progress
43.	Seychelles	Not initiated	
44.	Sierra Leone	Completed	Completed
45.	Somalia	Rapid assessment completed	Developed
46.	South Africa	Comprehensive assessment completed	Developed
47.	South Sudan	Not initiated	
48.	Sudan	Rapid assessment completed	Developed
49.	Tanzania, United Republic of	Comprehensive assessment completed	Developed
50.	Togo	Not initiated	
51.	Tunisia	Rapid assessment completed	Developed
52.	Uganda	Comprehensive assessment completed	Developed
53.	Zambia	Comprehensive assessment completed	Developed
54.	Zimbabwe	Initiated	

11.   The production of vital statistics reports has improved. A survey by ECA in August 2019 showed that 68 per cent of the 40 countries that responded had compiled vital statistics on births and deaths. However, only 38 per cent of those countries produced regular vital statistics reports.

12.   The survey also showed that about 50 per cent of countries in Africa had fully or partially computerized registration systems, but only 12 countries had fully digitized systems. Only 28 per cent of African countries were able to capture death records electronically.

IV. Day to commemorate civil registration and vital statistics in Africa

13.   At the fourth session of the Conference of African Ministers Responsible for Civil Registration, held in Nouakchott in December 2017, the ministers recommended that 10 August be declared the day of registration of vital statistics and invited African Union member States to observe the day. The day has been commemorated every year since 2018.

14.   The second commemoration of civil registration and vital statistics in Africa was held on 10 August 2019 under the theme, "Birth certificates for all: fundamental for protecting human rights and promoting inclusion". The demand for registration services remains weak because many people are not sufficiently aware of the importance of civil registration for them and their families, or of the implications that this has for improving their access to core government services. The theme was chosen to improve public awareness of the importance of making everyone visible in Africa through universal birth registration and certification.

15.   The third commemoration of civil registration and vital statistics in Africa was held on 10 August 2020 under the theme, "Civil registration and vital statistics: an essential service for monitoring and mitigating the impact of emergencies". Emergencies like the COVID-19 pandemic disrupt the provision of civil registration services. The current pandemic has shown the vulnerabilities of civil registration systems when such services are needed the most. Evidence is showing that access to civil registration is being hindered by social distancing, restrictions on movement, general apathy among the populace, and the closure of local government service centres. The number of countries that officially marked the day has yet to be determined.

16.   For the first time, in 2020, the day commemorating civil registration and vital statistics in Africa was part of a week-long series of webinars that focused on civil registration and vital statistics on the continent, during which all stakeholders were engaged on issues affecting the performance of civil registration offices in Africa. The webinars focused on the following topics:

(a)   Improving reporting of deaths and cause of death by the medical community in the context of COVID-19;

(b)   Promoting access for forcibly displaced persons and stateless people to national civil registration and vital statistics systems in Africa in the age of COVID-19;

(c)   Re-engineering civil registration systems in Africa based on the COVID-19 experience;

(d)   Status of efforts to generate vital statistics from civil registration records.

17.   The main conclusion drawn from the webinars was that civil registration offices needed both to increase investments in online platforms for registration and to strengthen collaboration with key stakeholders such as ministries of health to ensure that events are registered as they occur.

V.   Capacity-building initiatives

18.   The secretariat of the Africa Programme, in collaboration with the Centre of Excellence for Civil Registration and Vital Statistics Systems (housed at the International Development Research Centre), the Bloomberg Philanthropies Data for Health Initiative, and Vital Strategies, developed a framework for the improvement of civil registration and vital statistics systems. To build a well-functioning systems for civil registration and vital statistics, countries will need

to take transformative measures to continuously improve existing systems to meet the ever-growing, modern-day challenges to provide their populations with access to legal documents as evidence of identity, civil status and family relations and to produce timely vital statistics. Guidelines have been developed as part of the Africa Programme to help countries to deal with these challenges. After years of conducting comprehensive assessments, the time has come for countries to focus more on an end-to-end, process-centric approach to strengthen their civil registration and vital statistics systems.

19. A business process improvement framework for civil registration and vital statistics has been developed as guidance for countries in using a multi-sectoral, participatory approach to continually assess civil registration and vital statistics processes and improve their performance. The framework guides countries in the process-centric approach of analyzing and assessing civil registration and vital statistics business processes, redesigning them, and developing strategic and action plans to implement the desired changes. The framework is composed of three stages: (a) stage 1: assessment, analysis, and redesign; (b) stage 2: development of the strategic and action plan; and (c) stage 3: implementation, monitoring, and evaluation.

20. The framework can be applied in a modular or a comprehensive way, depending on the strategic value of investing in a particular civil registration and vital statistics process and the aspects of the relevant systems that need improvement. The long-term utility of the process-centric approach to such systems is realized when a country undertakes process analysis and redesign as part of continuous system improvement. The resources needed for this exercise should be mobilized to evaluate existing system performance.

VI. Technical materials

21. To date, ECA has produced snapshot reports of civil registration and vital statistics systems for 19 countries, as follows:

(a) Snapshots for 14 countries (Botswana, Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Madagascar, Malawi, Mali, Mauritania, Namibia, the Niger, Rwanda, South Africa, Tunisia and Zambia) have been finalized and are undergoing editing and country approval.

(b) Snapshots for 5 countries (Angola, Chad, Egypt, Somalia and Zimbabwe) are pending finalization.

(c) Snapshots for an additional 5 countries (Benin, Eswatini, Lesotho, the Sudan and South Sudan) have been added to the drafting programme.

22. The snapshots provide information on the country's background; selected indicators that are relevant for civil registration and vital statistics improvement processes; the structure of the national civil registration and vital statistics system; business processes; the extent of stakeholder activities; and the resources available to strengthen civil registration and vital statistics systems to improve country-level coordination and collaboration among all stakeholders. The snapshots will also serve as an important benchmarking tool for improvement initiatives in other countries.

23. ECA, in collaboration with Centre of Excellence for Civil Registration and Vital Statistics Systems, has produced technical briefs based on observations of the effects of COVID-19 on civil registration systems. The first brief, entitled "Rapid assessment of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on civil registration and vital statistics systems in Africa", was based on the survey conducted by ECA to access the impact of COVID-19 on operations in various countries. The results show that it is imperative that civil registration systems continue to function during emergencies, as they are classified as essential services. Countries in Africa need to develop disaster-resilient civil registration

systems that can continue to function in precarious circumstances. Countries with automated registration systems have had minimal disruptions; online tools make it possible for clients to provide notification of and register vital events as they occur, which allows for continuity. It is therefore essential that concerted efforts be made to promote the development and use of digital civil registration systems in African countries.

24. The second technical brief, entitled "Civil registration systems as enablers of emergency response to the COVID-19 crisis: Namibia's emergency income grant", showed the benefits of long-term and strategic investments in building digitized, robust civil registration and identity ecosystems, and in enabling interoperability among digitized government databases. The experience of Namibia has shown that having identity data in a digital format and being able to verify identity data across a range of functional databases allows authorities to verify within a short time frame that all eligibility criteria have been met.

25. The third technical brief, entitled "E-notification of vital events: adaptable innovations for business continuity of civil registration in emergency situations". The brief shows the potential of mobile phones in increasing the operational efficiency of civil registration systems in Africa. Given the extensive use of mobile devices in Africa, digital technologies provide an incomparable opportunity to drive the agenda for accelerating the improvement of civil registration and vital statistics systems, with a view to providing a legal identity to all on the continent. Technology provides the platform for interoperability and real-time data sharing for efficient governance and e-commerce, bringing together all development efforts through interconnected systems across the public and private sectors. Inclusive and trustworthy civil registration and digital identification systems are the foundation for accelerating progress towards the achievement of many Sustainable Development Goal targets.

VII. United Nations Legal Identity Agenda

26. The United Nations Legal Identity Agenda, which advocates a global life cycle model of legal identity from birth to death, was introduced in 2019 to address the challenges faced by Member States in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals, in particular target 16.9 (by 2030, provide legal identity for all, including birth registration). The key objective of the Agenda is to ensure a comprehensive, harmonized and coordinated approach by all United Nations agencies, funds and programmes, as well as the World Bank Group, in providing advice and support to Member States in the development of holistic, interoperable and sustainable civil registration, vital statistics and identity management systems. The benchmark goal of the Agenda is to reduce the global identity gap by 300 million by 2025. Through the Agenda, the United Nations and the World Bank Group will support Member States to ensure that the legal frameworks, technical expertise and technology infrastructure are in place to strengthen civil registration, vital statistics and identification management systems in a holistic and interoperable manner.

27. At the fifth session of the Conference of the African Ministers Responsible for Civil Registration, the ministers encouraged all countries on the continent to ensure the implementation of the United Nations Legal Identity Agenda. The ministers also emphasized that birth registration and birth certificates were a means of protecting children's rights, their access to social services such as health, education and employment, and their eligibility to vote as soon as they reached the required age. It was also emphasized that a comprehensive approach to legal identity required interoperability among civil registration, vital statistics and national identification systems. These systems

must be linked to a unique identification number assigned at birth and used throughout the life of an individual.

28.   Progress has been made in the implementation of the United Nations Legal Identity Agenda. Rapid assessments have been completed in the following pilot counties: Cameroon, Côte d'Ivoire, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Kenya, Liberia, Mozambique, the Niger, Nigeria, Sierra Leone and Zambia. Technical assistance is being provided to other countries to build integrated systems.

VIII. Impact of COVID-19 on civil registration and vital statistical systems

29.   Emergencies like the current COVID-19 pandemic disrupt the provision of civil registration services. African governments have responded by implementing various strategies to flatten the disease curve that range from simple restrictions to contain the virus, to isolation of cities and regions that have been identified as epicenters; while in some countries, total lockdowns have been imposed. These measures have had an impact on activities and programmes in both the public and private sectors. Some of the most affected subsectors include statistical and data management, health, education, food security, industry and public services. Civil registration systems have not been spared and have already begun to experience disruptions at all levels.

30.   The findings from the rapid assessment conducted by the United Nations Legal Identity Taskforce in April 2020 have shown that the reactions by governments differed across countries, ranging from total shutdown, to the partial provision of services, to the assignment of a lower priority for the registration of certain vital events, to uninterrupted services. There is evidence that access to civil registration is being hindered by social distancing, movement restrictions, general apathy of the populace towards going to registration centres, and the closure of local government service centres. An assessment carried out by ECA in April 2020 showed that only 9 countries had reported that services had not been affected, while 23 countries had reported partial closures and 2 countries had totally closed their registration offices.

31.   About 75 per cent of civil registration offices across the continent were affected, either with services being discontinued as offices were closed, or with reduced services, limited office hours or limited staff on duty. It was also noted that civil registration had been affected by travel restrictions and stay-at-home orders, given that neither registration office staff nor potential clients were able to travel to the offices for the required face-to-face meeting with a civil registrar.

32.   The COVID-19 pandemic has revealed the weaknesses in civil registration systems in Africa. There have been heightened demands for national statistical systems to provide the data needed to manage the crisis, including its socioeconomic effects. However, in 47 African countries the systems for registering deaths were not fully-functional and failed to provide the real-time data that are the gold standard for measuring mortality, which has proved crucial during the current pandemic. Civil registration has an important role to play during the pandemic as it should provide a tally of all deaths, from all causes, and make mortality data rapidly available to the public and to decision-makers in real-time. However, civil registration systems in Africa are not fulfilling this mandate, as the registration of deaths is currently incomplete in all but seven countries. To monitor the evolution of the pandemic, countries have been relying on hospital reporting of deaths among patients identified as positive for COVID-19. However, such data are often incomplete because they do not include those who die outside hospital settings, such as at home or in social care institutions. Reliance on hospital figures alone has led to an underestimation of the scale of the pandemic.

33.   ECA organized a number of webinars on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on civil registration and vital statistics systems in order to address: (a) international standards for civil registration and vital statistics and their implementation in various countries/areas; (b) the impact on the operations and maintenance of civil registration systems and the production of vital statistics; (c) the short-, medium- and long-term consequences for the registration of vital events; and (d) the need to ensure universal civil registration of all vital events and the production of comprehensive, reliable and regular vital statistics.

IX.   Way forward

34.   The following four key recommendations have been proposed to transform the performance of civil registration systems:

(a)   First, civil registration systems and the vital statistics that are generated must be strengthened as core components of the response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Civil registration must be recognized as an essential service even during a prolonged lockdown because of their intrinsic value for upholding human rights, their administrative utility and their use in the production of vital statistics.

(b)   Second, civil registration systems need to harness the potential of technologies that are now widely available. The potential of mobile phones to increase the operational efficiency of civil registration systems in Africa is immense and could be a game-changer. Given the extensive use of mobile devices in Africa, digital technology can serve as an incomparable vehicle for advancing the Africa Programme on Accelerated Improvement of Civil Registration and Vital Statistics and United Nations Legal Identity Agenda, for the benefit of all on the continent.

(c)   Third, digitalization of civil registration processes (from notification to certification) will convert systems from being slow, passive, reactive and dependent on in-person interaction, to being resilient, proactive and agile. Automated services will reduce the face-to-face interaction required for the acquisition of vital-event certificates.

(d)   Fourth, civil registration systems need to be interoperable and reflect a life cycle approach that accounts for people as they enter the system upon birth, as they progress through various stages of life, and until they exit the system upon death. Technology provides the platform for interoperability and real-time data-sharing for efficient management in that regard.

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