



**Fifth Conference of African Ministers Responsible  
for Civil Registration**  
Lusaka, Zambia  
14-18 October 2019

CRM5/2019/19

# Taking a holistic approach to legal identity: good practices from integrating civil registration and vital statistics and identity systems around the world<sup>1</sup>

*Conference Theme: Innovative Civil Registration and Vital Statistics System: Foundation for Legal Identity Management*



**APAI-CRVS**  
Everyone visible in Africa



**Decade for Repositioning  
of Civil Registration and  
Vital Statistics in Africa  
2017-2026**



**CENTRE OF EXCELLENCE  
for CRVS Systems**



<sup>1</sup> Submitted by the Centre of Excellence for Civil Registration and Vital Statistics Systems and the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development Data.



## I. Background

1. Well-functioning civil registration and vital statistics (CRVS) systems, including birth registration, are quintessential to fulfil the promise of leaving no one behind and delivering on the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Without closing the current identity gap and knowing who people are, where they are and what their needs and aspirations are, it is difficult to put in place cost-effective evidence-based interventions for improved health, economics and other outcomes.

2. The World Bank<sup>2</sup> estimates that 1 billion people cannot legally prove their identity. This makes them invisible in the eyes of the law, leaving them unprotected and often unable to exercise their rights, such as the right to education, representation and vote. It also renders access to health, social protection and financial services even more difficult. In terms of birth registration, which establishes a child's legal identity,<sup>3</sup> the average registration rate globally is 73 per cent. In sub-Saharan Africa, only 46 per cent of all children under 5 years of age have had their births registered.<sup>4</sup> These figures show how far behind the world is in providing children, women and men with access to basic rights and opportunities enabled by legal documentation.

3. The past five years have seen a rapidly increasing interest and investment in digital identity systems, e-governance and biometrics technology by a range of Governments, development partners and the private sector in Africa. This rising interest offers opportunities for a larger part of the population to be protected by legal documents. However, the deployment or strengthening of identity management systems has sometimes taken place at the expense of strengthening civil registration, resulting in outdated and low-quality data, and thus unreliable population registers and poor service delivery. In many countries, there are also huge gaps in coverage and completeness, leading to an inability of civil registration and statistical offices to produce quality real-time disaggregated data and therefore a continuous reliance on alternative data sources, such as surveys for population estimates.

4. A holistic approach to CRVS and identity systems that integrates these elements – through a conducive legal framework, effective institutional arrangements, technical interoperability, accessibility to services, community participation and social and behaviour change to improve coverage – is widely viewed as the best way to ensure a sustainable and reliable identity ecosystem. Such systems can effectively verify people's identities, maintain an up-to-date repository of identity information, produce timely and accurate population data for statistical purposes, enable access to key services and protect rights.

5. The Centre of Excellence for Civil Registration and Vital Statistics Systems, housed at the International Development Research Centre in Ottawa, Canada, and the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development Data have developed a compendium of good practices on the integration of CRVS and identity systems through a holistic approach.

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<sup>2</sup> See <https://id4d.worldbank.org/global-dataset>.

<sup>3</sup> Legal identity, defined as the basic characteristics of an individual's identity, allows the individual to be protected in the eyes of the law and the State to fulfil its obligations in terms of national law and as a signatory to different international covenants and conventions on human rights. Legal identity, including birth registration, can facilitate access to services and protection. It is particularly important for women and girls who tend to fall behind in accessing civil registration services and other identity documents, such as national identity cards.

<sup>4</sup> See <https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/report/2019/The-Sustainable-Development-Goals-Report-2019.pdf>.

## **II. Purpose of this issue paper**

6. The purpose of this issue paper is to share key findings and advocate for a holistic approach to the development of CRVS and identity systems in Africa.

7. The compendium documents reflect the experiences of six countries – Armenia, Ecuador, Kyrgyzstan, Namibia, the Netherlands and Peru. These countries have diverse experiences of building legal identity ecosystems in different parts of the world, with different constitutional systems, administrative systems, traditions and institutional arrangements. They outline good practices employed by the different countries and highlight how their very different starting points and challenges were not an obstacle to success. They also highlight that there are many ways to adopt a holistic approach to ensure their residents' rights, privileges, obligations and production of vital statistics.

## **III. Holistic approach to civil registration, vital statistics and identity management**

8. The case studies of all six countries show that a CRVS system with near universal coverage, operating as a compulsory, universal, permanent and confidential process, is a precondition for the implementation of a holistic identity ecosystem. This key tenet of the holistic approach reflects the understanding that legal identity is dynamic. Many persons change their identity data over time. For instance, birth registration is the first moment that a baby's legal identity is recorded by the State, from which point they are recognized as a person before the law. Over time, a child can be adopted and change his or her name or surname or gender description. By contrast, when an identification credential is issued, it represents a person's identity at the point that the credential is requested and issued. While information from such credentials can be used to enrol users in specific services, it is understood that this information may not always be up to date. Civil registration systems are designed as administrative frameworks that, when implemented properly, capture all vital events as they occur. By adopting a holistic approach and drawing on information on vital events from the civil registration system, the case studies show that Governments are better able to effectively serve their populations.

9. The cases also show that the relationship between civil registration and identity systems is mutually reinforcing. An example common to all six countries is the requirement that people present a national identity credential when registering a vital event for the purposes of identity verification. The role that the identity management system plays in authentication is critical to the overall functioning of the integrated system.

10. In the light of the lessons learned, current practice in civil registration and civil identification is converging towards a holistic approach by introducing interoperability between CRVS and identity systems, or at least their administrative integration. Digitization of paper-based records and advances in technology have greatly facilitated this trend.

## **IV. The contribution of digitization to system effectiveness and efficiency**

11. Across the case studies, digitization has dramatically increased the efficiency of data sharing. It has changed the way that business processes for registration and identification are designed, including how vital events are defined, configured, created, stored, shared and processed. These new systems are commonly referred to as digital national population registers.

The digitization process, as well as new tools such as these registers, now provide the means to integrate what often used to be multiple fragmented systems into a seamless framework that reinforces the holistic approach to CRVS and identity management.

12. Individual country experiences show that there are many pathways to digitization, and each has chosen the approach that best suits its national circumstances. It is also important to note that digitization has brought new risks, particularly to personal privacy, underscoring the importance of having a strong legal framework for the protection of personal data and ensuring that data processing takes place in a regulated environment.

13. Close collaboration and interoperability between civil registration, statistical and identity system authorities also allow vital demographic and health statistics to be produced in a timely manner, which is essential for national planning and policy development. The usage of data from civil registration and identity systems by the statistical authorities also helps to pinpoint data quality issues and gaps in registration.

14. While the case studies in the compendium provide examples of countries that already had well developed civil registration systems, including near universal coverage, it does not mean that other countries with less developed systems – or without legacy systems – will need to wait decades before their CRVS systems are at a level of development to adopt the holistic approach. Interim solutions could be used to leverage existing data collected as part of identity issuance, to start building a digitized CRVS system and increase coverage in parallel. Over time, the volume of identity information available directly from the civil register will increase, while all deaths, including their causes as well as and other vital events such as marriage, divorce or change of name, will be available from the moment the digitized CRVS system is operationalized.

15. Several lessons can be drawn from the case studies to support this approach. Over extensive periods of time, country authorities can operate with vital events records that have been registered relatively recently. In most of the cases examined, the process of digitization of all historical records is still an ongoing process.

## **V. Key strategies for implementing the holistic approach**

16. Central to the implementation of a holistic approach to CRVS and identity management is designing the legal, administrative and technical framework for sharing identity data between different systems, including the health system, which is responsible for the notification of births and deaths.

17. A key element of all the systems examined in this compendium is that the civil registration system operates as a compulsory, universal, permanent and confidential process and that it has achieved coverage completeness above 90 percent, often close to 100 percent. All other parts of the identity system are built on these core assumptions and operate on the understanding that at any point when identity data is required, up-to-date identity data can be obtained from the civil registration system. To meet this requirement, civil registration records should be transferred to digital format and made available to other parts of the identity system in a regulated environment.

## **VI. Sharing identity information with other functional registers leads to significant benefits**

18. Governments operate identity systems to fulfil the right of legal recognition, and to issue proof of identity to individuals to facilitate their rights and access to services. A holistic approach to CRVS and identity systems ensures that this process takes place in a legally defined environment, leaving little room for arbitrary determination of a person's legal identity. A digital platform that shares up-to-date identity data supports a wide range of other government functions. Very often digitization and strengthening a country's identity system come precisely as a result of the need to improve other government services.

19. Civil registration and identity systems are the main providers of identity data for governance processes. They are used not only for enrolment in specific services, but also to assess how access to services needs to change as identity changes. While marriage and divorce are one event that typically has an effect on a range of rights, the most common trigger for changes in the delivery of services is the registration of death. Each case study highlights the range of government services that depend on timely communication of updates in identity data. The Government of Namibia, for example, has incentivized death registration as a requirement for citizens to access social safety net programme benefits regarding their late relatives.

20. By sharing data with other functional registers, joined-up civil registration and legal identity data offer substantial savings by reducing the need for other registers to build their own identity management systems. This offsets what appears to be the initially high investment in building a holistic identity ecosystem.

## **VII. Financial benefits**

21. All the case studies underline that identity system reforms are an integral part of achieving more cost-effective and efficient governance. While assessing the financial impact of identity system reforms was beyond the scope of this research, evidence collected in each of the countries indicates that they all expect the financial benefits to outweigh the initial high investments of system reform.

## **VIII. Creating an enabling environment for the holistic approach**

22. The six case studies examined for this compendium highlight several critical elements that will create a conducive enabling environment for reforming CRVS and identity management systems through a holistic approach. Each of the six countries exhibited the following elements to varying degrees:

- Strong political commitment from key government stakeholders, including those responsible for CRVS and identity management, as well as other government stakeholders in a position to use identity data through interoperable platforms. This commitment should be a result of an institutionalized consultative process mandated to define institutional responsibilities and technical implementation models. High-level commitment should be extended in terms of providing adequate funding for the system reforms and its functioning in the future.
- Amending the legislative framework to reflect changes in business processes and institutional arrangements that will support a reformed identity system. The

legislative framework should reflect any revisions to the business processes for registration and any responsibilities of the identity system towards other government stakeholders in terms of data sharing.

- Prior to commencing with digitization, a well-defined data and privacy protection framework should be developed to define the rules for sharing identity data between government bodies, as well as the rights of data subjects in this context. The framework should include the appointment of an authority responsible for oversight of data processors, which also extends to the authority to conduct an audit of individual government information and communications technology systems, with a view to certifying that all data and privacy protection provisions have been fully implemented and followed in practice.
- Technical implementation and digitization of CRVS and identity management processes carries risks of vendor lock-in. This can be addressed by building technical ownership from the onset, relying on technology neutrality and open standards.

## **IX. Key messages**

23. Based on the six case studies, there were five recurring messages:

1. Civil registration is the essential foundation for a holistic identity system. Without well-functioning civil registration, it is almost impossible to ensure up-to-date information for a population or to produce vital statistics for national planning and policy.
2. Digitization and advances in technology have been essential to the integration of civil registration and identity management systems and have contributed to more effective authentication, deduplication and data sharing across government systems.
3. An interoperability framework is essential for secure and efficient sharing of data between government databases. The use of unique identification numbers has paved the way for improved data sharing across different parts of government, allowing for seamless authentication of individuals and improved service delivery.
4. Good governance benefits from a holistic approach, which includes ensuring people's rights, improving service delivery and reducing corruption. A holistic approach can also help to drive better decisions and track progress against the Sustainable Development Goals by strengthening vital statistics and ensuring more accurate population data.
5. The four key elements of an enabling environment for a holistic identity system are as follows: political commitment from key government stakeholders; a legal framework that enables data sharing and other changes that support the holistic approach; a data privacy and protection framework; and the need for technology ownership from the outset to mitigate possible vendor lock-in and ultimately create a system that citizens can trust.

**X. Questions:**

- What are current strengths, weaknesses and opportunities in your country as regards the adoption of a holistic approach to CRVS and identity management?
  - What support is needed in your country to adopt a holistic approach to CRVS and identity management?
  - How can African States ensure universal registration of all vital events and the issuance of identity credentials for internally displaced persons and refugees?
  - Which financial benefits have been witnessed by countries in the African region with advanced CRVS and identity systems?
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