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## Issues paper

# The civil registration and vital statistics systems improvement framework

*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





## I. Background

1. Civil registration systems establish legal identity for members of a population and issue legal identification documents, which are used by the public as a means to prove identity while transacting with each other and with the State. Individual and aggregate civil registration records are useful to different actors, including government departments and the private sector, in organizing and delivering their services to the public. Complete, current and accurate records from civil registries enable governments to maintain population-based sectoral databases, which foster good governance, including by ensuring, inclusiveness, transparency and accountability. Civil registration records further provide governments with a continuous source of vital statistics,<sup>1</sup> which are needed for derivation of critical health, social and demographic indicators including for small areas. In some countries where these systems are highly developed, routine register-based population counts can be conducted, hence offsetting or reducing the need for the costly traditional population census counts. Such countries are also able to implement robust population identification databases and to support robust e-government programmes, which are increasingly growing in importance.

2. While almost every country around the world has had some system of registering its vital events, few meet the United Nations standard of “the continuous, permanent, compulsory, and universal recording of the occurrence and characteristics of vital events (live births, deaths, fetal deaths, marriages, and divorces”).<sup>2</sup> In many countries, civil registration systems are incomplete, and are further constrained by accessibility, issues of timelines in registration, organizational, infrastructural, management and human resource capacity challenges among others. The gap and impact of lack of proper functioning civil registration and vital statistics (CRVS) systems to individuals, societies and governments cannot be overstated. Concomitantly, development priorities and commitments made by regional organizations and governments, such as under Agenda 2063 of the African Union and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development increasingly underline the importance and need for robust and well-functioning CRVS systems. Target 16.9 of the Sustainable Development Goals calls on countries to provide a legal identity for all, including through birth registration. The need for death registration is explicitly recognized under Goal 17, as well as in the health related targets, which require data on mortality, by cause. Furthermore, as Governments are now increasingly investing in civil identification as well as immigration and national security systems, birth and death records and information from civil registration systems become critical.

3. Recognizing the importance of CRVS systems and the need to strengthen existing systems to meet the required standards of performance as set out by the United Nations, countries in Africa, Asia and the Pacific have, through their respective ministerial conferences, made resounding commitments to build efficient and reliable CRVS systems since 2010. In particular, countries in these regions have committed to a common approach of: (a) Conducting a comprehensive review of their CRVS systems; and (b) Developing a national strategic action plan to guide the improvement process. The primary aim of the review is to assist countries in deriving baseline evidence on the status of performance of the systems, and to identify and prioritize the key areas requiring intervention. The review is required for a holistic and in-depth assessment of CRVS systems, including the legislative and policy framework; the operational environment; the organizational and management framework; and the efficacy of registration processes, practices and infrastructure, as well as outputs generated and key services.

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<sup>1</sup> Principles and Recommendations for a Vital Statistics System, Revision 3. New York, United Nations. 2014. Sales No. E.13.XVII.10. See <https://unstats.un.org/unsd/demographic/standmeth/principles/M19Rev3en.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

4. To support countries in undertaking this review, in 2010 the World Health Organization and the University of Queensland produced a CRVS systems assessment tool whose scope covered births, deaths and causes of death.<sup>3</sup> In 2012, the Economic Commission for Africa elaborated and tailored this tool for the African region and expanded its scope to cover marriage and divorce.<sup>4</sup> A strategic planning guide for CRVS was also developed to accompany the tool.<sup>5</sup> This review process, which is now commonly referred to as a CRVS systems comprehensive assessment, has been implemented by over 30 countries in Africa. A few countries have opted to conduct a lighter assessment, using a shorter version of the assessment tool that was developed by the World Health Organization and the University of Queensland, commonly referred to as a rapid assessment. A majority of the countries have also developed a CRVS strategic action plan but few are implementing them.

5. The Economic Commission for Africa and Vital Strategies, in collaboration with the Centre of Excellence for Civil Registration and Vital Statistics Systems/International Development Research Centre, have developed the CRVS improvement framework to serve as a second generation planning tool for CRVS improvement. The framework takes into consideration upgrades and innovations to process-centric approach in planning, implementing and monitoring.

## **II. Rationale for the CRVS systems improvement framework**

6. The countries that have undertaken the comprehensive assessment and planning processes over the past nine years learned important lessons and shared useful experience. This was used to improve the existing assessment tools and guidelines, which in turn led to the development of the second-generation assessment and planning tools and guidelines, known as the CRVS systems improvement framework. The framework focuses on improving the performance of CRVS systems by continuously improving the CRVS business processes as a system. It combines a business process improvement approach, performance management and existing approaches to CRVS strengthening in order to ensure the success and sustainability of CRVS systems improvements while enabling a process excellence culture. The framework comprises a package of materials developed to support countries in the end-to-end process of reinvigorating their CRVS systems. The package incorporates all the elements covered in the original assessment tools and planning guidelines, and further includes the following new or expanded components:

(a) Guidelines and tool for conducting CRVS systems process analysis and redesigning those processes, as needed, to improve the performance of the systems;

(b) Guidelines for the development of a CRVS strategic action plan;

(c) Guidelines for implementation of the CRVS strategic action plan;

(d) Guidelines for monitoring and evaluating the progress and results of implementing the CRVS strategy and action plan; and

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<sup>3</sup> World Health Organization and University of Queensland. 2010. *Improving the quality and use of birth, death and cause-of-death information: guidance for a standards-based review of country practices*. Queensland, Australia. See <https://apps.who.int/iris/handle/10665/44274>.

<sup>4</sup> See [www.apai-crvs.org/assessment-tools](http://www.apai-crvs.org/assessment-tools).

<sup>5</sup> See [www.apai-crvs.org/node/126](http://www.apai-crvs.org/node/126).

(e) References to resource documents that provide guidance on other topics relevant to this work but not covered in this framework.

7. The CRVS systems improvement framework is intended to improve and expand the earlier set of guidelines released by the Economic Commission for Africa for these purposes. It introduces a new approach and methodology to the existing CRVS systems assessment, referred to as “assessment, analysis, and redesign”. This component, which was narrowly covered in the previous assessment tools and guidelines, supports countries to embed a critical “process-centric approach” to the review and development of CRVS systems.

### **III. Organization and scope of the CRVS systems improvement framework**

8. This framework envisages four main stages to the CRVS systems improvement process, namely: (a) Preparing for CRVS systems improvement; (b) Conducting CRVS systems assessment, analysis and redesign (c) Developing CRVS systems improvement strategic and action plans; (d) Implementing CRVS strategic and action plans, with monitoring and evaluation.

- Part one of the framework provides a background on the importance of CRVS systems and sets out the rationale for countries to improve their CRVS systems. The chapter also suggests what purposes the guidelines might serve and explains the organization of the guidelines and who the target users are.
- The second part outlines the general principles and key considerations that should be made in undertaking the CRVS systems assessment and analysis process. It provides a step-by-step guide on the process, covering the required set of actions and the key actors, including the governance arrangement for the entire process. It further organizes the proposed activities with respect to some illustrative time allocations.
- The third part expounds on the components of the CRVS systems assessment, analysis and redesign. The first component deals with application of the CRVS comprehensive assessment tool. It provides the general purpose and expected outcomes of the proposed review issues and questions. It further provides the assessment schedules with the main issues for investigation, and some proposed line of questioning, investigative actions and suggested range of methods to be used. The second component deals with the CRVS system process analysis and redesign.
- The fourth part provides guidance on the formulation of a CRVS strategic action plan. It draws on the output of CRVS system assessment, analysis and redesign, which is a matrix that summarizes the key findings of the two processes to derive possible strategies and prioritized actions to be undertaken. A simplified costing approach will also be introduced here. The fifth part elaborates on monitoring and evaluation. It also brings in key performance indicators that would be developed during the preparation of the analysis and redesign stage and at the drafting of the CRVS improvement action plan stage.

9. Although, the guidance provided within the framework is limited to four major vital events – live births, deaths (including cause of death), marriages and divorces – Governments can customize it, with a few adjustments in specific sections, to include any other vital events

currently included in their CRVS systems. In order to address these three distinct phases, the framework is organized into the following key parts.

#### **IV. Target users of the CRVS systems improvement framework**

10. Recognizing that countries are at different stages in the process of CRVS systems assessment and improvement, the CRVS systems improvement framework is inherently flexible and will be of value at any stage of CRVS improvement activities for countries at different stages. For those countries with well-functioning systems, an assessment following the guidelines provided in this framework will indicate areas in which greater efficiencies could be gained, either in the registration and service delivery in respect of specific events, or at various geographical levels. For some countries, the issue may be in the effectiveness in generating vital statistics from the event records. For most other countries where registration is persistently incomplete, the framework should serve as a basis for determining what intervention are needed and what priorities would need to be set for the resources that are made available for the improvements.

11. The framework is useful for government ministries and departments and other stakeholders that are involved in the implementation of CRVS systems improvement. It is of critical importance that all senior management, as well as the operational staff in their organizations, are familiar with the framework and commit to its implementation. The framework can be applied at various levels of decision-making and operations of CRVS systems. It will further be useful for non-government stakeholders and development partners supporting a country's CRVS system strengthening, either technically or financially, by providing a structured approach to CRVS system strengthening.

12. There are different levels in which the framework can be applied. It is first intended at the decision-making level for the highest substantive functionaries that constitute a steering committee or similar high-level coordinating committee that oversees the entire process, covering CRVS systems assessment, analysis and redesign, and the planning and the implementation of the proposed strategy. At the second level are the functionaries responsible for the management of CRVS programmes in the respective countries, for example the Civil Registry Office or National Statistics Office. At the third level are the functionaries responsible for technical implementation of the CRVS system, mainly the technical teams expected to undertake the day-to-day activities of the framework. The fourth group of users are national stakeholders and development partners who will support the CRVS system assessments analysis and redesign in countries both technically and financially. These guidelines will help them to shape their views and understand the entire process.

#### **V. Key discussion points**

13. This section presents a few points to start the discussions related to the guidelines in the CRVS improvement framework and related issues.

(a) Most countries in Africa have conducted assessments (comprehensive or rapid) and have prepared strategic plans since 2010. As we are approaching the middle of the Decade for Repositioning Civil Registration and Vital Statistics in Africa (2017-2026), how do countries envisage updating or developing the second round of strategic plans?

(b) What policies should the Conference of African Ministers Responsible for Civil Registration adopt as countries are moving towards the next phase of developing CRVS improvement strategy and actions plan?

(c) Countries should broaden the realm of stakeholders in improving their CRVS systems. The importance of linkages of CRVS systems and national identity management system has come to the forefront in the last few years. Should the business process improvement framework also be flexible enough to address this and other emerging issues?

(d) What types of knowledge transfer and support to countries could be facilitated by the Africa Programme for Accelerated Improvement of Civil Registration and Vital Statistics (APAI-CRVS) secretariat, the Africa CRVS Core Group and other development partners to help countries adopt a business process improvement framework in the next phase of designing costed strategic plans? What should be the role of countries?

(e) What regional approach should African countries adopt with a view to strengthening their collaboration with other countries within the continent that have achieved a functioning CRVS system or those that have adopted relevant technologies in moving towards a functioning system?

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