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Civil Registration System¹

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¹ The text is presented without formal editing.

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A. Introduction

1. This paper is prepared as a contribution to the United Nations Expert Group Meeting on International Standards for Civil Registration and Vital Statistics Systems to be convened from 27 to 30 June 2011 in New York, USA. The paper particularly refers to the section on civil registration system as proposed in the draft outline of the revision of the principles and recommendations for a vital statistics system. The paper starts with a brief background on the various versions of the principles and recommendations and then reviewed the current revision in reference to civil registration system. In section four experience and lessons learnt from the recent African initiative on improving civil registration and vital statistics systems is presented. Finally comments and suggestions are given as a way forward on the proposed outline and future engagements in improving the international principles and recommendations for a vital statistics system.

B. Background - various versions of principles and recommendations of vital statistics

2. The United Nations published the first principles on vital statistics in 1953. It is a small booklet with 28 pages size. The 1953 Principles was structured in a format that gave the international guiding principles for each identified concepts, management and operations of vital statistics. It only addressed the principles without dwelling on the procedures and operations for implementing them. This makes it distinct compared to the principles and recommendations that followed it. In this version the recommendations seem to have been subsumed in the principles. Subsequent to the principles a handbook named “Handbook of Vital Statistics Methods” was published in 1955 that covered all aspects of the concepts and operations of vital statistics, including reflections on the implementation of the principles. The 1953 Principles in all its presentation took civil registration system as the sole data source for generating vital statistics. The 1953 Principles was revised after serving for two decades.

3. In the 1953 Principles, civil registration was treated as it relates to generating vital statistics. During that time there have not been either principles or guidelines in reference to concepts, management and operations of civil registration. There have not been parallel efforts at the UN or by other international organizations in the development of principles and guidelines for civil registration system⁴. Hence, the primary information base for vital statistics has not been supported by international principles and guidelines.

² Paper presented as per the proposed outline of the revision of the current Principles and Recommendations for a Vital Statistics System in reference to the section on civil registration system

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⁴ There could be such principles and recommendations for the developed world but not for developing countries.

4. The first revision entitled “Principles and Recommendations for a Vital Statistics System” was published in 1973. The structure, content and volume of this revised version is different from its predecessor. In regards to the structure, unlike the previous version, it covered the principles and recommendations as well as the guidelines for its implementation in one volume. It is hardly difficult to isolate the principles and recommendations from the management and operational guidelines. This is a major shift from the previous version. Because of the structural change the content has broadened and the volume increased. The 1973 principles and recommendations not only broadened in its content but also the concept and definition of vital statistics widened and extended to cover censuses and surveys as data sources for generating vital statistics. However, in all the presentations, civil registration was taken as the primary and preferred source for vital statistics. The other sources were recommended to serve as either supplementary sources in countries with complete civil registration or interim measures in countries where civil registration is lacking, deficient or in the process of development. Throughout the principles and recommendations, all the major contents of the publication were discussed against these categories of data sources: civil registration as conventional source, supplementary source and interim measures.

5. The 1973 principles and recommendations was accompanied by two volumes of handbooks⁵ that treated comprehensively the management, organizational and technical aspects of vital statistics system. As it was the case in the 50s and 60s, there have not been either principles or guidelines throughout the 70s and 80s dedicated to civil registration. Again during these years, the primary information base for vital statistics was not supported by international principles and guidelines, specifically for the developing world⁶.

6. The second revision of principles and recommendations of vital statistics was published in 2001. Generally, the current revision followed similar structure as the first revision in content, structure and volume. The second revision was published after over two decades service of the first revision. As was the case in the first revision, it is difficult to isolate the principles and recommendations from the operational guidelines. Vital statistics data sources other than civil registration were treated in separate chapters and elaborated at length. They are presented as alternative data sources and the varieties increased, where additional data sources such as records from health services and administrative records added. Nevertheless, the current principle like the previous version considered civil registration as the priority and recommended data source for vital statistics.

7. While preparing the current principles and recommendations parallel programme of development of civil registration and vital statistics guidelines were widely conducted that resulted in the publication of series of handbooks⁷ on the different aspects of civil registration and vital statistics systems. These handbooks were prepared as part of the International Programme for Accelerating the Improvement of Vital Statistics and Civil Registration Systems. As was the case in the past, the development of the various Handbooks was generally guided by the demands for improved vital statistics data with little contribution from other major actors and stakeholders of the civil registration component. As a result the contents of most of the

⁵ Handbook of Vital Statistics Systems and Methods: Volume I – Legal, organizational and technical aspects, UN 1991 and Volume II of the Handbook referring to country practices.

⁶ International Commission on Civil Status was in existence since the 1960s that may have been engaged in addressing principles, recommendations and policies on civil registration in reference to Europe.

⁷ Five series of handbooks were produced.

Handbooks seem to have been guided by statistics principles and operational guidelines. These were huge developments in civil registration and vital statistics systems that were observed starting mid 1990s.

C. Review of the current principles and recommendations in reference to civil registration system

8. The current principles and recommendations for a vital statistics system included a full chapter on civil registration treating as source of vital statistics data. The chapter is divided into seven sections: definition of civil registration, method and system; fundamental role of civil registration system; recommended vital events to be registered; the civil registration process; computerization of civil registration system; and civil registration and its linkages to population register. In addition to this chapter, a section was dedicated under chapter two on the principles for compiling and processing vital statistics based on a civil registration system. In the following, some major observations on the above contents of the principles and recommendations will be presented.

C.1 General

9. Civil registration is the conventional source for generating vital statistics data that meets vital statistics principles and requirements: universal coverage, continuity, confidentiality and regular dissemination. It is only civil registration that meets fully these principles and requirements. All the other methods (enumeration and administrative methods) do not meet these principles and requirements to serve as conventional sources for generating vital statistics. In general, the current principle and recommendation falls short of in appraising these other data sources against these basic principles and requirements of vital statistics. In addition, the current principle and recommendation did not clearly distinguish those other data sources that should be treated as complementary and those as interim data sources. In this respect version one was clear in categorizing each of the other data sources conceptually as well as in their applicability. For instance, in the first revision census and survey methods (referred as “field survey methods”) were recommended as vital statistics data sources based on two practical considerations: first as “supplementary” data sources in situations where civil registration is adequate and as “interim” measures where civil registration is inadequate. In the current principle and recommendation though there were mention of these other data sources as provisional methods, however the presentations in the various chapters treat them as equivalent to “alternatives” to civil registration system, which created great confusion in many countries, specifically in the African region.

10. Generally, the whole purpose of civil registration can broadly be categorized into two: information collection and service provision. Vital statistics is one among the various information outputs of the civil registration system. From the statistics perspective the techniques and operations of the collection of vital statistics data from civil registration system is termed as “registration method” as opposed to “enumeration or administrative methods⁸”. The current principle though managed to distinguish registration method from enumeration; it has confused registration method with administrative method, which is the case also in the first revision (see also below additional discussion in section 3.2).

⁸ Handbook of Vital Statistics Methods, UN 1955

11. The linkages between civil registration and vital statistics go beyond data or information sharing. Civil registration function with respect to vital statistics is not limited only to collecting vital statistics data and forwarding the collected data to the compiling office. The different versions of the principles and recommendations consistently missed in properly and comprehensively reflecting the technical, operational and institutional linkages of the two systems. Statistics is the discipline that provides the knowledge and expertise in designing and performing civil registration functions and activities that meets the various requirements of civil registration data and information collection and service provisions following scientific techniques and standards. The current principle and recommendation as its predecessors do not clearly articulate and reflect these basic linkages between the two systems. In this respect, there are no clearly articulated recommendations on the responsibilities and contribution on the part of the vital statistics system to the functions and operations of civil registration system.

C.2 Definitions

12. The definitions given on page 50 are limited to concepts of civil registration with the exception of the additional explanatory notes. All the definitions consider or treat vital statistics as an additional assignment to the civil registration system. It is not considered as core component of civil registration system. For instance, the phrase indicating about vital statistics in the definition of civil registration was added as a separate statement unrelated to the concept civil registration, which reads as follows: "... The usefulness of these records as the best source of vital statistics has been established." The definitions conceptualize the purpose and products of civil registration categorically; primarily production of legal records and vital statistics takes some form of secondary or tertiary position. Such labeling in conceptualizing vital statistics in the civil registration system has brought serious practical implication, where vital statistics is taken as an extra and additional activity to the civil registration organ. Here one need to recognize the changes being brought on the traditional thinking and application of statistics, where in this modern age the role of statistics in national development endeavor has broadened and its service in regional and international fora have also changed. One of the areas that have such a role is vital statistics⁹. Hence, the concept and definition of "civil registration" need to treat "registration of vital events for legal and administrative purposes" and "collection of vital statistics data" as reinforcing each other. Vital statistics should not be considered as by-product of civil registration system. Collecting vital statistics data from civil registration system by its nature is different from collecting statistics through the operations of administrative recording system. Furthermore, the definition of civil registration should broaden to encompass the service delivery aspect of civil registration; to individuals, households, institutions etc.

C.3 Interface and integration of civil registration and vital statistics systems

13. The interface and integration aspect of the two systems should have been presented following section 'A' on page 50. The purpose of the whole chapter should have been to show the conceptual, management and operational linkages of the two systems in generating the required vital statistics. However, the chapter seems presenting processes and procedures of civil registration without showing the institutional, management and operational linkages to vital statistics system.

⁹ In measuring and monitoring national developments, including the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)

C.4 The fundamental role of the civil registration system

14. In section ‘B’ page 50, three categories of fundamental roles of civil registration system are presented. Explanations for each category are given from para 309 to 311. In para 309, the explanation after the first sentence has no relevance to the subtopic. In para 310 list of activities are indicated to show the administrative advantage of civil registration. However, the linkages and implication of these lists of activities and services to the operations and services of vital statistics system are not discussed and analyzed that should have been used to articulate proper operational recommendations. The phrase at the middle of para 311 “... once the system is established, obtaining statistics is relatively inexpensive because they are a by-product of an administrative process; ...” has conceptual as well as operational problems. As discussed above, compiling vital statistics from civil registration should not be considered as simple administrative data collection exercise.

C.5 Recommended vital events to be registered and their definitions

15. Vital statistics principles and recommendations is the primary resource document to refer to the recommended vital events to be registered as well as the definitions of each of the vital events from the statistics perspective. However, it may not equally serve as a reference document for the legal functions of civil registration, as the principles and recommendations is prepared for vital statistics. There is a need for reviewing the recommended vital events and also crafting definitions of vital events that conforms to the legal functions as well and come up with a harmonized definition addressing legal, statistical and other information and data requirements as per the principles and operations of civil registration and vital statistics systems. The process of developing these definitions should also involve all stakeholders and should be coordinated and led jointly by the institutions that represent civil registration and vital statistics organs.

C.6 Characteristics of the civil registration method

16. In the principles and recommendations, the statistical concept “registration method” was applied as data and information collection method for civil registration, including registration-based statistics. Accordingly, the term “civil registration method” seems to have been coined based on this premises. However, the explanation on the characteristics of civil registration method presented in section ‘D’ on page 51 does not clearly indicate the conceptual and operational linkages between civil registration and vital statistics. Civil registration method is presented from the statistics perspective which needs clarification about its techniques and applications to non-statisticians. The conceptual and operational linkage of civil registration method to the two systems needs to be properly defined and its characteristics and relevant recommendations should be drawn from such conceptualization.

17. From the statistics perspective, civil registration method should recognize the three stages or processes of generating vital statistics: collection, reporting and compilation, including dissemination. Registration of vital events is considered to encompass collection of data and information on vital events and the persons involved that addresses legal, administrative and statistical information requirements of a country. Collection of vital statistics data from civil registration should not be narrowly perceived as designing a statistics form and then forwarding it to a local registrar to be completed and then to be forwarded back to the compiling office. The whole process of vital statistics data collection, including the technical preparations should be

built into the civil registration management and operation infrastructure.¹⁰ Based on these conceptions, collection and reporting of vital statistics data should be considered as an integral part of the whole civil registration function. Accordingly, the definitions and characteristics of civil registration method should buildup and reflect these above requirements, which is not the case in the principles and recommendations.

18. The paragraphs starting 323 are outside the characteristics of civil registration method. The characteristics of civil registration method are those indicated in para 316.

19. Goal of the registration programme is presented in para 323. The goal is narrowly defined; specifically it does not address the “service delivery” aspect of civil registration system. The end result of civil registration should not be limited to the accumulation of vital event records. Furthermore, the goal statement of civil registration in a vital statistics principle and recommendation should show its linkages to vital statistics system.

20. Paragraph 353 refers to the duties and responsibilities of a local civil registrar. Item (f) under this paragraph obliges the local registrar to complete the statistical report and transmit to the compiling office. However, there is no mention of institutional linkages and responsibilities or recommended working modalities in the collection and transmission process of vital statistics data, except the mandatory statement indicated under the duties of the local registrar. Questions like, who prepares the statistics form and how, preparation of data collection directives, trainings in data collection, how vital statistics data collection and reporting integrates to the civil registration institutional and operational procedures, etc. These were critical management and operational issues that need recommendations in the principles.

21. The sub-section on designation of responsibilities and organizations of civil registration at the local level starts from para 350. There are no specific recommendations on the linkages and interface of civil registration institutional structures with other government organs. The presentations in all the paragraphs seem to assume civil registration as a standalone institutional organ structured from the national to the local level. The discussions on the number and size of primary and secondary registration units (para 364 to 370), are not linked to the boundaries and arrangements of any administrative structure. It did not also make reference to the integrations to other government services or institutional arrangements. There is no reference made to other necessary infrastructural developments that contributes to the sustainability and permanence of the registration system. For instance, putting local civil registration offices or focal persons in villages and local communities without parallel developments and existence of public administration offices and other judicial, health, and education at the minimum, would not result in a sustainable civil registration system. The principles and recommendations did not make reference to such basic institutional and system linkages.

22. Time allowed for registration is discussed starting from para 383. The rationale in deciding the time period or interval between the occurrence of an event and registration for each of the vital events was not properly presented. The reason was presented in reference to memory lapse only. However, further analysis should have been made considering the necessities and

¹⁰ There may be a need to recommend the establishment of a vital statistics department or unit that coordinates the collection and reporting activities of vital statistics in civil registration organs.

requirements from its legal, administrative and statistical values of the records and the evidences that would be extracted from the records.

23. Paragraph 393 discusses about the necessity to establish a scale of fee for late and delayed registrations. Such proposals or recommendations on registration services contradict to some of the basic service provisions of civil registration records, for instance from the human rights perspective registration should be recommended to be free. Most of the responsibilities and sanctions should be put on the government rather than on the public. The government should take the primary responsibility of ensuring the availability, accessibility and use of registration records and hence ensuring the full registration coverage of each of the vital events. As indicated in the various international conventions, registrations of vital events by themselves are among the human rights provisions.

24. Preparation of statistical reporting forms and content is discussed starting para 453. There are no recommendations on the implementation modalities in federal and decentralized government administrations, where in some respect regional governments or states may have the authority to own and lead part of the process. Similar problems are also observed on statistical reporting process starting on para 460.

D. Experience and lessons learnt from the African region

25. The various UN guidelines on civil registration and vital statistics have been in existence since early 1950s. The principles and recommendations and the handbooks are meant primarily to serve as guiding tools for the developing regions that are striving to improve their civil registration and vital statistics systems. There are no systematic studies conducted on the availability, accessibility and level of utilization of these materials in countries and the impact they have exerted in changing the situation in the countries.

26. As from the feedback collected from participants of the regional workshop on civil registration and vital statistics conducted in Dar-es-Salaam, Tanzania in June 2009, most country delegates from over 40 African countries, both from national statistics offices and civil registration offices expressed that they were unaware and have not had access to these resource materials. Specifically those from national civil registration authorities had expressed that they have not had a chance to participate meetings and training workshops in reference to these UN materials on civil registration and vital statistics.

27. The regional initiative on the “African Programme for Accelerated Improvement of Civil Registration and Vital Statistics Systems – APAI-CRVS” is built on the International Programme for Accelerating the Improvement of Vital Statistics and Civil Registration Systems. The regional initiative was started in 2009 and is being led by the three premier regional organizations, UNECA, AUC and AfDB in partnership with UNSD, UNICEF, UNFPA, UNHCR, HMN/WHO and others. In the following, some of the experiences and lessons learnt in improving civil registration and vital statistics in Africa in relation to the UN principles and recommendations are briefly reflected.

28. General:

- The UN principles and recommendations should continue serving as guiding tool for the African civil registration and vital statistics reform and improvement initiative;
- Revising the current principles and recommendations is timely;
- It is necessary to have the principles and recommendations separate from the guidelines;
- The current principles and recommendations are on vital statistics. There is also a need to have similar principles and recommendations for civil registration. Then to prepare international guidelines in civil registration and vital statistics that serves the implementation of the different principles and recommendations;
- In the process of planning and implementing the African initiative, the necessity for developing regional operational guidelines based on the international principles and recommendations and the accompanied international handbooks was envisaged. Accordingly, activities are underway in preparing regional operational guidelines on the various components of the civil registration and vital statistics systems;
- Integrating the activities of civil registration and vital statistics systems is one of the strategies devised in the African initiative. As observed in the above presentations, there are critical guiding principles missed in the principles and recommendations that promote technical, management and operational integration between the two systems at country level;
- International recommendations on the need and securing political commitment and modalities for its implementation was not properly reflected in the current principles and recommendations;
- There are no specific recommendations on resource mobilization, partnership, and modalities for implementation, specifically in reference to vital statistics operations that need to be accomplished by the civil registration system;
- Role of UN regional commissions and sub-regional organizations was not reflected in the principles and recommendations;
- Recommendations in creating demand for vital event evidences at individual and institution levels and use of generated data and information, specifically at continental level not reflected comprehensively;
- Recommendations in reference to the use of civil registration records and compiled information in implementing regional protocols and charters not reflected;

29. Specific to the topic:

- Need to change the misconception in most national statistics offices of considering vital statistics as a by-product of civil registration system;
- Role of national statistics in improving civil registration need to be defined;
- Recommendations on the roles and responsibilities of the different actors on causes of death recording and production of statistics;
- Practices that consider interim measures as alternate to vital statistics from civil registration system need to change;
- National statistics offices should orient their plans and activities towards long-term and sustainable vital statistics data source. Hence, exit strategies from provisional methods to the conventional need to be developed and endorsed;
- Experiences from the current African regional initiative need to be shared to other regions

E. Way forward

E.1 Proposed outline for the revision of the current principles and recommendations

30. Most of the points raised in the preceding sections are suggested to be considered in formulating the outline for the upcoming revision. In addition, the following specific points are proposed to be considered in the proposed outline:-

- The principles and recommendations need to be presented separately from the operational guidelines;
- Vital statistics data sources other than civil registration should be treated in a separate chapter as complementary and interim measures, if at all required;
- Strategies for improving civil registration and vital statistics systems deserves to have a separate chapter;
- Chapter V in the current principles “Evaluating the quality of civil registration information and register-based vital statistics” should be maintained in the proposed outline;
- Strategies and monitoring mechanisms of the implementation of the principles and recommendations itself should be considered in the outline; and under this item role of countries, regional commissions and organizations, UN specialized agencies, NGOs, etc. need to be reflected;
- Causes of death recording and statistics need to be treated in a separate chapter in a broader context;

E.2 Proposal on future engagements in improving civil registration and vital statistics principles and recommendations

- Revision should be based on routine feedback gathered through years of assessment and monitoring of the implementation of the principles and recommendations at country, regional and international levels;
- Revision of principles and recommendations need to follow bottom up approach – countries to regions and then to the international;
- Performance indicators need to be developed in reviewing the contribution and impact of the principles and recommendations at country and regional levels;
- The use of vital statistics data generated from civil registration system in the preparation of official statistics on population and health sector could be one of the key indicator in evaluating the performances of national civil registration and vital statistics systems – UN Population Division should have a role on this;
- Revision of principles and recommendations on vital statistics should be a joint responsibility of civil registration and vital statistics experts.
- The principles and recommendations on civil registration that need to be incorporated in the vital statistics principles and recommendations should be developed jointly by civil registration and vital statistics experts;