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**USES OF VITAL REGISTRATION RECORDS
AND STATISTICS FOR SOCIAL AND SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC
DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMS**

BY

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**USES OF VITAL RECORDS AND STATISTICS
FOR SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMS**

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There are laws in virtually every country for the registration of vital events. These registered events provide prima facie evidence of the facts about the event and about the relationship between those involved. As legal documents, the individual records are placed in a permanent repository to be retrieved when there is a request for a copy of the record for various juridical and administrative uses.

At the time of registration, the local registrar will also record various items of demographic and health importance in the case of live births, deaths and fetal deaths for the purpose of compiling national vital statistics. In a number of countries, one record serves both legal and statistical purposes. Additional copies of the statistical record may be made for administrative and program uses of various governmental agencies.

The purpose of my presentation is to mention briefly the various uses of vital records and statistics, and the role they are playing in the lives of individual citizens and in the social and economic development of countries.

Let us first take up the uses of the record of live births, deaths, marriages and divorces for the individual. These documents constitute proof of the fact, the time, and the place of occurrence of the event. Also, they contain other information required for establishing certain relationships such as parentage, legitimacy and dependency.

I am sure that all of us here have experienced some need for vital records. I needed a copy of my birth certificate as proof of citizenship when I applied for my civil service position and when I applied for my first passport. I had to produce birth certificates as proof of age for my children for admission to grade school. I needed a copy of my birth certificate as proof of age to qualify for my pension at my retirement and for my social security benefits. I needed a certificate of marriage to show that my spouse was eligible for survivor's benefit in the event of my death. At the time of my death, my survivors will need certified copies of my death certificate for a number of purposes such as stopping payment of my pension and social security benefits, to collect on my life insurance policies at the time of my death, and start monthly payments of survivor benefits to my wife. Relevant vital records are required before a person can receive an inheritance. A divorce record or a death certificate for the spouse is required for persons who wish to remarry. These and other uses are in the exercise of our basic human and civil rights.

Vital records are also indispensable for updating official files of various kinds such as population registers, files of personal identity systems, social security rosters, and electoral rolls. In these uses, the birth record for the individual constitutes proof of age. That is, when an individual becomes eligible to vote, to receive an identity card, or to receive certain benefits. The death record is used to purge the system of ineligible individuals to prevent unauthorized use of personal identity cards, illegal exercise of the voting franchise, fraudulent receipt of benefits, etc.

Birth records are being used to identify newborns to be cared for at well baby clinics; babies born with certain birth defects may be referred to a crippled children's program; and all live-born babies may be followed up for immunization against various childhood diseases. A death record reporting certain virulent diseases makes possible the investigation of cases to prevent the spread of the disease. Also, death records are being used as the beginning and end points of epidemiological studies. With respect to statistics compiled from birth and death records, especially the latter, they are indispensable to health programs by providing quantitative base for the delineation of health problems, for planning and directing programs for improving the public health, and for evaluating health progress. Many participants of the WHO Program of Health for All by the Year 2000 are probably painfully aware of the handicap of not having adequate mortality statistics to conduct and monitor health programs in Health for All by the Year 2000.

A social program of major importance in the developing countries is family planning. Uncontrolled population growth is probably the greatest tragedy of modern time. Here, vital statistics provide the basic data for measuring the magnitude of population growth, and fertility statistics will identify the segments of the population with the greatest need for family planning. For information on the use of, and knowledge about, contraceptive methods, follow back surveys on registered births may be conducted, or an independent knowledge, attitude and practice (KAP) study can be made.

The planning for the economic development of a country is inextricably bound up with the future size and distribution of the population, and frequently with the age composition of the population. The construction of public utilities for a community such as water supply, sewage disposal, gas mains, and power supply require reasonably accurate population projections in order that the facilities will have sufficient capacity to serve future populations. There are other problems such as providing needed community services such as hospital and health centers. There needs to be planning for the construction of schools and training of teachers for these schools. These require projections of the birth rate in order to estimate the number of children at various grade levels expected in future years. For most of these purposes, data at the community level are needed rather than national or provincial statistics. Then, there are those interested in demography, the study of population. Their needs for data

encompasses all aspects of vital statistics, that is, fertility, mortality, marriage and divorce data, usually in some demographic detail. In these studies, it is important that the registration coverage be complete so that the trends and differentials can be interpreted with some confidence.

In countries like the United States, there is considerable demand for vital statistics from the private sector. The infant formula and baby food manufacturer would like to know the size of the market for their products. The furniture manufacturer would like know about new family formation. The pharmaceutical firms are concerned about the market for new drugs being developed for the treatment of certain diseases, and they look to statistics on causes of death for information on this point. And the mortician and the casket manufacturer are interested in the deaths that occur each year in their area.

These are some of the uses that have been made of vital records and statistics. To a large extent, the rate of development of the civil registration and vital statistics systems will be determined by the uses made of vital records and statistics. Without the awareness on the part of the public of the importance of these needs, there will be little incentive on their part to register vital events. Without the demographic, public health and other program uses of vital records and statistics, there would be little justification for the establishment and maintenance of a civil registration system. Vital records and statistics are not ends in themselves, but are administrative, juridical and research tools to be used. The uses to which they are put, or can be put, must justify them as government functions. The value of these tools will depend greatly upon the completeness of registration and the quality of the statistical information. This will pose a serious problem for countries where registration of vital events is incomplete. Accurate estimates and projections are difficult to make without an adequate data base. On the other hand, there is much that can be done now to promote the use of individual records of vital events for juridical and administrative purposes.

For statistical purposes, the International standards call for 90 percent or more completeness of registration which is one of the goals of the International program. The International Program for the Accelerated Improvement of the Civil Registration and Vital Statistics Systems recognizes the importance of the uses of vital records and statistics and calls for the participation of the major users and potential consumers in the reform and development of the civil registration and vital statistics systems. The representatives of official agencies such as public health, economic planning, population registers, including personal identification and electoral commissions, and family planning programs should be brought in to assist in the drafting of plans for improving the civil registration and vital statistics systems. Professions like demography and sociology should be invited to make known their needs for vital statistics. The importance of serving the various uses of vital records and statistics cannot be

overemphasized in any program for the improvement of the national civil registration and vital statistics systems.

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