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INTERNATIONAL PROGRAMME FOR
ACCELERATING THE IMPROVEMENT OF
VITAL STATISTICS AND CIVIL
REGISTRATION SYSTEMS

Prepared by

United Nations Statistical Division

United Nations Population Fund

World Health Organization

International Institute for
Vital Registration and Statistics

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INTERNATIONAL PROGRAMME FOR ACCELERATING THE IMPROVEMENT OF VITAL STATISTICS AND CIVIL REGISTRATION SYSTEMS

I. Introduction

There is universal recognition of the need for national vital statistics and civil registration systems (VS/CR). Virtually every country in the world has enabling legislation to register vital events, that is, live birth, death, foetal death, marriage, divorce etc. occurring within its territory. Also, almost all countries have a government unit responsible for the compilation of vital statistics based on registration records.

Nevertheless, the present vital statistics and civil registration systems in many countries are not able to produce regularly complete and accurate vital statistics. Indeed, the VS/CR systems suffer from lack of funding and high level support and are on the verge of becoming dormant in a number of countries. The urgent need, therefore, is a joint and special effort by countries and international organizations to improve vital statistics and civil registration systems.

In the past three decades, because of the immediate need for vital statistics for monitoring population trends and evaluating social and economic development programmes there was a shift in emphasis away from efforts to improve VS/CR systems. Instead, data from ad hoc demographic surveys and population censuses have been used to provide estimates of birth and death rates. Frequently, indirect demographic methods have been used to estimate birth and death rates.

In some countries which lack good civil registration data, multi-round surveys are now being used to collect vital statistics. These surveys have also highlighted registration problems and have generated a demand for more detailed geographic data. Since these demands can well be met only from direct sources such as the civil registration systems, the increased awareness of this situation and flow data needs re-emphasize the importance of promoting and obtaining the financial and administrative support required for the improvement of the VS/CR systems.

For countries without any data at all, estimates obtained from survey and population census data fill a genuine but limited need. However, such estimates fail to provide a continuous flow of vital statistics; they do not provide needed geographic and demographic detail, or medical and health characteristics of vital events; they are rarely of sufficient accuracy to allow measurement of change in vital rates. More importantly, the efforts to provide estimates of vital rates have diverted attention and resources away from the basic problem of improving the national VS/CR systems so that they eventually yield a permanent and continuous flow of complete and reliable vital statistics at all geographic levels.

Over the years, the international community has made efforts to develop and improve VS/CR systems. This support included the provision of technical assistance, advisory services, fellowships, training, and financial assistance for regional and country projects. Methodological support for VS/CR systems included, for example, the publication of the Principles and Recommendations for a Vital Statistics System and the Handbook of Vital Statistics Systems and Methods by the United

Nations. These publications have resulted in a great deal of progress in international comparability in terms of concepts, definitions and data presentation. Despite the progress already made, a great deal still remains to be done to improve international comparability, coverage and quality of the data.

Many of the country projects supported by international agencies in the past were concerned with establishing model registration areas with the hope that they would be extended to the rest of the country. Unfortunately, there has been little carry-over of experience from these projects to other areas of the country. Thus, the demonstration areas and pilot projects have had little impact on the national VS/CR systems.

The importance of upgrading the existing systems of VS/CR was stressed by the participants of seminars and workshops on VS/CR held in Asia and the Pacific, Africa, and in the Caribbean over the past five years. The urgency was underscored by the fact that unless such reorganization and strengthening were achieved in the course of the next decade, the effective planning, implementation and monitoring of a number of development programmes and strategies, at both national and international levels would be jeopardized. To achieve such improvements will require a carefully planned programme and concerted efforts on the part of countries with outside technical support.

Therefore, the present International Programme is aimed at encouraging countries to undertake actions to remove the constraints that block the development of their national VS/CR systems. Countries would be expected to deal with specific problems existing in the current VS/CR systems of the country as revealed by their own assessment of their situation. Toward this end, the International Programme will work to bring together and focus the technical and financial resources of international organizations, bilateral agencies and interested technical bodies. The work will be done by the countries with limited guidance provided by the international and regional organizations. The countries will also be able to seek technical and to some extent financial support from international agencies to assist their efforts in effecting needed VS/CR reforms over the coming decade. It is envisaged that the International Programme will assist countries in their search for funding as well.

This programme is conceived as a joint initiative of international agencies, regional bodies and non-governmental organizations. The emphasis will be on national determination of goals and strategy for improvement of its VS/CR systems. National authorities at the highest level of the government, often involving several ministries, will be encouraged to give their support to the national improvement programme. Such support and the active involvement of high level national officials in programme planning will be essential to the success of the programme.

II. Uses of the Vital Statistics and Civil Registration Systems

A very important use of the vital statistics and civil registration systems is to serve as a continuous source of statistics on births, deaths, foetal and infant deaths, marriages, divorces, etc.,

in order to monitor the natural growth and changes in structure and distribution of the population. It also provides certificates on registered vital events occurring to individuals and thereof to meet legal and administrative requirements of a country.

The birth, foetal death and infant death records provide the basis for public health programmes for post-natal care of mother and child, for programmes of vaccination and immunization, for assistance to the physically handicapped, and so forth. Because records include the causes of death, they will be useful for epidemiological purposes as indicators of the existence of infectious diseases requiring immediate control measures, as well as for the identification of health problems. Vital registers may also be used in public safety, accident prevention and crime prevention programmes, in social security, military service and electoral rolls.

Marriage records may be used administratively as proof of establishment of a family or household and hence to initiate family-benefit programmes related to health, housing, etc. They also serve to clear administrative files on programmes dependent on marital status, alimony payments, etc. Divorce records serve similar administrative purposes. All these are potential uses of civil registration data which the International Programme will seek to enhance.

Other important uses of continuous vital statistics derived from vital records lie in planning for economic and social development. The two components of natural growth of the population, births and deaths, determine the trend and rate of population growth at the national and sub-national levels. Estimates of population size as well as population projections can be made on the basis mainly of reliable vital statistics and therefore, population estimates and projections e.g., school enrollment, childbearing women, the elderly population, etc., will provide a useful basis for social and economic development planning and policies, their periodic evaluation and monitoring.

The rapid growth of the population in many countries became a matter of serious concern in the post-war period and gave rise to organized national programmes of family planning. For effective implementation of these programmes, annual fertility statistics classified by various social and demographic characteristics and by detailed geographic divisions are needed for understanding the situation and thereafter for planning, administration as well as evaluation of the programmes.

The earliest uses of vital statistics has been in the field of health to delineate major public health problems, to design health programmes and to evaluate health progress. Statistics on causes of death have been particularly useful in identifying the diseases of public health importance, and following the course of mortality associated with these diseases, and the characteristics of persons dying from these diseases are particularly useful in planning, conducting and evaluating control or prevention programmes.

The commitment by Member States of WHO to achieve Health for All by the Year 2000 has given rise to further efforts aimed at the reduction of inequalities. Further, a number of population groups have been identified for special attention, among them women and children, the disabled, the elderly, migrants and refugees, minority groups, and others. Thus, the need for data to support the analyses of health situation extends not only to local area needs but to the needs of various population groups.

Of particular importance in relation to women's health is the problem of maternal mortality, an area in which WHO, UNFPA and UNICEF have been intensifying their efforts. The exact magnitude of the maternal mortality problems is unknown, as in many developing countries the cause of death are either not stated or stated by lay persons. Nonetheless, it has been estimated that worldwide at least 500,000 women die each year from causes related to pregnancy and childbirth.

Child health is a problem of special importance in the developing countries. Deaths among children under 5 years have been estimated to account for about one-half of all deaths occurring in many developing countries. The exact proportions at both national and local levels are unknown owing to the problem of large omissions in the civil registration system of deaths occurring at an early age. Much can be done to improve the recording of deaths and their causes in the civil registration system.

To meet the data needs of these specific concerns and their focus on special population groups, complete, accurate and current vital statistics at the national and small geographical area level are essential. Civil registration is the only means of providing flow statistics at the required geographical levels and the main one to produce statistics on maternal mortality and characteristics of the child and its mother, so that more in depth studies on child and infant mortality can be made. Awareness of maternal, infant, and child mortality has increased everywhere, including the least developing countries. Much of the child mortality is preventable by means of currently available tools and measures.

In the WHO Strategy of Health for All by the Year 2000, a number of minimum health goals have been established in terms of indices like average life expectancy at birth, infant mortality rate, and childhood death rate which require accurate death, birth and population statistics. Therefore, to plan, monitor and evaluate health strategies ranging from disease prevention and control and health promotion, reliable vital statistics are indispensable tools for the country as a whole as well as for its administrative subdivisions. This is of particular importance in the local areas where special population and health service programmes are being implemented. Under the emerging new directions of population and health service programmes, countries are facing an increasing need for vital statistics.

III. Objectives of the International Programme

The main objective of the International Programme is to mobilize international and bilateral efforts both technical and financial to promote, support and encourage the developing countries to undertake meaningful and sound reforms to accelerate the development and improvement of their vital statistics and civil registration systems. With improvement, the VS/CR systems will become a sound component of the socio-demographic data base needed for population and development programmes. These data base will be better able to respond to the ever growing need for vital statistics and vital records for the planning, administration and evaluation of various programmes such as family planning, health programmes, especially maternal and child health.

For programme purposes, countries, may be divided into different groups, e.g.:

- (1) Countries which have the best prospect for a rapid attainment of complete birth and death registration, say in a period of five years. These countries presently either have 80 percent or higher registration coverage of births and deaths, or have established most of the basic infrastructures for complete VS/CR systems but in which the systems have significantly deteriorated over the years due to poor performance of personnel, insufficient budget, and lack of technical guidance;
- (2) Countries which have a good prospect for a rapid attainment of complete birth and death registration, say in a period of ten years.
- (3) Countries with poorer prospects for a rapid attainment of complete birth and death registration. VS/CR systems in these countries are in an early stage of development, e.g., the least developed countries. In these countries the VS/CR systems face many procedural, infrastructural and financial problems.

For the first group, technical and financial assistance, channeled through this International Programme, will lead towards the consolidation of a comprehensive civil registration system from which complete and accurate vital statistics can be derived on a permanent basis. For the second group of countries, the objective of this Programme is towards reaching complete coverage and production on a regular basis of reliable vital statistics. For the third group, the objective of this Programme is to help countries establish solid technical and legal bases and to outline the necessary infrastructure for universal registration and vital statistics compilation. The attainment of full coverage for the third group of countries may not be possible even in ten years from now. But immediate benefits can be derived in providing a solid foundation. Even data for parts of the country can provide a good starting point for the implementation of health and family planning programmes.

The programme offers WHO a unique opportunity to further enhance specific components of vital registration which are more directly relevant to health situation and trend assessment. In particular, the recent initiatives in WHO to evaluate and promote further development of causes of death information as basic statistics support for health strategy implementation would be incorporated into this programme. Therefore, the inclusion of cause of death statistics will be an integral part of the development of VS/CR systems to yield relevant and reliable mortality information.

The International Programme would assist the countries by (1) providing guidelines for the self-assessment of both the existing country systems and ways of improving the systems, (2) providing guidance for formulating a national plan of action, (3) disseminating and assisting in the preparation of handbooks and technical documents for use in the country systems, (4) operating a clearing house of information on VS/CR system which would be responsive to needs of countries, (5) providing technical advice to countries at various stages of country project development, (6) supporting and carrying out training activities to increase the skills of nationals, (7) assist countries in obtaining other necessary technical co-operation for proposed activities and projects and related support of national organizations.

Birth and death registration and the resulting statistics will be stressed as priority issues in all countries. Registration of marriages and divorces and their statistics would be considered according to specific country needs and priorities.

IV. Main Features of the International Programme

This programme shifts the emphasis of international technical cooperation away from pilot studies and demonstration area approaches to solving specific problems existing in the current vital statistics and civil registration systems of the country. It is hoped that the various international, bilateral, and private agencies will make changes in their guidelines on assistance so as to suit the new direction given by this programme. The role of this programme is to step up its support for projects aimed at improving VS/CR systems and to provide limited technical guidance in doing so. It is envisaged that there will be broad support for the country projects from the various multilateral and bilateral agencies as well as from the country itself. A pre-requisite to country participation in this international programme will be a positive commitment to invest staff, time, and resources by the country. The commitment, in the first phase of the programme, will be the willingness of the government to prepare the assessment of the current systems in accordance with a suggested outline, by developing a plan of action, and by showing intent to implement necessary reforms. Because this requires the allocation of necessary funds, political support at the highest government level will be needed.

Another feature of this international programme is that it will take into account the present stage of development of the VS/CR systems in a country so that specific problems prioritized for action can be pinpointed. The goal setting, the short, medium and long term objectives as well as the type of technical assistance will be assessed accordingly to suit the needs of each participating country. It is again stressed that a requirement for participation in this programme will be a strong national commitment to invest time and resources.

In the process of implementing the reforms for the country systems, the programme will make sure that those changes neither lead to the collapse of the current systems nor to the interruption of their outputs. In other words, only realistic measures with high probability to succeed will be implemented.

For the reforms to be successfully implemented, the programme must be responsive to the needs of data users as well as of producers. For this purpose, it is essential that the major users of vital records and vital statistics and those responsible for maintaining civil registration and vital statistics systems be brought together at an early stage of development of the country programme. To promote the active involvement of users and producers, countries may want to set up a high level advisory committee which would meet periodically to review the operation of the VS/CR systems.

The initial assessment undertaken by each country participating in the programme will provide a baseline from which to measure change. Subsequent periodic assessments will provide measures of improvement and will identify problem areas requiring further action. The assessment exercise must thereafter become a part of the regular work within the systems to monitor their performance.

The Statistical Commission has, at its twenty-fifth session held in 1989, expressed its support for the present new initiative towards accelerating the improvement of civil registration and vital statistics systems of the developing countries. The programme will also seek endorsement, participation and cooperation from a wide range of multilateral and bilateral donor agencies and interested organizations/institutions.

Further, it will seek the endorsement of international organizations of lawyers, proponents of human rights and children, women, refugees and displaced population, etc. which have a strong interest from the availability of vital records and statistics in the developing countries. If these international associations will mobilize their resources to support the national initiative in their country, it will go a long way in effecting major reforms towards accelerated improvement of VS/CR systems.

V. Programme Components

The substantive programme components are as follows:

1. Prepare appraisal forms to be used by countries in assessing the current status of their VS/CR systems.
2. Prepare outline of the country report on assessment of their Vital Statistics and Civil Registration Systems.
3. Canvass countries to determine their commitment to actively pursue a programme for the accelerated improvement of their VS/CR systems.
4. Distribute appraisal form, outline of country report and guidelines for formulating a national plan of action for effecting reforms. Assist countries, as needed, in the preparation of a national plan of action.
5. Assist countries in obtaining necessary funds to support national projects.
6. Identify, acquire, and disseminate existing handbooks, manuals and technical reports covering various aspects of operating VS/CR systems. The international programme will also identify, prepare and disseminate additional handbooks, manuals, and technical reports covering topics for which there are no existing examples. Topics which may be covered in the handbooks, manuals or technical reports include such areas as:

- Laws and regulations concerning VS/CR
- Organizational requirements for CR systems
- Organizational requirements for VS systems
- Duties and procedures for the local registrar
- Motivating the public to register vital events
- Guidelines for data processing and computerization of VS/CR systems

Releasing vital records to the public (including protection of confidentiality and protecting against fraudulent use of documents).
 Procedures for storage and retrieval of vital records
 Vital statistics instruction manual
 Lay reporting of cause of death
 Use of vital records in population registers, and in individual identification systems

An additional series of reports will be prepared and disseminated to help acquaint national planners, administrators, and researchers with the main uses of vital records and vital statistics, particularly for family planning operations and evaluation, for social planning and administration, evaluation of maternal and child health programmes, and other health and population programmes.

7. Conduct regional and/or national training courses and workshops.
8. Operate a clearing house of information and materials about VS/CR systems.
9. Provide necessary technical advice and other assistance to countries at various stages of the project implementation.
10. Periodically assess global, regional and national improvement of VS/CR.

In order to participate in the programme, the country needs to:

1. Conduct an appraisal of their VS/CR systems.
2. Prepare a country report based on the appraisal and prepare a draft plan of action for the accelerated improvement of the VS/CR systems, which takes into consideration the needs of major consumers of data. This requires the involvement and participation of demographers, statisticians, health, legal and administrative experts, family planning staff, etc. All need to participate in country assessments, the development of the national plan of action, and in supporting activities relating to data improvement and data production.
3. Prepare a final plan of action (needed reforms and strategy). Assess the needs, if any, for external assistance both technical and financial.
4. Help implement the plan of action, monitor its progress, and advise adjustments in the plan and its implementation as required.
5. Help transmit periodic reports on work progress to the international agencies sponsoring the country programme.
6. Evaluate periodically the effectiveness of the country project activities.

If need be, short-term international assistance may be provided under this programme to assist countries in the above activities.

A four-year work plan for the First Phase of the Programme, assuming that the Programme would formally begin in January 1990 is shown below.

VI. Institutional Arrangements

1. The International Programme for Accelerating the Improvement of Vital Statistics and Civil Registration Systems, as outlined above, will assist the developing countries to upgrade substantially their vital statistics and civil registration systems. It will endeavor to mobilize support from organizations of the United Nations system as well as from bilateral agencies and private organizations and undertake co-ordination with a view to securing maximal use of financial and technical resources for the strengthening and the improvement of national VS/CR systems.
2. The United Nations Statistical Office (UNSO) in collaboration with the United Nations Department of Technical Co-operation for Development (DTCD) will act as the focal point in promoting the strategy for accelerating the improvement of VS/CR system. The UNSO will be substantively responsible for the implementation, co-ordination and monitoring of the programme activities. Further, it will be joined by the World Health Organization (WHO) and the International Institute for Vital Registration and Statistics (IIVRS) -- the co-sponsoring institutions which will be closely involved in the planning and carrying out of the programme. For this purpose, UNSO will assign one of its staff members to carry out the Programme.
3. The regional commissions of the United Nations will also be closely involved in the planning and carrying out of the programme activities and will provide regional advisory services and serve as resource centers for the promotion of the programme. A similar role will be played by the regional offices of WHO in support of advisory and training activities for health personnel. WHO will also participate in preparing manuals for the collection of cause of death information. Further, the United Nations regional commissions and regional offices of WHO will co-operate actively in organizing and conducting regional and national workshops .

