



Distr.: Limited

AW2/CRVS/95/35

Original: English

UNITED NATIONS
ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COUNCIL

**AFRICAN WORKSHOP ON STRATEGIES FOR ACCELERATING THE IMPROVEMENT
OF CIVIL REGISTRATION AND VITAL STATISTICS SYSTEMS**
Rabat, Morocco, 4-8 December 1995
(FOR SELECTED FRENCH-SPEAKING COUNTRIES)

UNITED NATIONS	ECONOMIC	DIRECTORATE OF
STATISTICAL DIVISION	COMMISSION FOR AFRICA	STATISTICS MOROCCO

**ESSENTIAL CONDITIONS FOR
IMPROVING VITAL STATISTICS AND
CIVIL REGISTRATION SYSTEMS ***

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18 September 1995

* The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the United Nations.

* Issued without formal editing.

September 18, 1995

ESSENTIAL CONDITIONS FOR IMPROVING VITAL STATISTICS AND CIVIL REGISTRATION SYSTEMS *

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Over the past few decades many international and regional conferences, workshops, and seminars have discussed the problems of existing vital statistics and civil registration (VS/CR) systems and adopted numerous recommendations on how these systems might be improved. Among these recommendations are the conference participants' perception of what are the essential conditions required for a country to produce useful products from the VS/CR systems.

During these decades we have come to better understand how these conditions actually facilitate the improvement process, which of these conditions are absolutely essential, and which conditions are highly desirable but perhaps not absolutely essential, and can perhaps even be bypassed by alternate arrangements. The efforts of numerous countries to upgrade their VS/CR systems, oftentimes with the assistance of United Nations agencies or other foreign assistance have also given us an opportunity to test the proposals for improvement. This paper will attempt to indicate our current assessment of what the essential conditions are and some idea of their priority.

CENTRAL GOVERNMENT COMMITMENT

First and foremost among all the essential conditions is a strong and continuing central government commitment to allocate sufficient financial, human, and political resources to improvement of the VS/CR systems. Without a minimum of funds for salaries, forms, transport, equipment, fuel, storage files, data processing equipment, etc. it is just not possible to maintain a satisfactory system, no matter how good are the intentions. Yet

* Paper to be presented at the African Workshop on Strategies for Accelerating the Improvement of Civil registration and Vital Statistics Systems, Rabat, Morocco, 4 to 8 December 1995. Sponsored by the United Nations Statistical Division and the Economic Commission for Africa

we know that inadequate funding is a serious deficiency in most developing countries. Strong central government support is also an essential condition to ensure that the various ministries involved in the VS/CR systems cooperate to the fullest extent. Even in countries where the administration of CR and VS are in the same ministry there are other ministries whose cooperation is required for a satisfactory system. For example, the Health ministries can play a crucial role in operation of a notifier system, as vital events often occur in health facilities and their personnel are often present when a vital event occurs.

The Education Ministry, Labor Ministry, Foreign Ministry and other ministries can also help develop the "need" for registration by requiring civil registration documents for entrance to educational facilities, ration cards, passports, work documents, driver's licenses, etc. But without strong central government commitment and direction this required cooperation is often not forthcoming. Devising and promoting greater use of registration documents and vital statistics by the various ministries as well as by private businesses and organizations is essential for developing the strong national commitment required to improve CR/VS systems. The session at this workshop on uses of the products of VS/CR systems provides a number of examples of how the products are used.

Strong central government support is also required to ensure that the various levels of government in a nation, the center, state, and local levels also cooperate to the fullest extent. What is absolutely essential is that the local government units and their officials, who are most often responsible for the registration function, come to think of an active registration role as a normal and essential part of the regular duties and not as an extra added burden.

Strong central government support is also needed to ensure the passage of legislation and the adoption of regulations that may be required to institutionalize and legitimize needed reforms. For example, regulations might provide for the establishment of an inter-ministerial committee to help monitor and guide the VS/CR systems. The ministries which are involved in the operation of the CR/VS systems in one way or another and ministries which are the users of vital records and statistics would be represented.

CENTRAL REGISTRATION AUTHORITY

Another essential condition for a satisfactory VS/CR is a Central Registration Authority that can direct and/or coordinate the registration activities throughout the country and supervise its operations. Without such a central authority it is difficult to attain the central-state-local coordination and cooperation that is required. Even in a nation which has a decentralized registration system in which the States have major control over registration activities, a central authority is needed to provide leadership and to devise means of coordination and foster

cooperation between the center and the states, as well as among the states. A strong central authority can also be an important force to ensure that uniform or comparable procedures, definitions, etc. are followed throughout the nation.

FOCUS ON NATIONAL PROGRAM

One condition required for a program to improve the VS/CR systems of a nation is that the program must be focused on improvement of the national program. In a sense this is a departure from many of the past international assistance projects which focused on pilot or demonstration areas. Although these projects may have been successful in the pilot areas, the conditions, (including financial and human resources) present in the pilot areas were rarely replicable on a country wide basis. Thus little, if any, replication of the pilot or demonstration project ever took place. This does not mean that there should not be any testing of proposed new procedures in limited areas. But these new procedures should not require resources that would not be available for the entire country in a reasonable amount of time.

IMPLEMENT MEASURES WITH HIGH PROBABILITY OF SUCCESS

Only realistic measures with high probability of success should be implemented. Some problems are relatively intractable to solution because they require major changes in a nation's social and economic conditions for solution, e.g. readily available qualified medical personnel, or major political rearrangements. Such difficult problems can be handled later. A good discussion of this question of which problems to attack earlier or later is found in IIVRS's Technical Paper No. 20 "Improving Civil Registration Systems in Developing Countries ", by Forrest E. Linder, October 1982.

RESPONSIVE TO NEEDS OF DATA USERS AND BENEFICIARIES

An improvement program must be responsive to the needs of data users , as well as the producers. Some of the many uses of vital records and statistics have been discussed at other sessions of this meeting. Data users must be able to make known their needs. It is therefore essential to bring these persons and organizations into the program development at an early stage, e.g. in assessment of the existing system and in drafting a plan of action for improvement. These persons and organizations should continue their association with the program. One way to do this would be to set up an advisory committee of users and producers which would meet periodically to review the output of the VS/CR systems.

SUPPORT OF BENEFICIARIES

There are many organizations in the health field, legal professions, human rights, children's and women's rights, etc. which stand to benefit by improvement of a nation's VS/CR systems, and the resulting availability of vital records and statistics. Gaining the active support of these groups will help in obtaining the strong government commitment required for improvement.

ACTIVE NOTIFIER SYSTEM

Recently there has been growing awareness that although it is important to publicize the importance of vital registration to the general public, dependence solely on household members to report vital events may delay the improvement process considerably. There seems to be growing recognition that some sort of "notifier" system can speed up the improvement process greatly. Such notifiers would be persons or agencies who learn about a vital event and notify the registration official of its occurrence. These notifiers might be health center personnel, midwives, funeral directors, persons in charge of crematories and cemeteries, etc. Registration systems which can take advantage of these knowledgeable sources can increase coverage and even improve the quality of data considerably. Because of its great potential for improvement of registration, it is urgent that operational research be conducted to determine the best persons and procedures to be used in notifier systems.

Another question which deserves to be the target of operational research is how to get persons who know about vital events to persuade the "immediate family" to themselves notify the registrar about the event.

CREATING A NEED FOR REGISTRATION DOCUMENTS

Unless the populace uses registration documents there is little motivation to register vital events. What is lacking among a large portion of the population in many developing nations is awareness that one may someday need a registration document. In actuality, many of these people may never really need a registration document. Even when regulations "require" such a document, officials very often ignore the requirement. But without awareness of a need for a registration document, it becomes considerably more difficult to develop satisfactory VS/CR systems.

The Civil Registration authorities should seek the cooperation of other ministries to demonstrate the usefulness of such documents for participation in a wide variety of programs and activities. Although few would argue that an infant should be denied access to a health center because it does not have a birth certificate, the health worker may well ask for such a certificate, and if one is not available, urge the parent to register the event. Another possible action would be to have the health worker inform the

registration unit about the vital event. Ration cards for infants and children might also "require" a birth certificate. If the various agencies work to build a need for registration documents among the public, at the same time that a public enlightenment program is carried out in the mass media, schools, etc, the population may with time become aware of the need.

TRAINING

VS/CR systems involve a large number of persons who need comprehensive and continuous training to do their jobs right. Thus workshops, seminars, refresher courses are useful components of a training program. Such training, in addition to building needed skills, also helps to build a professional pride among the numerous officials who are responsible for the day-to-day operation of the systems throughout the country. Without a corps of registration officials who believe in the importance of their duties, it is exceedingly difficult to improve CR systems. In the United Kingdom the movement to professionalize the position of "registrar" has progressed to the point that there are special training courses which registrars can pursue for the purpose of taking examinations which if passed results in the award of a certificate as a Professional Registrar. Written manuals are also needed for registration personnel to refer to, and satisfactory systems require that these manuals be readily available to all who need them.

TRANSPORT AND COMMUNICATIONS

Essential conditions for satisfactory VS/CR systems are adequate means for officials at all levels of the systems to communicate with one another, and an attitude that fosters such communication. Persons at each level have much to learn from each other and without such communication no reforms will be long lasting. A field staff for the central and/or provincial registration authority is a highly desirable means by which communication between the various levels of the registration system can be maintained. Likewise, in order for supervisors and registrars to do their work properly and do the follow up often required, some access to means of transport is needed. The amount, frequency and type of access depend on settlement patterns, topography, and workload. Often fairly simple means of transport such as bicycles and motor bikes will suffice.

PATIENCE AND TIME

Too many countries have sat too long and waited for their VS/CR systems to improve. What is urgently needed in most developing countries is an aggressive program of action for improvement. A researcher who spent much time working on improvement of VS/CR systems in Francophone Africa is Michel Francois. He concluded that given the widespread and continuing nature of these systems, Patience and Time are essential conditions for a successful improvement program once the program has been implemented. Thus

even when an aggressive campaign for improvement is launched, the users of the products of the VS/CR systems must have some patience. One of the dilemmas of programs to improve CR/VS systems is that even when strong efforts are made to improve the systems, some of the products of the systems will not be available for a relatively long time (as compared to other sources of vital statistics). Unlike a sample survey whose results can often be obtained in a couple of years, or a population census which may require a few more years to yield results, VS/CR systems may take a couple of decades to achieve a fully adequate state. Francois wisely asks the question--"How does one engage the politician, who loves what can be seen and seen rapidly, in an effort whose results he will not see? "

The answer would seem to be that it is essential to be innovative in utilizing whatever products may be obtained from CR/VS systems even when the systems do not have complete nationwide coverage. One strategy to buy time is to improve the VS/CR system by geographic areas so that usable birth and death statistics will become available in a shorter period. Another strategy is to identify geographic areas which have acceptable coverage (e.g. 90 % or higher) and thus establish a "national birth registration area" and a "national death registration area" which can give usable estimates almost immediately and which can be expanded as more areas fulfill the requirements for satisfactory coverage. This procedure, for example was used in the United States during the first half of this century..

Also, even when coverage is not complete, birth registration records can be useful for identifying cases for contact in immunization campaigns, family planning programs, nutritional campaigns, etc. Death records can help identify important health problems. By finding such uses for vital records and statistics we may help sustain the commitment long enough to allow the CR/VS systems to be improved. Patience and Time are scarce commodities- - we can help by actively devising and promoting uses for the early products of CR/VS systems.

ESTABLISHING THESE CONDITIONS

The above comments about the conditions which are essential for development of satisfactory VS/CR systems in a developing country does not tell us how to establish these conditions. These conditions are the intermediate goals of an improvement program. How to establish a strong government commitment, for example, is a question which has faced all reformers. It is one of the key questions which each country and the concerned persons and ministries must answer. It is a question which I believe should be a major topic at workshops like this one.

The most essential overriding condition for improvement is that the Director of the National Registration and Vital Statistics Service(s) and staff be dedicated to provide leadership to bring about all the conditions essential for the development of the VS/CR systems their sustained effort nothing is going to get done.