

Workshop on the Improvement of Civil Registration and Vital Statistics in the SADC Region, Blantyre, Malawi, 1 – 5 December 2008

Conclusions and Recommendations

General

1. The participants recognized that this workshop is an outstanding event that was long overdue as the issue of civil registration as a preferred source of vital statistics was not focused upon in the region for the past fifteen years. In that regard, the Workshop expressed its appreciation to the United Nations Statistics Division and to the Secretariat of the Southern Africa Development Community (SADC) for conducting this workshop and to the Government of Malawi for hosting it.
2. The Workshop concluded that the state of the art of both the civil registration and vital statistics in the SADC region, with very few exceptions, points to the need of numerous remedial actions, as they, in most part, do not comply with international standards nor, more importantly, do they meet the need of decision-makers, citizens, communities and development purposes. In the vast majority of countries in the region, the Workshop concluded, the coverage of civil registration of births and deaths is quite low; which, on the other hand, has detrimental impact on generating relevant, accurate and regular vital statistics. Substituting civil registration with other sources, such as population and housing censuses and households surveys, which is a current practice in the region out of necessity, does not provide sustainable, regular and timely production of vital statistics, nor does it enable establishing time series that would allow for more in-depth analysis of these essential demographic phenomena.
3. The Workshop concluded that in all the countries participating at this Workshop there is a clear understanding of the need to use civil registration as a source of vital statistics; that there needs to be a direct link between civil registration and statistics; and that there is a solid knowledge of international standards and recommendations in this field. The Workshop noted, therefore, that the lack of knowledge about the recommended framework is by no means the source of the problems in generating reliable vital statistics. Rather, it is the consequence of a concatenation of adverse circumstances affecting both the civil registration and official statistics.
4. In reviewing the current circumstances in the countries of the region the Workshop concluded that improvements are needed in almost all the areas of concerns: the presence of the civil registration law, its enforcement, the existence of the civil registration service, the compliance with international standards in terms of topics, coverage and procedures, availability of statistical capacities to compile and process data, and routine dissemination of vital statistics.
5. The Workshop recommended that national governments need to commit themselves toward improving civil registration and vital statistics as both have crucial impact on the lives of individuals, society-at-large, planning, development and decision making. Without such a commitment followed-up by concrete actions in that regard the improvement in these areas is not likely to occur.

Civil registration

6. Civil registration, i.e. registering of vital events, is mandatory or is to become mandatory shortly in every country of the region. However, the Workshop concluded that there are a number of obstacles and challenges that hamper an efficient and complete coverage of civil registration.

7. The workshop recognized that, out of the major components of the civil registration system, namely:

- a. Legal framework
- b. Civil administration infrastructure
- c. Population participation
- d. Service to the public
- e. Ensuring confidentiality
- f. Quality assurance (checks and balances)

Each has almost equal specific weight and that all of them need to be put in place in order for the system to operate. Yet, the existence of the law is certainly a major prerequisite of the system, and so is the presence of the functioning civil administration infrastructure, as the other components may be upgraded gradually.

8. The Workshop also observed that statisticians who are responsible for the processing and compilation of vital statistics are often not familiar with the law. It recommended that statisticians should familiarize themselves with the law that concerns civil registration and training programs in the civil registration law could also be developed, as well as the other way around, training registrars in basic vital statistics.

9. Not only there needs to be a legal framework firmly put in place, but it needs to be revisited and improved, as this appears to be a weak spot in the regional civil registration systems. In addition, there is a need to invite a much broader discussion and concrete initiatives on the best modalities to enforce the law once it is enacted.

10. In addition, regarding the civil registration law, the Workshop noted with concern that (a) the statistical function and coordination mechanisms often did not exist in the law and (b) not all vital events recommended by the international standards were covered, such as foetal death and divorce. The Workshop therefore recommended that current civil registration legislation in SADC countries needs to be reviewed carefully and revised accordingly, addressing the above two issues.

11. The Workshop noted with concern that the civil administration infrastructure in many cases is not sufficiently robust or numerous nor trained or skilled to perform the registration of births, deaths and marriages in continuous and reliable manner. In certain cases the registration of vital events rests with village chiefs who may not be always equipped or skilled to perform the registration process, and sometimes are not sufficiently literate.

12. The population participation remains another major concern as it is apparent that, in general, people are not aware of the necessity to register births and deaths, as a minimum. The Workshop concluded that there is an immediate need for jump-starting public education campaigns in all the countries in the region. To that end, the Workshop recommends that its conclusions are made available to the Governments in the region with a request to set aside appropriate funding for raising public awareness in terms of benefits of registering vital events. The Workshop also emphasized the importance of involving and educating media in delivering the right message to the public, realizing that different media requires different strategies for reaching the goal, including conveying the

message in local languages. The fact that the coverage of vital events by civil registration in the region, with one notable exception (Mauritius), ranges between 10%-80% for births (and is significantly lower for deaths) clearly documents the immediate necessity for undertaking public education on a large scale.

13. The Workshop concluded that establishing checks and balances within the civil registration system is of paramount importance not only from the point of view of the civil registration system, but also from the point of view of statistics that are using it as a source. Irrespective of the method used for assessing the quality and the effectiveness of the system, the conclusion refers to the necessity of establishing regular and routine checks that are applied with the assistance of the statistical agency.

Vital statistics

14. The Workshop concluded that in each country of the region statistics on births and deaths are available to a certain extent. These statistics are sourced primarily in the population census and occasional household survey. The Workshop noted the limitations of using these sources for generating vital statistics: for censuses, this refers to the number of actual questions that can be inserted; as for surveys, this refers primarily to the limitations in generating small areas statistics.

15. Another limitation of these two sources refers to the level of detailed statistics that is necessary for in-depth analysis of fertility and mortality; it is available only through specialized health or demographic surveys and these tend to be few and apart.

16. The Workshop concluded that, with few exceptions (Mauritius, South Africa and, to a certain extent, Botswana) countries in the region do not use civil registration as a source of statistics primarily due to the low coverage of vital events by civil registration. Other reasons also include the lack of coordination between civil registration and statistics and the lack of statistical capacity to process records obtained from civil registration. However, the Workshop concluded that, without significant improvement of coverage rates of civil registration, it would be difficult to put an argument for building up national statistical capacities to compile and process data out of civil registration.

17. Therefore, the Workshop evidently acknowledged the fact that many countries in the region did not have complete coverage for their civil registration systems, which hampers the dissemination of statistics derived from such systems. However the importance of disseminating any available vital statistics obtained from civil registration system was emphasized, even when the coverage is incomplete. The workshop also noted that importance of publishing accompanying meta data on the quality of statistics.

18. The Workshop concluded that, in few countries in the region where the main source of vital statistics is the civil registration, the wealth, timeliness and quality of statistics clearly points to the fact that this is the optimal arrangement. To that end, the Workshop recommended that all countries continued to work towards achieving this goal.

International standards

19. The Workshop acknowledged with appreciation a vast and comprehensive body of work on international standards for civil registration and vital statistics produced by the United Nations Statistics Division. The Workshop recommended that all countries in the region undertake all needed

Coordination

20. The Workshop concluded that the issues relating to coordination are of particular importance in improving civil registration and vital statistics in the countries of the region. Coordination takes many dimensions, both horizontal and vertical and at all levels: district, province, national and regional.

21. Particularly, the Workshop concluded that there is a need to establish coordination bodies at the national level that will bring together registration authorities, national statistical agency and other ministries that have a stake in the subject matter, such as the ministries of health and interior, for example. Such a body is necessary not only for coordination purposes, but also to give a much needed weight and exposure to the functioning of civil registration system and its input into national statistical system. The conclusion also underscores that this body should preferably include other users as well, such as academia, for example.

22. At the national level it is also important to establish regular working relationships and coordination at all levels. To that end, the Workshop elaborated several possibilities, such as establishing similar coordination bodies at lower levels of civil divisions, or putting together other mechanisms that will allow for regular and detailed exchange of opinion and information between the agencies.

23. As for the regional level, it is recommended that this workshop is followed-up by the development of the regional programme for improving civil registration and vital statistics in the SADC region and that SADC Secretariat should take a lead, with the support and collaboration with the United Nations Statistics Division. The workshop outlined that this is first of this kind in Africa in fifteen years and that such low frequency has negative effects on the overall development of these two areas. Consequently, regional programme should include not only follow-up workshops every 2 years based on the Technical Report on Civil Registration and Vital Statistics in SADC countries, which will be prepared by the United Nations Statistics Division as one output of this workshop, but also establishing a network of experts that will foster exchange of experiences, country visits and exchange of experts.

24. As a part of this network, the Workshop concluded that it would be beneficial for the region to discuss the possibility of laying the foundation for a SADC Association of Civil Registrars and Vital and Health Statisticians that will provide a much-needed venue for professionals to enhance their capacity and to learn from each other.

Compilation of vital statistics at international level

25. In another illustration of the weak state of availability of vital statistics in the SADC region, the Workshop acknowledged that the level of response to the United Nations Demographic Yearbook, as one of the international statistical data dissemination major instruments, is disappointingly low, except for Mauritius. While the unavailability of data is identified as the main reason for non-reporting to the United Nations, the Workshop pointed to other factors as well, such as lack of resources, primarily human, that prevent submitting data that are otherwise available, as well as gaps in internal coordination in national statistical agencies.

26. Coupled with this, the Workshop recognized the lack of proper communication between countries and international agencies and concluded that establishing permanent linkages or focal points

between their national statistical offices and international data collectors is of crucial importance, so that they are able to provide all available data and metadata in a timely manner.

27. In addition, the Workshop strongly emphasized the need to ensure that all the figures provided to international collectors are accompanied by meta-data that clearly outline the methodology used, as well as all the supplementary footnotes and explanations.

Improvement of data on cause of death

28. The Workshop outlined the importance of information on cause of deaths for policy makers and public health interventions, as well as the importance of civil registration system being the best source for such information. It concluded that there was a big gap for the SADC countries to provide complete and accurate information on cause-of-death information.

29. While acknowledging the fact that collecting, coding and compiling cause of death data are complex and need strong commitment from various stakeholders such as the Ministry of Health, Civil Registration Office and National Statistics Office, the Workshop recommended that as much effort as necessary to be made by various parties involved to improve the completeness and accuracy of data on cause of death.

30. The Workshop emphasized that an indispensable measure to the improvement of the cause of death data is through trainings of medical doctors, registrars and statisticians who are responsible for completing the cause of death information on a death certificate and the coding and compilation of the death records. The Workshop also recommended that all countries in the region should adopt the 10th Revision of the International Classification of Diseases (ICD-10) as it represents an improved and contemporary instrument.