

Workshop on *Principles and Recommendations for a Vital Statistics System, Revision 3* for Arabic-speaking countries

14 – 17 November, Muscat, Oman

Conclusions and recommendations

1. The workshop was conducted by the United Nations Statistics Division in partnership with the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) and hosted by the Statistical Centre of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC Stat). Civil registrars, statisticians and health officials from the following countries participated: Bahrain, Iraq, Kuwait, Libya, Morocco, Oman, State of Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Syrian Arab Republic and Tunisia. Representatives from the Eastern Mediterranean Region Office of the World Health Organization (WHO-EMRO) and Lebanon country office of UNICEF also participated.
2. The workshop expressed particular appreciation to the Sultanate of Oman for a warm hospitality and took the opportunity to congratulate Omani colleagues on their National Holiday and to wish a long and productive life to the His Excellency Sultan Qaboos bin Said.
3. The participants expressed their appreciation for the organization of the workshop and emphasized that it was timely taking into consideration the momentum that is being built in regard to the improvement of civil registration and vital statistics in the attending countries. They also expressed their gratitude to GCC Stat for warm hospitality and reception.
4. The participants concluded that workshops like this, but with a broader participation from civil registration, official statistics, health sector and all other stakeholders, such as Ministry of Justice, Ministry of Police, Ministry of Home Affairs, under the guidance of the United Nations Statistics Division, should become regular and routine occurrence, thus maintaining the momentum of exchange of experiences and implementation of international standards.
5. In that context, and in an attempt to develop regional capacities of professionals involved in civil registration and vital statistics, the workshop recommended that regional bodies explore the possibility of initiating the foundation of an Pan Arab Professional Association for Registrars, Statisticians, Health Professionals that would provide opportunity for developing network of specialists, for cooperation and exchange of knowledge.
6. The participants emphasized that the workshop is timely also from the point of view of the adoption of the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda and the role it assigns to statistics in general and vital statistics in particular. The participants highlighted the fact that the Agenda directly positions accurate and complete registration as one of the main targets under the 16th goal “Peace, justice and strong institutions”, as well as under the 19th goal “Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development”. The participants also noted that that this workshop was timely given that the region is currently approximately at the midpoint of implementing its regional strategy for improving civil registration and vital statistics (2014-2019) – developed jointly by WHO-EMRO, ESCWA and the UNFPA Arab States Regional Office.
7. The workshop welcomed the revised version of the *Principles and Recommendations for a Vital Statistics System* underlying its importance in terms of setting international standards for civil registration and vital statistics. Participants suggested that this version of the principles and recommendations should be used as a benchmark for all the participating countries and to guide civil registration and vital statistics improvement strategies.
8. In addition, the workshop pointed out the need for UNSD to ensure the production of the accompanying manuals and handbooks related to this revised set of principles and recommendations in Arabic and in a timely manner.
9. The implementation of the international standards, including the medical cause of death certificate updated by WHO in 2016, is recognized as a goal for all participating countries; nevertheless, there are difficulties and obstacles

that vary from one country to the other, in order to accomplish identical figures between civil registration and vital statistics.

10. The workshop recognized the whole set of handbooks accompanying the *Principles and Recommendations for a Vital Statistics System, Revision 3*, as a relevant and valuable reference.
11. Visible and tangible improvement of civil registration procedures and coverage has been noted in many of the participating countries albeit the levels of modernization and functioning of these systems were not at the same level. However, in recent years in several participating countries, due to a number of circumstances, the actual deterioration of the civil registration and related systems was also recorded and documented.
12. In this context, the workshop noted that there is an increasingly large number of refugees in the region, moving across borders, thus putting additional pressure to civil registration systems in different countries. Participants highlighted the need to develop regional strategies to ensure that refugees have access to civil registration and related services, records and documents. They also acknowledged the responsibility of national statistics offices in producing vital statistics on the entire resident population – including refugees.
13. The workshop noted the importance of civil registration for a whole range of issues, including the exercise of basic human rights and assigning legal identities, aside from its role in the production of reliable, regular and comprehensive vital statistics. In this context, participants debated at length the paramount importance of maintaining information confidentiality and privacy of individual information in all stages of the process, both in the civil registration and the vital statistics system.
14. In terms of capabilities of countries to produce reliable, accurate and regular vital statistics from civil registration, among the participating countries, the workshop recognized that there are those that are undertaking specific and comprehensive efforts towards a fully developed and integrated system of generating vital statistics from civil registration with direct support of the health sector; those that developed some components of the system, for example, generating vital statistics from civil registration, but without incorporating statistics on causes of death; and, those that do not generate vital statistics, but only estimate indicators on mortality and fertility using a combination of sources such as population and housing censuses and demographic surveys.
15. The workshop debated issues regarding the assessment of the coverage of civil registration and resulting vital statistics, especially in the context of sustainable development planning and execution. It noted the methods for assessing the coverage of civil registration as contained in the *Principles and Recommendations* and concluded that direct methods described therein were implemented recently (and successfully) in only one of the participating countries. When available, the national completeness assessments vary considerably, depending on the source of the assessment. The workshop noted that armed conflict and conflict-related migration poses particular challenges for completeness and quality assessment for a number of national authorities in the region.
16. It was also concluded that the quality and comprehensiveness of vital statistics, in general, should be improved, taking into consideration the current state of statistical development across the region. Timeliness and accuracy of vital statistics produced and submitted to international and regional organizations by the participating countries indicate that some of the core topics recommended by international standards are not collected, for example.
17. The workshop concluded that one of the weakest links in the overall functioning of civil registration and vital statistics system refers to an inadequate level of training of civil registration officers, physicians in the case of certifying underlying cause of death, local registrars and other personnel involved in the process of registering vital events and compiling vital statistics. The need for continuous and comprehensive training, therefore, should be the cornerstone for improving the coverage and quality of the system; the workshop strongly outlined the critical importance of such a training and urged the decision-makers to take this recommendation into most serious consideration.

18. In that context, the workshop also noted that collecting information on certain personal characteristics, such as educational attainment, occupation and employment represents very often a weak point of records coming from the civil registration system in the vital statistics system, thus requiring considerable efforts in validating the data.
19. Coordination at the national level among institutions responsible for civil registration, vital statistics and public health and all other relevant stakeholders is a particularly sore point for all participating countries – yet, when functioning, clearly results in excellent quality and timeliness of vital and related health statistics. Therefore, the workshop concluded that each participant needs to deliver a straightforward message to their decision makers regarding the urgent need to formally establish mechanisms for ensuring regular and holistic cooperation between civil registration, statistics and health national agencies, starting with harmonization of definitions of vital events and their classifications.
20. While the registration of births, in general, increased in recent years across the region, the level of registration is still uneven, not only between countries, but also within countries' urban and rural areas. The workshop noted specifically that stillbirths (foetal deaths) are not sufficiently recorded in most of the participating countries.
21. In terms of registering deaths in general, although there has been increase in recent years across the region, the workshop noted that in a number of participating countries this issue represents a particular challenge, especially in rural and remote areas, . Some countries have successfully increased death registration completeness by triggering an automatic notification from the health system to the civil registration system. The workshop concluded that this would be a feasible strategy to implement in other countries as well.
22. As for the neonatal deaths, the workshop noted specifically they are not adequately recorded in most of the participating countries.
23. The workshop discussed in detail the most appropriate instruments for increasing the coverage of the registration of deaths, including penalties as spelled in civil registration laws as well as incentives. The participants concluded that the most effective approach consists of providing financial support for funeral expenses to the deceased's family, as this would result in issuing the death certificate. Another example referred to granting paid leave of absence for a deceased close relative. Incentives like these, the workshop concluded, are much more efficient than the implementation of penalties.
24. The workshop noted that the certification as well as coding of the causes of death as per the international classification represents still a considerable issue for participating countries. In that context, the workshop commended all the efforts by WHO-EMRO in the recent period of time. Yet, it also concluded that there needs to be even more concentrated efforts from regional and international partners that would place the certification of deaths in the focus of the discussion regarding improvement of civil registration and vital statistics.
25. In delivering their presentations on the major obstacles related to the functioning of civil registration systems and the production of vital statistics, the workshop concluded that for all participating countries these obstacles are well known and elaborated. Further, participants highlighted the importance of carefully planned use of contemporary technology solutions, as presented by several countries. Improvement strategies need to give due consideration to the choices, benefits and cost-effectiveness, among other issues.