

CONSIDERATIONS IN THE ORGANIZATION OF NATIONAL CIVIL REGISTRATION AND VITAL STATISTICS SYSTEMS¹

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Civil registration systems have been in existence for many years in many, if not most, developing countries. For example, in three quarters of the 36 countries on the African continent for which information is available, civil registration dates back more than 50 years. However, little progress has been made over the years in establishing a satisfactory system for the registration of vital events and compiling statistics therefrom. There are many reasons for this state of affairs. Chief among them is the low priority accorded civil registration and vital statistics (CR/VS) by governments because of the absence of a need for vital records for any governmental function. Another possible reason is the manner in which the CR/VS systems are organized. This article examines the present organizational structures of the national CR/VS systems and the factors which seem to deter their growth and development. It is hoped that this will suggest the best organizational structure for a civil registration and vital statistics system.

Present system of registration

A civil registration system requires a national network of local offices where the registration of vital events takes place. The establishment of such a system is essential for the compulsory and continuous recording of vital events, the safekeeping and retrieval of vital records to be used for individual legal and administrative purposes and for the compilation of national vital statistics. The system may be organized and operated on a centralized or decentralized basis. A decentralized system is one in which the local registration offices are administered by the state or provincial authorities following state or provincial laws and regulations with no national office to direct their activities except possibly to coordinate them.

The United Nations² recognizes two types of administrative structures in a centralized system. The first has been termed the principal centralized system, in which a network of local registration offices is directly controlled and mandated exclusively for civil registration administration. The second is referred to as "the other centralized system," in which the local registration offices are directed by a government agency other than a national civil registry, such as the statistical office or the health ministry, in which civil registration is a part of the overall administrative program.

Although the United Nations Handbook provides a number of examples of the principal centralized system, none of them seems to fit the definition because the local registration offices do not deal exclusively with registration of vital events but perform additional functions such as registration of legal documents other than vital records, preparation of voters' lists, issuance of personal identity cards, health administration or administration of justice. Actually, there may be systems in a few small countries that fall within the definition of a principal centralized system, but few, if any, big countries have civil registration offices mandated exclusively for that purpose. A principal centralized registration system, as defined, is an ideal system not found in the real world because of the expense involved in establishing a system dedicated exclusively to civil

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²United Nations, *Handbook of Vital Statistics Systems and Methods*, Vol. 11, *Review of National Practices*, Studies in Methods, Series F, No. 35, 8-10, New York 1985.

registration. Almost all countries have used an existing framework of local public services such as government offices, the courts, health centers and local election boards for the registration of vital events.

Responsible central authorities. In countries with a centralized registration system (see Table 1), the legal responsibility for registration is most frequently lodged in the Ministry of Home or Interior (34 percent), followed by the Ministry of Justice (28 percent) and the Ministry of Health (15 percent). The rest (24 percent) are in various administrations such as the Prime Minister's Office, Ministry of Finance and others.

Table 1. Legal Responsibility for National Civil Registration, by Region
(Number of countries)

Region	Countries with data									
	Total	Home or Interior		Justice		Health		Other		No data
	No.	No.	Pct.	No.	Pct.	No.	Pct.	No.	Pct.	No.
All regions	144	49	34	40	28	21	15	34	24	37
Africa	40	19	48	9	23	4	10	8	20	11
North America	19	3	16	8	42	2	11	6	32	11
South America	8	2	25	4	50	1	13	1	13	0
Asia	34	16	47	5	15	10	29	3	9	5
Europe	32	8	25	8	25	2	6	14	44	5
Oceania	11	1	9	6	55	2	18	2	18	5

There seems to be a regional pattern in the national organization of civil registration systems. In Africa and Asia, the locus is most frequently in the Ministry of Home or Interior (including territorial administration, local governments and internal affairs). In North America, South America and Oceania, the legal responsibility is most frequently in the Ministry of Justice. In a relatively large number of countries of Asia, the Ministry of Health is responsible. The European countries do not fit into any of the regional patterns.

Supervision of local registration offices. In countries with a national registration office, local registration offices may be supervised through a chain of authority in the same ministry or department or through some other administrative channel, depending on the organization of the civil registration system. In general, the central registration offices situated in the Ministry of Interior and in the Ministry of Health have a channel of communication through their own ministry. In most other situations, the national registration office gives technical advice and direction to the local registration personnel under the administrative control of another ministry, usually Home or Health.

According to available information, in 60 percent of civil registration systems, the national registration office and the local registration offices are in the same ministry or administration and in 40 percent they are in different administrations (Table 2). In Asia, the ratio is close to 80 percent in the same administration. The percentage of countries with the national registration office and the local registration offices in the same administration is also relatively high on the

African continent and in South America. On the other hand, in fewer than half of the countries in North America and Europe are the national and the local registration offices located in the same administration.

Table 2. Location of National and Local Registration Offices, by Region
(Number of countries)

Region	Sufficient data						Insufficient data	No data
	Total	Same administration		Different administration				
		No.	No.	Pct.	No.	Pct.		
All regions	134	81	60	53	40	19	38	
Africa	37	25	68	12	32	4	11	
North America	22	9	41	13	59	1	11	
South America	10	6	60	4	40	0	0	
Asia	29	23	79	6	21	3	6	
Europe	27	13	48	14	52	7	5	
Oceania	9	5	56	4	44	4	5	

The actual situation is somewhat more complicated than that indicated by the data presented because the system may not be uniform within a country. For example, in India the responsibility for civil registration at the state level is generally in the hands of the health administration. However, in four of the states, the economics and statistics departments are responsible for registration of vital events. In one state, the Panchayat (village council) is responsible for the registration of births and deaths. In rural areas, the local registration offices may be found in the police station, revenue office, or in the Panchayat, depending on the state. In two states, public health centers serve as local registration offices. This is probably an extreme example of variability, but if all the facts were known about the systems of every country, a lot more variation would undoubtedly come to light.

The national organization of civil registration systems is such that in about 60 percent of countries, the line of authority extends from the national office to the local registration offices. In other countries, national civil registration agencies have to exercise technical direction of the activities of the local registrars under the administrative supervision of another ministry or department. This may not present too much of a problem where the local registrars devote full time to registration of vital records, but questions of priority arise when the person serving as local registrar has other duties to perform. Because it is essential that the local registrar always be available to give service to the public during prescribed working hours, much will depend on the nature of the cooperative arrangement between the two ministries.

The various patterns of organization of the national CR/VS systems come about because of differing situations within countries, and countries are free to seek their own solutions to the

various problems. Although the United Nations Statistical Office has issued guidance,³ the principles and recommendations as they relate to the structure and organization of the CR/VS systems are rather general.

Considerations in establishing CR/VS systems

A number of considerations go into the establishment of national CR/VS systems. First is the issue of a centralized versus a decentralized system. There is no question as to the desirability of a centralized system, be it for registration or for vital statistics, as it is much easier to obtain the essential uniformity of definitions and practices from one geographic area to another in a centralized system. Only in a federated system of government is it necessary to provide the state or provincial governments with authority for certain civil functions.

From the standpoint of effective administration of any system or operation, it is essential that the responsible agency have the capability of exercising technical as well as administrative control of all its employees. With respect to the national network of local registration offices, the administrative supervision of the local employees will not be possible if the local offices are located in another ministry or department, especially when the position of local registrars is a part-time function. This means that the jurisdiction of each local registrar should be big enough to provide for a full-time workload. At the same time, the jurisdictional boundaries of the local registration office must coincide with recognized political subdivisions so the public need not question where a vital event should be registered. Another important consideration is the ready accessibility of the local registration office to most residents of the area. Although it may not be possible to meet all these conditions, they represent factors that need to be considered.

Because vital records on file are legal records, it would seem that the logical place for the civil registration function would be in the Ministry of Justice as it is in about half of the countries of the Americas and Oceania. On the other hand, the function of compiling vital statistics would be more appropriately placed in the Central Bureau of Statistics than in the Ministry of Justice.

In addition to the appropriateness of the function in a governmental organization, there is the question of where the mandated activity will develop best. In order to examine this question, one might consider the following requirements for vital records and for vital statistics:

- Current registration
- Geographic and population coverage
- Registration completeness
- Data coverage
- Quality of data

Current registration relates to the timeliness of registration, which is a problem in developing countries. A large number of late registrations of births and deaths not only creates an administrative problem in registration but makes it impossible to obtain an accurate count of vital events occurring during the year. *Geographic and population coverage* refers to provisions of the registration law that usually specify that registration should be compulsory for vital events occurring in every subdivision or territory and to the entire population residing in the country. There are some exceptions in that the law might specify that only events occurring in the principal

³United Nations, *Principles and Recommendations for a Vital Statistics System*, Statistical Papers, Series M, No. 19, Rev. 1, United Nations, New York, 1973.

cities need be registered, or that certain ethnic or population groups should be excluded from compulsory registration. *Registration completeness* refers to the proportion of vital events occurring in an area that is actually registered. It has served as a useful index of acceptability of vital records for statistical compilations. The United Nations has published ratings of completeness: C for areas where 90 percent or more of vital events are registered, and U for areas where less than 90 percent of events are registered. *Data coverage* refers to the items of information required for registration and for vital statistics. For registration purposes, a limited number of items of information is recorded for live births, fetal deaths and other deaths, for example, place and time of the event and the individuals involved. For statistical purposes, many other characteristics of the child, mother and father are needed in the case of live births and fetal deaths, and of the event and the decedent in the case of other deaths. *Quality of data* refers to the completeness and accuracy of the data collected.

An assessment of the importance of each of the above factors to civil registration and vital statistics offices in developing countries is given in Table 3. It is assumed that at present there is little or no need for individual birth and death records in most of these countries.

Table 3. Factors of Importance to Civil Registration and Vital Statistics Offices in Developing Countries

Factor	Civil registration	Vital statistics
Current registration	+	+++
Geographic and population coverage	+	+++
Registration completeness	+	+++
Data coverage	+	+++
Quality of data	-	+++

Note: Number of plus signs represents relative importance; minus sign represents lack of importance.

By law, registration offices are generally charged with the responsibility for the timely registration of all vital events occurring in an area and the collection of additional statistical information for the vital statistics agency. In order to fully discharge these responsibilities, all the factors listed should be important. However, if only a small proportion of vital events occurring in the area is actually registered and no demand exists for individual copies of the records, there will be little incentive to mount a significant program to improve registration practices and procedures. This is especially true in the absence of adequate operating funds. With the increasing use of and demand for individual copies of vital records, greater importance will be attached to all facets of registration and its coverage.

Vital statistics offices, on the other hand, are fully cognizant of the importance of these factors in the discharge of their responsibilities for compiling national vital statistics. However, they are in the frustrating situation of being completely dependent upon the civil registration system to produce complete and accurate information on a timely basis. If the civil registration system and the vital statistics system are autonomous and separated organizationally, the vital statistics office is in a poor position to influence or work with the civil registration office for the improvement of registration of vital events. This is a cogent reason for having the registration and vital statistics functions in the same ministry or department and on at least equal levels. From the standpoint

of stronger incentives, it may be better to have the registration organization subordinate to the statistical office.

Ministerial or departmental responsibility for CR/VS

The next issue is where in the governmental organization the civil registration and vital statistics functions should be located to maximize their opportunities for growth and development. As noted above, the various countries appear to be utilizing one of four different networks for the registration of births and deaths, namely, local government under the Ministry of Home or Interior, the courts under the Ministry of Justice, hospitals and health centers under the Ministry of Health, and an organizational unit grouped under the heading of population registries, personal identity systems, and election boards.

From the standpoint of possible growth of registration and statistics, the court system seems to be the least desirable. Efforts to improve registration and to develop and maintain a statistical program are so different from the functions of the judicial system that registration and statistics would do better elsewhere. Furthermore, while the local courts may be a satisfactory place for registration of vital events occurring in cities, they probably cannot serve the rural population in a satisfactory manner.

In over 60 countries, civil registration is linked organizationally with governmental functions such as population registration, personal identification and maintenance of national electoral rolls. Information about vital events is essential for updating registers and election lists and for preventing the fraudulent use of identity cards. Except for the question of data coverage, the needs of the population register and the personal identity system are like those of the vital statistics system. Also, the population register, the personal identification program and the election boards are likely to be adequately funded. If this is so, the registration of vital events will probably develop faster there than in any other locale. On the other hand, the vital statistics function will probably not do as well if associated with an agency whose principal task is to issue personal identity cards or to set up an election registration system. Although the mechanics of population registration are different from those of CR/VS, vital statistics will fit in with a population analysis program should there be one in the population registry.

An important public service is the provision of medical care, which involves the establishment of a network of hospitals, clinics and health centers that may be used to house local registration offices. Also, births, deaths and fetal deaths frequently occur in health institutions. Therefore, the Ministry of Health is regarded by about 20 countries as a suitable site for a national registration office. In addition, some countries (Canada and the United States) utilize state and local public health offices for the registration of vital events.

Because the health service is one of the major users of vital statistics for planning and administration of public health programs, a good case can be made for locating the civil registration and vital statistics functions in the Ministry of Health. Unless a strong statistical program already exists in that ministry, provision must be made for the processing of vital records and the analysis of data.

Of all the government agencies, the Ministry of Interior or the Home Ministry appears best equipped to provide service to the public through its system of local government, and the central registration offices are most frequently under that jurisdiction. The use of an existing network of local governments makes for an economical operation insofar as the registration of vital events is concerned. On the other hand, for the vital statistics component to prosper, the vital statistics office should be part of the Central Bureau of Statistics or the census operation if these functions

exist in the same ministry. However, in the absence of statistical support, the Ministry of Interior would seem to be a less desirable location for the civil registration and vital statistics functions.

Whether the health administration or the Central Bureau of Statistics should be the locus of the vital statistics function is a difficult question to answer unequivocally. An important consideration is the authority for the civil registration function. If the health administration is responsible for civil registration, it does not make much sense to place the vital statistics function in the Central Bureau of Statistics. From a statistical point of view, the Central Bureau of Statistics would be a more appropriate place for vital statistics, but from the standpoint of use of the data, the health ministry would seem to be a better locale. However, the health administration is generally not interested in the demographic aspects of vital statistics, especially as they relate to marriage and divorce. In either event, neither the health nor the demographic uses of vital statistics can be neglected. This means that wherever the responsibility for vital statistics is placed, the health and demographic interests should participate in the planning and development of national vital statistics.