

**UNITED NATIONS SECRETARIAT**  
**Department of Economic and Social Affairs**  
**United Nations Statistics Division**

**ESA/STAT/AC.233/40**  
**24 March 2011**  
**English only**

---

**United Nations Expert Group Meeting on  
International Standards for Civil Registration  
and Vital Statistics Systems  
27 - 30 June 2011, New York**

## **Background document**

### **Concept note on the revision of the *Principles and Recommendations for a Vital Statistics System, Revision 2***

Prepared by

United Nations Statistics Division

**Concept note on the revision of the *Principles and Recommendations for a Vital Statistics System, Revision 2*, United Nations publication Sales No. E.01.XVII.10, New York, 2001**

The United Nations *Principles and Recommendations for a Vital Statistics System, Revision 2* was adopted by the Statistical Commission in 2001. The essential standard it promulgates - generating accurate, reliable and regular vital statistics from civil registration system - remains unchanged and valid. However, over the past 10 years several issues emerged that might require revisions and updates of the principles and recommendations, such as the increasing use of population registers as source of vital statistics. In addition, feedbacks on the principles and recommendations from countries that participated at a series of civil registration and vital statistics workshops conducted by the United Nations Statistics Division, as well as other country consultation processes point to the need to consider undertaking a review and update of the 2001 recommendations in several other components as well.

The proposed revisions are discussed below from two aspects: (1) the overall structure of the recommendations and (2) specific areas that would benefit from update and additional elaboration.

**Restructuring the current *Principles and Recommendations***

The current version of the principles and recommendations elaborates on vital statistics and civil registration in an interchangeable manner. While it is understood that civil registration is the preferred and best source of vital statistics, there should be a clear distinction between vital statistics as a set of data crucial for policy decision and population estimates and its source, the civil registration system. This is especially true given the increased use of population registers in many national statistical systems for generating vital statistics. The proposed outline for the revision is presented below, in Annex 1.

**Specific areas to be updated or elaborated**

Population register as a source of vital statistics and its linkage with the civil registration system

In a number of workshops conducted by the United Nations Statistics Division in the past ten years the issue of differentiating civil registration and population registers, as sources for vital statistics, emerged often. It was also noted that in some cases the installation and functioning of population registers is regarded as the ultimate solution and a replacement of the registration of births, deaths and other vital events, which may not be necessarily the case. More elaborated discussion is necessary to guide countries on how different types of population registers could be used to generate vital statistics as well as the limitations of using population registers for statistical purposes. Guidelines should also be provided on the use of regular-interval sample surveys to complement information obtained from population registers (such as income, for example).

### Core topics to be collected in a vital statistics system

Several core topics in the current version of the principles and recommendations, such as father's age (for live birth), mother's marital status and date of marriage were considered by some countries as non-core at workshops organized by United Nations Statistics Division in the previous decade. Therefore, it would be useful to re-visit the list of core topics and variables in terms of needs and uses of statistics. In addition, there is a need to elaborate in much more detail on the value of statistics for each core topic - for policy, demographic analysis, public-health interventions and so forth.

### Use of records from health services and other administrative sources

Health institutions records are sometimes used to generate and, much more frequently, to complement vital statistics. This is especially true in the case of causes of death, which is a crucial component of comprehensive national health statistics, as the certification of the causes of deaths is the primary responsibility of health services, not civil registration. The current principles and recommendations do not elaborate on the advantages and limitations of health services records as sources for vital statistics. Additional guidelines might be provided in regard to certifying causes-of-deaths, coding and training of medical personnel on providing information related to causes-of-death.

### Revision of classifications and definitions

Throughout the current version of principles and recommendations there is a need to adjust the international classifications that are referenced in the publication - for example, the latest revision for the classification of occupations is ISCO-08, while the ISCO-88 version is referred in the current issue. Certain definitions and classifications may have changed over the past ten years. Revision is also needed when defining certain core or non-core topics in the principles and recommendations to align these lists with the most recent guidelines on population censuses<sup>1</sup> (e.g., economic activity status). For the part on population censuses and sample surveys, the revision should use the same definitions and concepts and to make clear references to the current set of principles and recommendations for population and housing censuses<sup>2</sup>, as well as to the *Handbook on the Collection of Fertility and Mortality Data*<sup>3</sup>. However when referencing to other publications, it would be beneficial to incorporate directly the text to make the principles and recommendations more independent (stand-alone) for users.

### Glossary and Subject index

The glossary will be revised to be more comprehensive and a subject index will be added.

---

<sup>1</sup> *Principles and Recommendations for Population and Housing Censuses, Revision 2*, United Nations Publication, Sales No. E.07.XVII.8, New York, 2008.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> United Nations Publication, Sales No. E.03.XVII.11, New York, 2004.

## **Annex 1. Proposed outline for the revised principles and recommendations**

### **Chapter I. Definition, concepts and use of vital statistics**

- A. Recommended definitions of each vital event for statistical purposes
- B. Definition of vital statistics
- C. Uses of vital statistics (in general, more specific uses are elaborated under core topics)

### **Chapter II. The vital statistics system**

- A. Principles for the collection and compilation of vital statistics
  - Universal coverage
  - Continuity
  - Confidentiality
  - Regular dissemination
  - Vital statistics topics and variables
- B. Core topics to be collected in a vital statistics system – output oriented approach. Definitions, classifications, uses of and sources that can be used to collecting such data.
- C. Principles for compiling and processing of vital statistics
- D. Data dissemination (including the recommended tabulations presented in the annex)

### **Chapter III. Sources of vital statistics**

- A. Civil registration
  - Definition of civil registration
  - Role of civil registration
  - Characteristics of civil registration
    - Compulsory nature
    - Universal coverage
    - Continuity and permanence
    - Confidentiality
  - The civil registration process
  - Strategies for improving civil registration and vital statistics systems
  - Computerization
  - Limitations of civil registration
  - Evaluating the quality of civil registration for the purpose of vital statistics
- B. Population register
  - Definition
  - Links to the civil registration system
  - Advantages and limitations
- C. Health services records Definition and concepts
  - Advantages and limitations
  - Compilation of cause of deaths statistics
- D. Other administrative records
  - Court records

- Religious establishment records
- E. Population censuses and surveys
- Population censuses – core topics
  - Household sample surveys