

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

Conclusions and Recommendations

Prepared by

United Nations Statistics Division

United Nations Expert Group Meeting in International Standards on Civil Registration and Vital Statistics

Conclusions and recommendations

New York, 30 June 2011

General

1. Participants commended the timeliness of convening this expert group meeting to review the existing principles and recommendations, given the development in this field since the last revision that took place in 1999. The meeting re-iterated that such international statistical standards – understood to be gold standard - are critical tools for assessing national capacities to produce relevant, timely and accurate official statistics and for identifying the areas in need of improvement and/or development in the most effective manner; and in that regard, the principles and recommendations are as relevant today as they were at the time of their original release in 1953.
2. While recognizing that the essential principles in the current set remain valid and unchanged – only a functioning and complete civil registration can ensure regular, accurate, reliable and timely vital statistics – the participants supported the approach that the revision of the current set of principles and recommendations should focus on (a) sharpening the distinction between vital statistics and its sources, (b) elaborating on population registers, (c) re-visiting core topics, (d) addressing the role of health institutions within the vital statistics system, (e) aligning the principles and recommendations with current international classifications, and, in general, (d) updating and upgrading all the parts with contemporary approaches to producing quality official statistics. Improved consistency in reference to key concepts, that is, distinguishing civil registration from vital statistics throughout the revised principles and recommendations was also supported.
3. The revised set of principles and recommendations should open with an introductory chapter that would elaborate on the history of this international standard; address the complexity of the preparatory process; elaborate on the rationale for the revision; and outline the changes and improvements made on the current version.
4. The meeting noted that there was slow progress in many countries in improving or developing the capacity of national statistical systems to produce vital statistics since the adoption of the current set of principles and recommendations. In that respect it would be useful to elaborate in more details on this lack of progress and to present the practices in countries that achieved progress. Recognizing that the core text of principles and recommendations may not be the most appropriate vehicle for such a presentation, the meeting recommended considering the possibility of developing a companion volume to the revision that would address these topics, and that could be updated in regular intervals independently from the main text.

5. The meeting noted that the current set of principles and recommendations does not elaborate on advocacy for civil registration and vital statistics – although various advocacy tools are at length elaborated in one of the accompanying handbooks - and recommended that these items should be taken into consideration in the final preparation of the revision.

6. The current set of principles and recommendations is a combination of principles, recommendations and guidelines for civil registration system. This may lead to confusion and contradictory messages, especially given the fact that countries in the world are at very different level of development of civil registration. The revised version should be more principled in the elaboration of principles and recommendations and less prescriptive in terms of civil registration guidelines – in that respect, the original principles and recommendations from 1953 might serve as a good guidance.

On uses of vital statistics

7. The elaboration of the use of vital statistics could benefit from being organized in a more user-friendly and less technical manner (cohort analysis, for example) and closer to simplified and forceful structure and language, more suitable for addressing concerns of policy makers and provide guidance to data producers.

8. The elaboration of the use of vital statistics might benefit from a clear and unambiguous statement that without statistics on births and deaths it is not possible to estimate the total population of a country, province or any other civil division; and, in turn, without population estimates it is not possible to compute a majority of relevant indicators as the total population is the most common denominator for computing them. It was further stressed that for the purpose of a correct computation of total and local population and rates, the population of reference needs be the same for all vital events.

9. The meeting emphasized the importance of reliable and timely vital statistics for producing development indicators, and in this regard the section on use of vital statistics in the principles and recommendations should discuss indicators for relevant internationally agreed development goals in general and not specifically on Millennium Development Goals, which are due for final assessment in 2015 and taking into account that the lifetime of the revised principles and recommendations is certainly expected to extend well beyond 2015.

On the vital statistics system

10. The participants enthusiastically and overwhelmingly endorsed the introduction of quality assurance as an additional principle of the vital statistics system. Quality assurance encompasses all the components and processes of the vital statistics system and elaborating on the appropriate techniques to ensure accurate and reliable statistics would significantly enhance the usefulness of the revised principles and recommendations.

11. While discussing the major principles for a vital statistics system – that is, universal coverage, continuity, confidentiality, regular dissemination and quality assurance – the meeting concluded that the revised set of principles and recommendations include a comparison of each of the sources of vital statistics and their compliance with these principles. This will show comparative advantages of each of the sources – civil registration, population register, population censuses, sample surveys, health records and so forth – thus providing an unambiguous message about the suitability of each source to meet the international standards for accurateness, reliability and timeliness of vital statistics. In the current set of principles and recommendations this assessment is missing and that may mislead national statistical authorities in assuming that each source carries the same weight.

12. Reiterating that a well functioning civil registration system is the most preferred and reliable source of vital statistics, the meeting concluded that one source alone cannot meet all the requirements of detailed and comprehensive vital statistics. There is certainly a need for surveys to complement the statistics generated from civil registration as well as for population censuses in some cases and for other sources as well. In that context, a more detailed elaboration on linking records from different sources – both deterministic and probabilistic – should be included in the text together with an extensive elaboration on protecting confidentiality of individual records, while at the same time preventing the use of confidentiality argument for limiting access to micro-data.

13. The current definition of the vital statistics system defines it as a process of producing data on vital events, including adoption, legitimations and recognitions. It is clear that this definition is closely linked to civil registration, as the occurrence of these events can be registered solely by the civil registration. Hence, the meeting concluded that there would be a need to re-visit the definition of the vital statistics system and the list and definitions of vital events accordingly.

14. In terms of mapping the vital statistics system in a country, the principles and recommendations should strongly recommend (and include a real country situation, as an example) a diagram depicting the links between various segments and institutions that form the system and the flow of information and records that eventually lead to the production of vital statistics. Related to this interaction between various institutions within the vital statistics system it is necessary to focus not only on cooperation between them, but equally importantly on the collaboration, as it is often necessary for them to work together under a joint action-plan.

15. In terms of core topics, it was concluded that there is a need to conduct further and more detailed discussion, beyond what was already submitted as a reply to the United Nations Statistics Division concept note. This is especially true given the fact that some topics that are now considered additional gain on much more importance since the fertility and mortality patterns differ in different segments of population that are distinguished by ethnicity, for example, or poverty. Similarly, topics that are relevant for assessing migration, international as well as internal, may be considered critical enough to be considered for upgrade into core topics.

On civil registration as a source of the vital statistics system

16. The current version of principles and recommendations clearly underscores the importance of civil registration for the production of reliable and accurate vital statistics and the revision should follow the same rationale, by devoting a separate chapter on the characteristics, values and functioning of the civil registration. It was also underscored that civil registration is not fully functional in many countries and that, even where it functions, it may not yield reliable and accurate vital statistics due to the lack of links between the two systems. However, the meeting recommended that principles and recommendations should strive to set the highest standard of integration of civil registration and vital statistics system for countries to follow and measure up.

17. The meeting strongly recommended that the importance of civil registration in relation to the exercise of essential human rights – such as the right to be registered, to be named and to have an identity – need to be prominently elaborated.

On population registers

18. The meeting recognized that, while population registers may not replace the civil registration, they are becoming the source of vital statistics in a number of countries. In that respect, it was recommended that a separate chapter be dedicated on the role of population registers in the vital statistics system; the relationship between the population registers and National Identification Registers that are emerging in a number of countries; the value of population registers for longitudinal analysis; the opportunities to produce in-depth statistical analysis by combining population and other registers; and, finally, the relationship between population registers, National Identification Registers and civil registration.

On the role of health institutions

19. The meeting concluded that health institutions serve multiple purposes in the process of generating reliable vital statistics. First, the widespread network of health workers and volunteers and health facilities at local areas increases the coverage and the reach of civil registration by acting as informants on vital events. Second, health institutions are also indispensable in informants for birth and in certifying causes of deaths, which is crucial for public health policy development and interventions. It is recommended that the chapter on health institutions elaborates on the above two major functions of health institutions.

20. In addition, the principles and recommendations need to elaborate more on the collection, compilation and analysis of cause of deaths statistics, focusing in particular on the certifying and coding aspects, as the current set does not provide for such an elaboration. The major focus should not be on the coding, as this is comprehensively covered by World Health Organization manuals – rather, it should focus on the role and procedure for certifying and coding of causes of death in the context of civil registration.

On other administrative records

21. The meeting recognized that a separate chapter should focus on other administrative data used by the vital statistics system to generate statistics. These would include court records in cases of divorces; insurance records; marriage records outside of the civil registration and so forth. It was recommended to focus on the definition of the administrative records; the explanation of the need for standardized procedures for the vital statistics system to access these records; and the need to closely collaborate with the provider institutions to automate, to the extent possible, the process of acquiring input for vital statistics.

On population censuses and surveys

22. The meeting noted that in a number of countries vital statistics is still generated out of population censuses and household surveys – as a result of a non-functioning or under-performing civil registration or the lack of data flow between civil registration and vital statistics system. It was outlined that both censuses and surveys have outstanding value as supplementary sources within the vital statistics system as they provide a wealth of information not accessible through the civil registration – on education, economic status, in-depth demographic and health profiles, to name a few. However, it was concluded that relying solely on censuses and surveys to produce vital statistics clearly indicates inadequate capacity to generate accurate and relevant vital statistics and to comply with the international principles and recommendations.

On strategies to improve vital statistics system

23. The meeting concluded that, in essence, improving vital statistics system revolves around improving, or making functional civil registration of a country, on one side, and, taking full advantage of the contemporary computing platforms and solutions on the other. The revised principles and recommendations should also recognize there are different levels of maturity of countries' civil registration systems and their developmental pathways will vary in respect to the standard as set by the principles and recommendations as the goal.

24. As for the civil registration, there is a need to address a long list of concerns that hinder its functionality, such as the inadequate geographical coverage; complicated procedure; lack of incentive to register vital events; cost of registration; and low visibility, to list a few. It was recommended that, in addition to the current recommendations, the focus should be brought to the need for political commitment to enhance civil registration; to assess current status; to prioritize costed improvement plans and monitoring and evaluation strategies; to develop monitoring and improvement plans; to institute targeted and customized programs for promotion of registration; to the need for involving all possible stakeholders, and to ensure the full provision of services to the population.

25. The meeting also noted the need to address the role of regional institutions, such as the United Nations Regional Commissions, as well as other regional and international organizations, in developing regional strategies to improve civil registration and vital statistics. It was concluded that the optimal vehicle for presenting this information would be the United Nations Statistics Division website on civil registration and vital statistics, as it provides for constant updates.

On Information Communication Technology (ICT)

26. Closely related to the strategies for improving civil registration and vital statistics is the elaboration on the advances in the development of computing platforms and solutions for both civil registration and vital statistics. The meeting concluded that this would be one of the most critical components of progress while at the same time recommending that the elaboration of this theme takes into consideration that this development is not about tools – information technology, platform, portals and so forth – but about a new business model for both civil registration and vital statistics - including a development of data exchange protocols.

27. In that context, it was concluded that the revision should focus, among other issues, on the private-public partnership in developing these new applications for registration of vital events, data transfer, editing, harmonization and dissemination, taking full cognizance that adapting an existing information system into a contemporary one may be as complex as building one from scratch. Similarly, it would be necessary to adapt other instruments as well, such as the accompanying laws that need to be adapted to the new – electronic – reality.

On evaluation and quality assessment

28. The current set of principles and recommendations' elaboration on the evaluation and quality assessment remains relevant, although somewhat dense and technical. The meeting recommended that the revision should focus on including additional mechanisms for assessing the functioning and quality of civil registration – its processes, governance and structure – in addition to techniques to assess the quality of vital statistics. The revision should also include reference to the need for a comprehensive assessment framework that would provide a holistic overview of the vital statistics and civil registration system. In terms of the general criteria for assessment, as relevant as they are, it would be beneficial to provide a degree of importance for each quality indicator, thus assigning each a specific weight – for example, is it more important to have data fast albeit of poor accuracy, or obtaining them much later but of very good quality. As for the list of general criteria, it was concluded that international comparison of data should also be included.