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The Civil Registration System in Ghana¹

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¹ The text is presented without formal editing.

1. Despite the fact that the civil registration in Ghana began more than 100 years ago, it continues to be faced with significant challenges; limiting its coverage to about two-thirds for births and less than a quarter for deaths. Its coverage for marriages and divorces is marginal and significantly varies across regions and districts. The focus has generally been limited to births and deaths. The current registration level for births is however a substantial improvement over that of the early 2000s, given the deliberate effort made by the Births and Death Registry, to increase coverage. Some of the recent initiatives to improve coverage include strengthening collaboration with other key Ministries, extending the period for free registration, extending registration service points to various communities, and increase publicity campaign at specific times, with the introduction of an annual celebration of National Births and Deaths Registration Day.

2. The paper examines the civil registration system in Ghana in the context of the United Nations guidelines,² with particular reference to its characteristics, institutional responsibilities, the process and use of the information. The paper suggests some areas of the discussion on Civil Registration System that could be revisited.

Characteristics of the Civil Registration System

3. The Civil Registration system in Ghana places more emphasis on births and deaths than on the other vital events, and is currently governed by the Registration of Births and Deaths Act (1965). The Law aims for universal coverage of births and deaths and directs that registration is compulsory. The legal provisions are also to support the establishment of an efficient system of births and deaths records for the citizenry. The distribution of registration points across the country, however, limits access of many to the country's birth and death registration system

4. The Act is clearly outdated and an improved Civil Registration Act is therefore a fundamental requirement in ensuring a sustainable and functional CR. In spite of the existence of a law for almost 100 years,³ the highest coverage of birth registration achieved to date was 67 per cent in 2005, and it has been as low as 17 per cent (2002). The average coverage in the last 10 years has been about 49 per cent. For deaths the coverage is much lower, about half that of the birth registration, hovering around 23 per cent.⁴ The relatively high rates recorded for birth registration are generally associated with the relaxation of the late registration penalty for births, with the extension of the period of no-fee registration, and an annual registration drive during which the more considerate fee policy is well publicized.

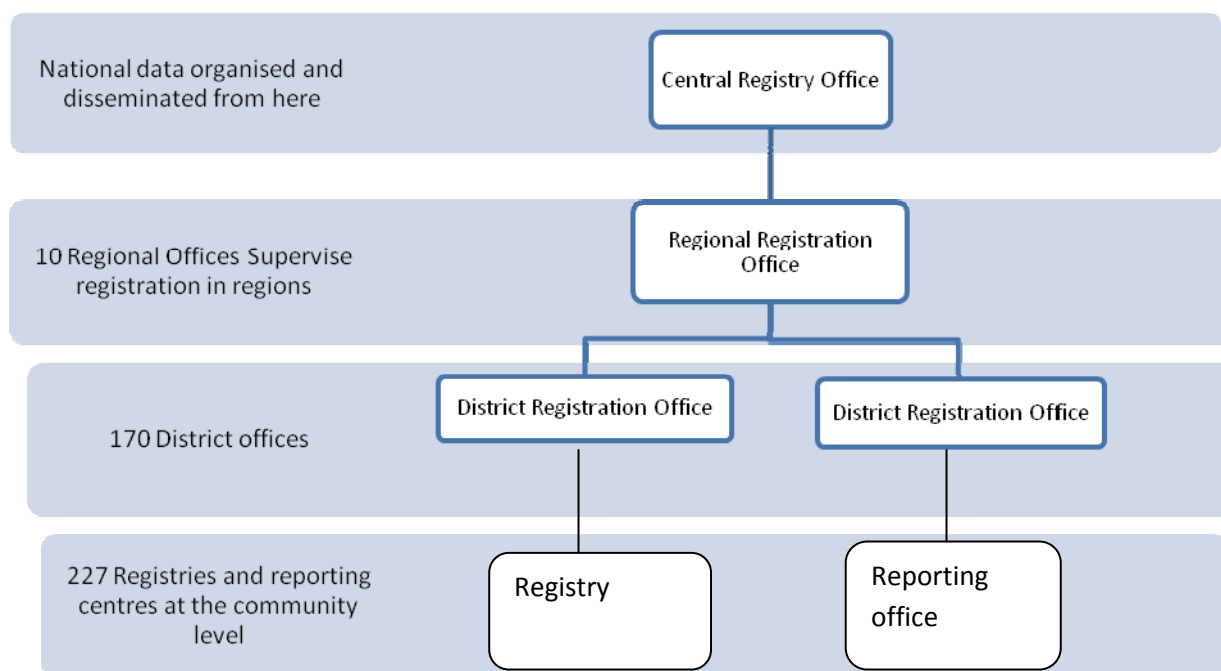
5. Although in principle the law aims for universal coverage, accessibility to registration centres is an inhibiting factor. It is estimated that only a quarter of the population is served by a registration centre. The registries are predominantly located in regional capitals, district capitals and a few communities, as represented in the figure below.

² United Nations (2001) *Principles and Recommendations for a Vital Statistics System, Revision 2*.

³ Births, Deaths and Burials Ordinance was enacted in 1912, replacing the 1888 Cemeteries Ordinance.

⁴ Kingsley Addo (2009), Siteresources.worldbank.org/.../060909TheCivilRegistrationSystemGhana.pdf

Structure of the Civil Registration in Ghana



Adapted from Addo (2009)

6. While much of its structure is permanent, the Birth and Deaths Registry has had, in recent years, to adopt strategies to increase its coverage. Some of the strategies have however not been sustainable. For example, the use of volunteer workers in the piloting of community registration surveillance sites has not yielded promising results, with the high attrition of volunteers engaged at the community level to register events. Since they receive little or no remuneration, in time many have withdraw from the registration programme.

Institutional responsibilities

7. The primary responsibility for the registration of vital events lies with the Ministry of Local Government and Rural Development. Within the Ministry, however, there is division of responsibilities, with the Births and Deaths Registry covering these events, while the metropolitan, municipal, and district assemblies (MMDAs) register marriages and divorces. These registration processes are not linked. On the contrary, while the Births and Deaths Registry is required by law to provide the Ghana Statistical Service for data processing, with one copy of each registration filled in triplicate, there is no such requirement for the other institutions involved in registration. There is therefore limited information on these other vital events.

8. The three institutions most directly involved in the births and deaths registration exercise are the Births and Deaths Registry, Ministry of Health and the Ghana Statistical Service. Until recently, in the last five years, the involvement of the Ministry of Health, was limited to the

medical certification of deaths. However, to expand the number of registration service points, the post-natal card of newly born babies has been modified. The introduction of a page allows the nurse to complete the required information and the form is submitted to the district registration office for the certificate to be issued. This initiative could provide the impetus needed to increase registration coverage, but is yet to be rolled out to all facilities.

The challenge to achieving complete registration

9. The main challenge of accessibility to registration centres is twofold. On the one hand, a substantial proportion of the unreached live in areas that are not served with many of the available basic services, and are therefore largely disenfranchised. Not only are these individuals not adequately informed of their legal and civic responsibilities to register the vital events in their lives, but also, they have limited or no means of reaching the registration points. Even if they did, they would have to visit it twice, first to register and then to collect the certificate. On the other hand, there is no immediate use to them of the certificate. Until the introduction of the national identification drive, the birth certificate was only required for passport application. Without the real motivation spurred by an immediate use of the birth certificate, parents who need to surmount any measure of challenge to get to the registration point would not respond to the call to duty. This is also the reason why the registration campaigns have been more successful at improving birth registration, and had insignificantly affected death registration.

10. Although there are penalties for failure to comply with the law, there has been no precedence set in this respect.

Process of registration

11. There are two streams for the registration of both births and deaths, one applying to when the event occurs in a hospital or health institution, and the other, when the event takes place outside these facilities, at home or other locations.

12. For births that occur at the health facilities (public/private hospitals; clinic and maternity homes, the registration form is completed in the facility or at the Child Welfare Clinic), and is submitted to the Births and Deaths Registry, either directly or through the parent or relative. The certificate is then issued to the parent or relative. For births that occur at home or elsewhere, the parent or relative (informant) registers it through the community health nurse or the community volunteer. And the certificate is issued to the informant. In the case of abandoned children, the institutions that are involved, i.e., the Police, Social Welfare, and Children's Home arrange for the birth to be registered and a birth certificate issued.

13. In the registration of deaths that occur in hospitals and other health facilities, the institution issues a medical certification of the cause of death, that is submitted to the Registry. A certificate is then issued in the form of a burial permit. When a death occurs in the home, it is reported to the police and a coroner's inquest report has to be issued. On the basis of the report the death is registered by the Registry and the Burial Permit issued.

14. The Death Certificate has fewer uses compared to the Birth Certificate, so the motivation to register is even lower.

15. While there is a penalty for delayed reporting for both birth and death, the time within which births are to be registered free of charge has been extended from one week to one year, but has remained at 7 days for death registration. There is in addition a penalty for registering a death after the deceased has been buried. In the rural areas where access points are limited and some cultural/religious practices require that the bodies of the deceased are buried within a specified period, such as 24 hours, deaths are generally not registered. In these places the burial ground are not protected so there is uncontrolled access to these grounds.

16. The records of births and deaths are kept in a register and a copy registration form filled in triplicate, also kept. These records are used for validation of documents and issuance of replacement of lost certificates.

Partnerships and collaboration

17. The success of the civil registration system depends not only on the effectiveness of the Births and Deaths Registry, but also on a network of collaborators, extending beyond the key institutions that have specific roles to play. Apart from the Ministry of Health/Ghana Health Service and the Ghana Statistical Service that are assigned specific responsibilities in the process, other institutions such as Ministry of Education and Ministry of Interior (Police Service), as well as traditional institutions such as Chiefs and the Traditional Birth Attendants (TBA), have supported the process in their respective disciplines. Other institutions, that have emerged since the 1965- Registration of Births and Deaths Act was passed, such as the Social Security and National Insurance Trust (SSNIT), National Identification Authority (NIA) are potential allies whose support and partnership have to be courted. Others include the Electoral Commission, and the Ministry of Employment and Social Welfare.

18. The major challenge to sustaining recent improvements is to provide a source of motivation for people to comply with the Act. To this end, it is envisaged in the system to involve these and many other agencies. The principle is to explore avenues for requiring Birth Certificate as part of any documentation require for the particular service, similar to the current practice with the census. Another area of improvement is the computerisation of the registration process to reduce the processing time for both the Certificate and the data.

Issues for further consideration

19. With the increasing attention to the subject of developing national civil registration system, it would be useful to provide some guidance on some basic elements that would make for an effective law.

20. It would be useful to have more specific recommendation and clarity on the terms used. For example, on the issue of universal coverage (para. 319) both geographical coverage and numerical coverage would need to be discussed. The goal of the civil registration programme (para 323) is linked to the universal coverage and could be discussed together.⁵

21. Some discussion on the factors associated with low or incomplete coverage would be necessary.

22. The need to link civil registration advocacy to other major national initiatives, such as national identification, could also be discussed.

⁵ United Nations (2001) *Principles and Recommendations for a Vital Statistics System, Revision 2*