

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

Background document

A summary of the responses from national statistical offices and international and regional organizations to the UNSD's proposal to revise the Principles and Recommendations for a Vital Statistics, Rev. 2

Prepared by
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1. On 24 March 2011 Mr. Paul Cheung, Director of the United Nations Statistics Division, in his letter to all heads of national statistical office and international and regional statistical institutions, solicited views on the need to review the current set of principles and recommendations for a vital statistics system, in terms of issues that might need to be included or further elaborated and on whether the guidelines are still relevant today. This communication was accompanied by a concept note (attached in the annex to this paper).

2. In response, thirty-five communications were received, twenty-nine from national statistical authorities¹ and six from regional and international institutions²

Overall comments:

3. All the replies unanimously expressed the opinion that the international standards on civil registration and vital statistics are relevant for the purposes of national official statistics. Some examples:

“ While the International Guidelines for Civil registration and Vital Statistics Systems are still relevant today, there are a few areas in our opinion where a review might serve to be useful” – Australia.

“The guidelines in the Principles and Recommendations for Civil Registration and Vital statistics are still relevant, beneficial and useful for the country as the guideline to produce quality data ...” – Malaysia.

“The existence of international guidelines continues to be of extreme importance, especially in what concerns comparability of vital statistics data, as well as their timeliness” – Portugal.

“We share the opinion that international guidelines are still relevant despite the fact there are significant differences between statistical systems of the UN countries” – Slovenia.

“The guidelines are still relevant today. But, it is needed to be revised” – Turkey.

4. With one exception, all replies expressed support for the initiative to review the principles and recommendations for vital statistics system, in light of the development in the past decade - the responses received support the proposal made by the United Nations Statistics Division. Some examples:

“We highly appreciate your initiative to revise the Handbook Principles and Recommendation for a Vital Statistics System, because the relevant units of the Armenian National Statistical Service very often use this handbook in practice” – Armenia.

“The ABS very strongly supports the proposed review of the *Principles and Recommendations*. Within the context of the Asia Pacific region, the proposed review is very timely” – Australia.

¹ Armenia, Australia, Azerbaijan, Canada, Chile, China – Hong Kong SAR, Czech Republic, Ecuador, Egypt, Hungary, Iran (Islamic Republic of), Italy, Korea (Republic of), Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malaysia, Mauritius, Mexico, Moldova, Occupied Palestinian Territory, Peru, Portugal, Seychelles, Slovenia, Switzerland, Thailand, Turkey, Ukraine, and United Kingdom

² CIS STAT, ECE, ESCAP, EUROSTAT, WIPO and WHO.

“While the guidelines and recommendations for civil registration and vital statistics systems should still be relevant generally in these days, we consider that there is the need of reviewing them regularly, taking into account the latest global demographic changes” - China, Hong Kong SAR.

“EUROSTAT welcomes the initiative of UNSD for reviewing the current principles and recommendations for civil registration and vital statistics” – EUROSTAT.

“Your proposal for a review of the current principles and recommendations for civil registration and vital statistics is really appreciable” – Italy.

“The revised guidelines should serve as a valuable guide for the producers of vital statistics ...” – Lithuania

“To (meet) the need for full and timely information to facilitate the knowledge of the social dynamics of the country, for analysis and decision making, (it) is essential to have guidance documents that maintain updated statistical generation process of the country, particular(ly) for the generation of vital statistics that address issues related to social, demographic and health. For that reason, it is necessary to update the document of Principles and recommendations for a vital statistics system, revision 2, approved by Statistical Commission of the United Nations, in 2001” – Mexico.

“Given the development of modern technologies and information statistical systems, as well as a lot of changes recently took place in data collection procedures in the world the State Statistics Committee of Ukraine fully supports the initiative of the United Nations Statistics Division to review existing Guidelines and Recommendations on Civil Registration and Vital Statistics Systems. We consider it will be useful for the future development and international comparability of vital statistics” – Ukraine.

Reorganizing the structure of the principles and recommendations

5. The concept note prepared by the United Nations Statistics Division emphasized the need to distinguish between vital statistics system and its sources – while at the same time reinforcing the essential principles of civil registration as the main source. This approach was supported by most of the replies.

“The proposed amendments are appropriate in the overall structure of the recommendations, to differentiate the records that may be complementary to information obtained from civil registration” – Mexico.

“ONS agrees that it is important to distinguish between the data required (vital statistics) and the system of producing those statistics (vital registration, population registers, administrative sources). However, we think it is important to recognise the unique role that vital registration plays for the individual (e.g. in recording important life events, providing identity and accessing services)” – United Kingdom.

“We fully support the need for greater clarity in terms of the differences between civil registration and vital statistics systems and for explanation on the role of civil registration in population registers. We hope that in so doing you will also emphasize the legal benefits and human rights aspects of civil registration as was noted in the 2nd revision of the Principles” – WHO.

6. The concept note included the proposed outline of the revision of the principles and recommendations, consisting of three chapters. The first chapter was focusing on definition, concepts and use of vital statistics; the second on the vital statistics system; and the third on sources of vital statistics. A number of replies suggested that there are important issues that run across different topics, such as computerization and the use of information technologies. There were also comments related to a somewhat obsolete approach to the presentation – for example: “The proposed outline covers most of the topics but is quite traditional in approach” – WHO.

7. In consequence, in the final preparation of the outline for the consideration by the Expert Group Meeting on International Standards for Civil Registration and Vital Statistics³, the outline was revised to reflect the received suggestions. It now consists of three parts and eleven chapters. The first part elaborates on the vital statistics system, including the definition and uses of vital statistics. The second part, in six chapters, focuses on sources of vital statistics. The third part, in three chapters, presents key elements of the vital statistics system – computerization, quality control and strategies for improving.

Importance of civil registration

8. All replies outline the need to clearly and unambiguously identify civil registration as the essential component not only of the vital statistics system, but of the much broader set of constructs that are critical for the wellbeing of the population.

“Inclusion of an introductory section which would reaffirm the importance of civil registration and vital statistics systems, perhaps setting the scene regarding the difference but inter-relationship between the two, as well as capturing the heightened understanding within the global community of the importance of vital statistics and the key steps that have taken across the past ten years to improve CRS and the quality of vital statistics. Recognizing, up front, that establishment of a civil registration system may take time ...” – Australia.

“I believe that CRS should be the subject of a separate and first section regarding sources of vital statistics. A separate (and subsequent) chapter could then provide guidelines in relation to the definitions of, and advantages and disadvantages in using other sources of information e.g. population registers, health services, other administrative data and population censuses and surveys. I believe the revised principles and recommendations should emphasise the strong comparative advantages of establishment of a robust CRS in order to produce quality vital statistics” – Australia.

“Highlight the importance of vital statistics resulting from the Civil Register, because its continuous character constitutes a dynamic vision of the population, and its use provides constant knowledge about the demographic evolution in a year to year basis” – Peru.

“However, we think it is important to recognise the unique role that vital registration plays for the individual (e.g. in recording important life events, providing identity and accessing services)” – United Kingdom.

“We fully support the need for greater clarity in terms of the differences between civil registration and vital statistics systems and for explanation on the role of civil registration in population

³ Scheduled for 27-30 June 2011, in New York.

registers. We hope that in so doing you will also emphasize the legal benefits and human rights aspects of civil registration as was noted in the 2nd revision of the Principles” – WHO.

Population registers

9. Most of the respondents agreed that the section on population registers for the purpose of vital statistics needs to be elaborated. The revision needs to discuss (1) the advantages and limitations of using population register for vital statistics; (2) the role of civil registration within a population register; (3) collaboration mechanisms among different institutions involved in the registration process and the data users; and (4) data transfer protocols between population register and statistical agency.

“It is very important for Armenia to find in the Handbook the clarifications and assignments on the issues related to the formation of interconnected system of population register and the civil status registration” – Armenia.

“Given the strong level of interest amongst some countries in the establishment of population registries, any revision to the *Principles and Recommendations* should clearly outline the strengths and weaknesses/limitations of such registries particularly in terms of delivering quality vital statistics” – Australia.

“The discussion on Population registers in Chapter III of the proposed outline needs to show how such systems with unique / biometric identifiers need to be set up in such a way so as to avoid duplication of and/or distraction from the development of proper CR systems. The statistical and administrative potential of such registers has to be explained as well as the pitfalls and problems that can result if not carefully built and managed” – ESCAP.

“As the attention is progressively moving towards combined register-based sources, issues related to linking/matching may be further explored, taking also into account the latest methodological and technical developments” – EUROSTAT.

“Utilizing the population register for vital statistics increases accuracy by comparing data with the civil registration and is useful for extending the coverage of analysis” – Republic of Korea.

“We support the idea of giving more importance to the register-based vital statistics and better cooperation with data providers in countries” – Slovenia.

“We also note that the current document refers in detail to the population registers. ONS is increasingly interested in the use of administrative data sources as a means of monitoring the population. We have established a project to look at the development of alternatives to the traditional census” – United Kingdom.

Quality assurance

The replies noted that a specific focus in reviewing principles and recommendations is placed on quality control and assurances, and such approach is strongly supported. Quality control here transcends all the components of the vital statistics system and is, therefore, included as one of the essential principles of that system.

“(There is the need for) Presenting methods for evaluating the validity of registers” – Iran, Islamic Republic of.

“Recommend that the evaluation of vital statistics must be part of each country’s system. Countries must conduct deep studies relative to coverage problems, sub register, according to the administrative and political division” – Peru.

“Establish the procedures to be used in order to improve the quality of vital statistics, with a special focus in births with low weight, and the statistics related to the mother and child health” - Peru.

“Another important additional element would be methods and tools for data quality review and assessment, a section that received some attention in the 2nd revision of the Principles” - WHO.

Review of core topics

In general, all replies support re-visiting the core topics for a vital statistics system. Summarizing the opinions, they range from the need to enlarge the list of core topics – for example, with variables to monitor maternal health and pregnancy outcomes or expanding the variable of marital status to accommodate people who are in civil partnerships – to noting that quite a few of the core topics in the current set of recommendations are not used because of the low response rate.

“I support the re-visiting of the core topics to be collected in a vital statistics system - the recent workshop in Bangkok raised the potential value of some additional variables being captured, particularly in order to improve countries’ understanding of maternal health during pregnancy and infant mortality. However, the (budget implications) of any such expansion of the information to be captured would also need to be considered, with compelling arguments required to support the value and feasibility of such expansion” – Australia.

“Second, an examination of the strengths and weaknesses of acquiring additional information, such as a mother’s education level at birth, to enhance vital statistics” – Canada.

“Regarding to what is pointed out, the rate of some variables, such as the age of the father, the marital status of the mother and the wedding date as non-core variables, we should consider that although some countries have analyzed and solved that these are not meaningful variables, many aspects covered by this tabular information, as well as others, would lose data sequence produced by the researchers and other users who would find that their research studies were reduced by the omission of these variables” – Chile.

“Así mismo, dentro de un proceso de evaluación y en consideración a la calidad de información resultante, que posiblemente por efectos de cultura estadística de la población y por el mismo procedimiento de recolección y/o llenado de los formularios, para el caso de algunas variables que son parte de las recomendaciones, han sido retiradas de los contenidos, ya que las proporciones altas de no respuesta no permiten disponer de información de precisión, por ejemplo de preguntas que se inquieren sobre la actividad económica de los entes que generan un hecho vital” – Ecuador. In essence, some core variables have very low response rate and are not included in the national data collection.

“Recently, parents; (especially mother’s) involvement in economic activities and their nationalities have been proven to be an important factor which affects the number of births” – Korea, Republic of.

“The variable “SEX” needs to be collected in a direct topic for marriages & divorces form/list. This is to help in the compilation of statistics on ‘mono-sex marriages’ in view of the new phenomena that ‘mono-sex marriages’ have become legal in a few countries” – Malaysia.

“The basic issues presented in the vital statistics, need to be analyzed to see if updates have been, for example, in the case of Mexico, as are marriages between same sex, which impacts the definition of marriage as in the document of principles and recommendations 2001” – Mexico.

“We agree the need to revisit the information that might be considered core. The concept note refers to marital status and should be widened to include civil partnership status and de facto household relationships. One assumes that demographic analysis covers family and household analysis but this is an important area and perhaps should be specifically mentioned” – United Kingdom.

Computerization

The discussion on computerization not only applies to civil registration procedures but also to all aspects of civil registration and vital statistics systems. Therefore, the chapter on computerization should be independent from any particular data source. The discussion needs to cover the risks and benefits in taking advantage of new technologies to improve civil registration and vital statistics.

“We hope that the section on Computerization in the proposed outline will take a broad view of all relevant IT and data management issues. This includes a discussion of advances in technology over the last couple of years that have made electronic registration through new technologies such as mobile phones, PDAs and scanning of registration forms a reality. The section should also discuss data management issues such as the documentation, archiving, storage, exchange, protection and security of data, as well as the insurance of privacy and confidentiality. In this context, references should be made to the relevant international standards, guidelines and tools (DDI, SDMX, etc.)” – ESCAP.

“The main directions in improvement of vital statistics in our country are built on the basis of use the data from the State Population Register. In modern conditions in realization of the objective of perfection of the system of civil registration and vital statistics the significant place is allocated to introduction of new technologies, perfection of system of reception and data processing about demographic events on the basis of automation of interdepartmental information interaction” – Moldova.

The role of health institutions – cause of death statistics

It was recognized by most of the respondents that health institutions played an important role in notifying births and deaths, and moreover, in certifying causes of deaths. Therefore it is plausible to provide guidelines in the revision on certifying causes-of-deaths, coding and training of medical personnel on providing information related to causes-of-death, as proposed in the concept note.

“It is important to see in the Handbook the guideline for the health care organizations on the issues related to the registration of causes of deaths” – Armenia.

“(The revision should include) the development of training guidelines for certifying and coding cause of death” – Canada.

“The use of records from health services and other administrative sources to the largest possible extent - mentioned among areas to be updated – can be a useful source for the completion of vital statistics, especially in case of data on causes of deaths. The primary data providers of Hungarian statistics on causes of deaths are health institutions. We support the recommendation that development concepts affecting medical personnel responsible for data on causes of deaths should be included in additional guidelines” – Hungary.

“The limitations identified in the certification of causes of death, mentioned the need for training medical personnel, especially in the cause of death, in the case of Mexico, there are problems of illegibility and certification, specifically when scoring the order of the disease, so are very important guidelines that arise in this regard” – Mexico.

“Highlight the importance of the entire death registry, which is very useful for the creation of infant mortality, childhood mortality, adult mortality and maternal mortality; also the civil register system is the best source of information related to vital events with application to demographic and epidemiological effects” – Peru.

“Verbal autopsy is also very important for certifying the cause of death outside health institutions. Therefore, this issue should be included in this guideline, as well” – Turkey.

“The cause of death which is not civil registration is a crucial component of national health statistics and also included in vital statistics. Because of this, absolutely, guidelines should include detailed information on causes of death as certifying cause of death, coding and training of doctors etc” – Turkey.

“The concept note also mentions 'providing additional guidance with regard to certifying causes of death, coding and training of those who certify cause of death' and ONS would support this to improve the quality of information recorded on the death certificate. In the UK health institution records are used to complement both death and birth registration. There maybe merit in the guidelines including references to linking registration data with data from health sources” – United Kingdom.

“We are glad that you raise the issue of the role of the health sector in civil registration, both in relation to cause of death certification and coding, but also with regard to the role of health institutions and health workers in the declaration of births and deaths and communicating with individuals and families regarding the importance of registration. We propose that a section on this issue be introduced, and that at the same time the potential roles and responsibilities of other sectors in registration and vital statistics (for example, education, labour market police, justice, insurance, etc) be explored. We would also propose cross referencing to the WHO standards for cause of death certification and coding which complement those developed by the UN for registration of vital events” – WHO.

Coordination mechanisms

Many respondents highlighted the importance of coordination mechanisms in successfully running the civil registration and vital statistics systems. Proposals from the respondents included that the revision should reaffirm the importance of collaboration between key institutions. The revision should also point out the benefits of creating an inter-agency committee to overseeing the operation of civil registration and vital statistics. The coordination among key institutions also benefits from establishing a clear delineation of responsibilities of various institutions in the legal framework for the vital

statistics system. In addition, common concepts and definitions across all data sources should be emphasized in the revision.

“A key learning from the March 2011 workshop on improving CRS in the Asia Pacific, was the value of but the challenges in stronger collaboration between key institutions involved in civil registration processes - most notably, Offices of the Registrar General, Ministries of Health and National Statistical Organisations. It would be helpful if the revised *Principles and Recommendations* included a section that re-affirmed the importance of and best practice in such collaboration in order to deliver quality and timely vital statistics” – Australia.

“In each country, in addition to the statistical offices, it would be essential to consider the contribution of other bodies with responsibilities in the field of vital statistics to the discussion and consultation process. In Portugal, “Instituto dos Registos e Notariado” from the Ministry of Justice (the body responsible for civil registration) and the Ministry of Health (the body responsible for the Death Certificates) should be consulted” - Portugal

“Point out the need for the creation of a permanent Committee or an Inter agency Commission for the management of vital statistics management, as an advisory body, with the purpose of strengthening the Civil Registration System and Vital Statistics. It should be established by public institutions responsible for the output of vital statistics, register of vital events and data users” - Peru.

Other issues

The replies received from countries raised also a number of other issues that are summarized below.

Advocacy

The revision could emphasize the importance of advocacy at regional and national level to help countries and make cases to national and international partners and mobilizing the resources required to strengthen the system. Some text on community mobilization and incentives for registration could be added in the revision. It would also be of value to address costing and capacity-building for civil registration and vital statistics (WHO).

Working with other partners for the revision

There was suggestion on UNSD working with other relevant agencies, i.e., Eurostat, taking into consideration of existing framework such as the European Community Regulation on Demography. A task force could be created to work on the revision, with the participation of relevant agencies, national statistical offices and administrative bodies that are in charge of the registration process in countries (Portugal).

Methods for population estimates

A number of respondents raised the issue of including an elaboration of statistical and demographic techniques and methods for generating population estimates and projections from vital statistics.

“From our point of view more important issue is the preparation of a short manual where, along with the methodology of calculation of the relative indicators of Vital Statistics, would be reflected the international approaches to the recalculations of these indices in retrospect in connection with the specification of the population for all years of the inter-census period” – CIS STAT.

“A separate chapter on methods should be added, which would treat in particular techniques for estimation of vital rates and ratios” – Switzerland.

Date of occurrence

“The question of the date of occurrence versus the date of registration should receive particular attention, and recommendations and guidelines should be developed on this subject, especially since the recommended basis for the time reference of all vital statistics is the date of occurrence, what is also the case at Eurostat. The question of the late registration of events (which can stretch over several years) should be addressed: how should countries deal with these cases?” – Switzerland.

Revision of definitions, classifications and glossary

Revision of definitions, classifications and glossary is echoed by many of the respondents (Armenia, Chile, Korea, Republic of, Mexico, Peru).

Annex I.

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 censuses⁴ (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 censuses⁵, as well as to the *Handbook on the Collection of Fertility and Mortality Data*⁶. 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.

⁴ *Principles and Recommendations for Population and Housing Censuses, Revision 2*, United Nations Publication, Sales No. E.07.XVII.8, New York, 2008.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ 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