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**Country response to international data requests: The role of
statistical coordination at the national level**

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A. DATA FOR THE *DEMOGRAPHIC YEARBOOK*

1. Data for the United Nations *Demographic Yearbook* consists mainly of population and vital statistics (births, deaths, marriages, and migration). One of the main sources of demographic data is a population census, which is generally taken decennially in Sri Lanka. In addition to the population censuses, vital registration system is the other key source of demographic data.

B. COLLECTION OF DEMOGRAPHIC DATA

(a) Population censuses

2. Population data for census years are based on population censuses. Sri Lanka has a long history of census taking, beginning with the 1871 census. With few exceptions, censuses have been taken at regular intervals as recommended by the United Nations, in years ending with 1. The exceptions have been due to unavoidable circumstances, for example the census that was due for 1941 was postponed to 1946 due to the Second World War, and the next census was carried out in 1953, and the next was in 1963. The 1991 census was not conducted due to unstable conditions from ethnic conflicts in the Northern and Eastern parts of the country. Hence, the last census was carried out in the year 2001 after a lapse of 20 years. It was not possible to cover the districts in the north and east of the country, except one (Ampara district) during the 2001 census. Therefore, to that extent there are gaps in demographic data today. Population data for intercensal periods are based on estimates prepared by the Registrar General's Department.

3. Information on the mid year population is available for the entire country without interruption. However, the accuracy of the data may be questionable for the estimates for the past 15 to 20 years due to lapses in the reporting. These estimates do not provide population characteristics such as urban/rural, and age distribution.

(b) Collection of vital statistics

4. The Registrar General's Department is responsible for collecting information on births, deaths, marriages and migration. The registration of births, deaths and marriages was introduced in Sri Lanka in 1867, but the registration of births and deaths was made compulsory in 1897. The Registrar General's Department collects and disseminates information on vital statistics. The statistical system of Sri Lanka is centralized and the Department of Census and Statistics has the role of coordination and guidance in providing technical staff for all government departments and the ministries.

5. For the purpose of registration of births, deaths and marriages, each administrative district is divided into small units called registration divisions. A birth, death and marriage registration division is a sub division of a Divisional Secretariat. There is a registrar in each of these registration divisions. Every live birth or death that occurs in any part of the Island is required to be registered within a specified period. In Sri Lanka, registration of births and deaths

is compulsory under the births and deaths registration act. Although birth and death registration is compulsory by law, some events are missed and do not get registered for various reasons.

6. Total live births, deaths, etc., are available from the registration system. For an individual, an official record of his/her birth registration is a legal document, which provides proof of his or her age, citizenship and other personal information. Similarly, a record of the registration of a person's death is required by his/her family or dependents for purposes of insurance claims, social security funds and proof of inheritance, etc. For the country, these records provide valuable information in the field of demography. However, there are delays in analysing and publishing these data. For instance, data on live births by age of mother have been compiled only up to 1998. All other vital information like births, deaths, foetal, infant, and maternal mortality are available at national, but not at sub-national level. Data on deaths by age and deaths by cause are also available only up to 1996. Delay in publishing data is due to a variety of reasons. One of these is the fact that the flow of information on vital events is not reported from all registration divisions on a regular basis. This is mainly due to disruption of the reporting system especially in the war-affected areas. At the same time, the recording of cause of death is not always done. Therefore, it is difficult to analyse deaths by cause due to lack of information.

7. Sri Lanka has a very good system of births and deaths registration. There have been studies to ascertain the extent of coverage of registration of births and deaths in 1953, 1967, and 1981. It was revealed that the overall completeness of birth registration in Sri Lanka in 1981 was 98.8 per cent. The percentage for urban and rural sectors was 98.6 and 99.2 percent, respectively. When 1953 and 1967 results are compared there is an improvement in the level of completeness of birth registration, which increased from 88.1 to 98.7 per cent in the 13-year period. The overall completeness of death registration was 94 percent. Rates for urban, rural and estate sectors were 92.9 per cent, 92.2 per cent and 100.0 per cent respectively. Comparing the 1967 results with 1953 survey shows that there was an improvement in the completeness of death registration from 88.6 to 94.5 per cent. However, there is evidence of late and non-registration during the late 1990s due to unstable conditions in parts of the country.

(c) International migration

8. Information on immigration and emigration is obtained through the Department of Immigration and Emigration. The accuracy of these data is questionable due to recent trends in illegal emigration of nationals to western countries in search of jobs.

C. IMPROVING THE SCOPE OF THE *DEMOGRAPHIC YEARBOOK*

9. To improve the scope of the *Demographic Yearbook*, I would suggest including in the regular issue a section on labour, employment, and fertility, which have a strong impact on demographic behaviour. This may include data on the labour force participation rate (LFPR) by sex, unemployment rate, and also total fertility rate (TFR), age specific fertility rate (ASFR), etc.

10. It is no doubt that an efficient and up to date vital registration system is a pre-requisite for sound demographic data. If Sri Lanka returns to normalcy the registration system could be better organized and improved.