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STATISTICAL DIVISION  
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BUREAU, CHINA

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**STRATEGIES FOR IMPROVING CIVIL REGISTRATION AND VITAL STATISTICS  
IN THE COUNTRIES OF ESCAP REGION**

by

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Asia and the Pacific

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Strategies for improving civil registration  
and vital statistics systems

(Item 9 of the provisional agenda)

Strategies for Improving Civil Registration  
and Vital Statistics Systems in the Countries  
of the ESCAP Region

Note by the ESCAP Secretariat<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The paper has been issued without formal editing.

**Strategies for Improving Civil Registration  
and Vital Statistics Systems in the Countries  
of the ESCAP Region**

**Introduction**

1. During the past four decades a number of resolutions and recommendations were adopted for the improvement of civil registration and vital statistics systems in developing countries, while numerous seminars, workshops and conferences were organized to identify possible ways of achieving that goal. In the ESCAP region, particularly in Asia, several meetings have been organized and projects implemented with international assistance to improve the civil registration and vital statistics system. Yet as far as the completeness of the system is concerned, not many examples can be found in the region where notable progress has taken place during the past four decades. This is evident from the information published in the United Nations publications Demographic Yearbook and Population and Vital Statistics Report on the quality of vital registration data in which registration of an event is considered to be complete if 90 per cent of the events occurring each year are covered.

2. In the 1950s six countries or areas in East and South Asia were considered to have adequate civil registration systems, i.e., Brunei Darussalam, Hong Kong, Japan, West Malaysia, Singapore and Sri Lanka. The situation has not improved very much during the past 40 years, since only a handful countries could be added to this list. In the Republic of Korea remarkable progress has been reported, as can be seen in the following figures:

**Completeness of registration (per cent)**

	<u>1978</u>	<u>1988</u>
Births	53	87
Deaths	74	91
Marriages	38	63

However, based on latest information available from country sources, the list of countries with complete registration of births and deaths should also include China, Macau and Maldives. Significant progress has also been reported by the Philippines and Thailand towards improving the coverage of birth and death registration, perhaps with further progress these systems would be soon considered as nearly complete for statistical purposes.

3. Table 1 shows the availability of demographic data in 53 countries/areas within ESCAP region which clearly demonstrates the need for considerable improvements in civil registration and vital statistics systems in at least half of the countries/areas.

4. ESCAP is quite a diverse region where wide differences are found among countries as to size of population, geography, society, culture, history, and socio-economic development. This variety of situations has contributed to a very rich data collection experience in the region and provides valuable opportunities to learn from each other's experiences. This paper discusses some of the factors which have been identified as obstacles to improvement of civil registration and vital statistics systems in the ESCAP region, and examines some of the probable strategies which may be considered in future plans of action.

#### **Factors Responsible for Inadequate Civil Registration and Vital Statistics Systems**

5. In addition to the socio-economic and demographic heterogeneity mentioned above, there are wide variations in the organizational patterns of civil registration and vital statistics systems of the countries of the region. Thus the various factors which are considered important in determining the quality of a civil registration and vital statistics system assume different degrees of significance under different settings and circumstances. The following is a list of selected factors which have been cited

as obstacles to the development and improvement of civil registration and vital statistics systems:

- Public apathy
- Financial constraints
- Lacunae in legal provisions and administrative organization
- Geography and population densities
- Calibre and morale of staff
- Time-lag in the compilation and presentation of data

### Discussion of Issues and Problems and Strategies for Improvement

#### Public Apathy

6. Motivation to register vital events is a major factor responsible for the degree of adequacy of a vital registration system. Legal provisions alone may not be that effective unless they are also accompanied by the perception that it is in the interest of the individuals and families to register. The law by itself, whatever punitive provisions it contains and whatever power it bestows upon magistrates or registrars, will not be sufficient if it fails to take into account the hopes and fears of the common man or woman. The law should be sensibly administered to overcome a universal fear and suspicion of bureaucracy. It is important for each person to know what is required by law, what benefits or obligations are entailed and, most importantly, the location of the registration office and procedures to be followed. The system, in total must be simple to follow, must be relevant, and must be seen to operate in the interest of the individual as well as the State.

7. Motivation among individuals and families to register vital events is a function, among other things, of literacy, socio-economic development and a common belief that people would fail to

obtain certain benefits and entitlement in the absence of a registration document. While little can be expected from the registration authorities in hastening the pace of development and the elimination of illiteracy, much can be contributed by them for improving the public attitude in many developing countries where the registration of vital events is incomplete.

8. In a number of developing countries the legal and administrative apparatuses do not insist on civil registration documents as necessary evidence on various matters such as proof of place of birth, age, relationship and the like. Rather, an individual can easily meet the requirement through other documents and means such as affidavits and personal witnesses. Thus there is a need to convince relevant administrative authorities and legal institutions at various levels to phase out the acceptance of other documents in lieu of civil registration records as proof of age, relationship, marital status, dependency status, etc.

9. It has been repeatedly mentioned in various forums that a better understanding of the role of civil registration in the society and its statistical and administrative functions by the user agencies, ministries, policy-makers and high-level officials will help both to generate interest in needed improvements and to mobilize the necessary resources. However, the question remains as to how one enhances awareness among government officials to ensure some concrete results. Perhaps to begin with, it should be pointed out that there is hardly any developed society in which registration records are not used as primary documents when it comes to rights to citizenship, to attend school, to obtain driver's license, to obtain a passport or to claim social security benefits. Also, it is highly unlikely that a developed country would not have an adequate civil registration system.

*Incentives to register*

10. There are examples from developing countries which suggest that, in legal and administrative matters, once a requirement is introduced seriously and it is strictly adhered to by the authorities, people generally comply with the procedures. Not due to the punitive aspects, but because of the perceived loss of entitlement and important rights such as citizenship. One example is the introduction of identity cards in Pakistan<sup>2</sup>, which is now commonly perceived as a document which no citizen could afford to be without. Whether it is evidence of domicile, issuance of passport or admissions to public professional schools, no application would be accepted without the identity card. Even in private business transactions, such as purchase of land, this document has assumed a special place. This shows that even in the situation of low literacy public motivation for registration can increase in the presence of relevant stimuli. There are a number of examples in the region where improvement in the civil registration systems were noticed whenever a stimulus in the society appeared. For example in Hong Kong, although birth and death registration became compulsory in 1872, it took many years for the registration system to be qualified as complete. It was in the 1960s when, in view of large scale demand for housing, preference was given in public housing projects to families with children. In order to qualify for that provision, birth certificates were required. This requirement led to a significant rise in awareness as to the importance of birth registration. This demonstrates that one of the best incentives to register is the realization by the public at large that the enjoyment of certain rights and privileges is contingent upon proof of registration.

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<sup>2</sup> It is likely that initially the introduction of identity card system itself might have contributed to a reduction in the registration of births. However, for recent births it has been made difficult for children to be registered as a member of the household without a birth certificate.

Another contributing factor in the improvement of birth registration in Hong Kong was the rise in the use of maternity facilities in hospitals.

*Public relation campaigns*

11. To gain official support, registration authorities must be able to demonstrate that the administrative steps taken for motivating people to register would produce results beyond achieving the completeness of registration, otherwise taking those steps just for the sake of producing reliable statistics would not be a sufficient reason. For example, whenever pilot schemes were devised in the past, the main focus was to achieve civil registration completeness, but not much attention was paid to demonstrate the immediate benefits which the community and the authorities could have drawn. Perhaps the future pilot schemes could pay due attention to public relations and make visible the products and services which can be extended. Potentially, complete registration in a community can produce information useful for education, housing, health and population programmes. For example, birth records may be used for implementing mother and child care programmes, while the statistical information, such as on birth-weight of the babies, may be utilized in determining the actual focus of those programmes. One important area which has assumed increased importance is statistics for local areas and communities for which civil registration plays an important role. The local authorities and community leaders, if convinced of this role, no doubt would prove to be effective allies.

12. Another factor responsible for the lack of attention to the needed reforms for civil registration and vital statistics is the failure to recognize in developing countries, as well as by the donors, that much of the population data which appear in national

and international statistical publications are based on indirect measurement. Often these data cannot be assigned the same degree of reliability as for those available on developed countries, and that the major reason for this disparity is the inadequacy of civil registration in developing countries.

13. In the region, efforts by some countries to promote a better understanding of the importance of civil registration have included publicity campaigns, such as through exhibition of posters, films, slides, television and radio spotlights. In the Philippines, since 1991, February of every year has been declared as Civil Registration Month. Also the usefulness of registration is being inculcated in some countries by introducing the need for production of birth certificates at the time of school admission, issue of ration card, and issue of passport etc. However, further studies are required to study the actual impact of these efforts on the improvement of registration coverage.

#### Financial constraints

14. Resources remain as a major constraint in improving civil registration and vital statistics in developing countries; often infrastructural development of this nature is considered low priority. The lack of resources contribute to a number of basic problems such as insufficient number of primary registration offices and the dependence on ex officio and/or part-time registrars. Many of the factors contributing to this situation and possible strategies for improvement have already been discussed above. In several countries of the region measures taken to circumvent financial constraints include introduction of the notifier system, local registrars in each village, and mobile registration offices. Nevertheless, mobilization of adequate resources should remain high priority and, as mentioned earlier, serious consideration should be given to public relations aspects for activating support.

Lacunae in legal provisions and administrative organization

15. In the ESCAP region the tradition of population data collection and civil registers can be traced back to early historical times, such as in the United Silla Kingdom of Korea (A.D. 668-935). However, the promulgation of legal acts and ordinances, making the registration of births and deaths compulsory, began in most countries from the second half of the nineteenth century. The legislation as they exist in different countries reflect the organizational structures and the past political histories of the countries. Where registration is relatively complete, including several island developing countries, the legal requirements to register vital events within the specified period of time are generally followed, although there may be some exceptions. On the other hand, in the majority of countries in South Asia and in most of the South-east Asian countries the registration of vital events is unsatisfactory despite the presence of legal provisions. It is only Bhutan, Lao People's Republic and Solomon Islands which still lack a civil registration act.

16. While it is true that a registration act alone is not sufficient to ensure compliance with registration, it is but necessary to have laws which clearly define the powers and resources of the registration agency, the compulsory nature of registration, the informant and the time period allowed to register.

17. Since registration laws in many instances are decades old, it is recognized by the countries that they need review and revision. There are examples in the region where revisions have been introduced to legal provisions. It would be most useful if an assessment could be made of the impact of such changes. Recently in the Philippines the Status of Civil Registry and Vital Statistics Division of the National Statistics Office was raised to

the National Civil Registration Office, while, through a Senate Bill, provision has also been made for every local government unit to have a full-time, permanent and career position of local civil registrar. In 1986, and again in 1991, civil registration laws were revised in the Republic of Korea to simplify the procedures of registration by informants.

18. During discussions in regional and other meetings, civil registration and vital statistics officials from developing countries often identify problems with regard to existing legal provisions - such as laws not being specific enough to deal with all aspects of legal systems, registration law not covering the entire territory of the country, existence of several systems of registration with their own comprehensive laws, and absence of detailed and clear rules and regulations to encourage good reporting. However, it is not clear that how far these discussions lead to concrete steps taken towards early rationalization of the laws. There is a need to identify ways and means of implementing the sound recommendations emanating from the civil registration and vital statistics agencies.

19. In the ESCAP region the organizational structures of the civil registration systems can generally be characterized as "centralized" ones. Usually local agencies are responsible for civil registration but are supervised by a national office which supervises, inspects and unifies the system. For example in Japan, vital statistics are derived from information obtained through the family registration system provided for by the Family Registration Law (KOSEKI). At the central level the Ministry of Justice has responsibility for administering the system whereas sub-branch offices of the Ministry supervise and assist local offices. However, in a number of countries the agency in charge of civil registration at the centre may be different from the agency or agencies looking after the registration work at the local level. The involvement of different departments requires coordination

through such means as interdepartmental agencies. The absence of interdepartmental coordination is another major issue facing many developing countries with weak registration systems.

#### Geography and population densities

20. Difficulties of terrain and poor access to the local registration offices, due to lack of adequate transport, communication facilities or otherwise, are among the factors which contribute to poor civil registration in several countries, such as Papua New Guinea and Nepal. It is recognized that this problem may be tackled by establishing an effective network of local registration offices and through better coordination among relevant departments, particularly between the Registrar General's office and the Health Departments. However, many of these solutions are not implemented due to resource constraints. In some island developing countries, one problem in the compilation of vital statistics is the late submission of returns from distant islands, which in some cases are quite dispersed and require considerable amount of travel time and resources to reach.

#### Calibre and morale of staff

21. Even where people recognized the responsibility to register and sufficient incentives were present to do so, the system could face difficulties if the registration staff were not properly trained, or did not have the right attitude to serve the public. One concern expressed in various regional forums is the low status of the local registrar in the community. Where registration function is assigned as part of various other duties, the former invariably receives a low priority. In some South Asian countries, this has contributed to the situation where people cannot even locate the office and the official responsible for registration.

The lack of interest shown by the registration staff, such as by not having available registration forms, discourages people to visit those offices unless there is a strong reason to do so. It has been observed that monetary incentives, constant supervision and encouragement, and public acknowledgement of the importance of registrar's role by high-level officials are among some of the factors which may contribute in enhancing the status and morale of the local registrars. In some countries, some attention has been paid to the training of staff, for example, by conducting annual seminars/workshops of local civil registrars in every region and selected big provinces.

#### Time-lag in the compilation and presentation of data

22. In the majority of the countries (about two-thirds) in the region, the major responsibility of the national vital statistics administration rests with the national statistical offices. The compilation, processing, tabulation and dissemination of data from administrative records have different characteristics than other processes of data collection. Because of the involvement of different agencies and the continuing process of registration, the agency responsible for compilation does not have as much flexibility as is the case with population censuses or surveys.

23. One major factor contributing to the time-lag in the compilation of vital statistics, which is very often done by date of occurrence, is late registration, while another is the late submission of the returns by the local offices. To counter those problems, some countries have proposed adoption of more intensive procedures for monitoring the flow of registration forms and their processing to ensure that tabulations are produced on a timely basis.

24. Application of computer and microfilm technology for the preservation and retrieval of civil registry documents are among

several steps being taken to improve the civil registration system. Other measures include application of on-line computerized data entry, electronic data communication and transfer. Attention is also being paid to the improvement of the quality of information collected on birth, death, and marriage certificates so that more information could be derived to help the analysis of fertility, mortality, and marriage trends.

### Concluding Remarks

25. In considering strategies for improving any administrative system, it is also important to focus on its various components. In the case of the vital statistics system, a review would concentrate on legal aspects, organizational structure of civil registration, and the administrative structure of the vital statistics system. In-depth review is also required of the collection process which brings together and controls the statistical returns, the statistical recording procedures - such as transcription and coding, the compilation procedures which include editing and tabulation, and the presentation and analysis. It would also be needed to review the characteristics of vital events that are included on the statistical document, particularly in those countries which have relatively complete registration of the vital events.

26. The experiences of the countries in the region in tackling issues with respect to various components mentioned above would serve as useful guides for future reviews and formulation of strategies for improvement - some of which have already been discussed in the paper. Thus the process of sharing these experiences should continue, such as through technical meetings and publications. However, much needs to be done to understand public apathy towards civil registration and to promote innovative measures to minimize it. Hardly any systematic research has been conducted on these issues, despite their recognized importance.

27. The paper has emphasized more reliance on public relations campaigns and the visibility of the outputs and services of a vital registration system in order to gain the support at a very high level in the government. However, statisticians and registrars need more allies in this campaign, within and outside the government. Civil registration is an important legal instrument and has fundamental linkages with various issues concerning human rights. Thus campaign should also be launched to gain active support of the lawyer's associations and non-governmental organizations concerned with human rights. Similarly, associations and agencies concerned with the advancement of women, of indigenous populations and other special population groups, if properly briefed, would also be interested in the improvement of the civil registration system in their respective countries. The users of statistics, such as local authorities, community leaders and chambers of commerce should also be the focus of the public relations campaign.

28. There is also a need to conduct further research on the impact of various strategies for improving civil registration and vital statistics systems, such as the revision of laws and regulations, publicity campaigns and the improvements in the status and salary of the registration staff.

Table 1  
Availability of basic demographic data in the ESCAP region

	Year of Latest census	Quality of vital statistics	
		Births	Deaths
<b>CENTRAL ASIA</b>			
Azerbaijan	1989	..	..
Kazakhstan	1989	..	..
Kyrgyzstan	1989	..	..
Tajikistan	1989	..	..
Turkmenistan	1989	..	..
Uzbekistan	1989	..	..
<b>EAST ASIA</b>			
China	1990	C	C
Democratic People's Republic of Korea	1944	..	..
Hong Kong	1991	C	C
Japan	1990	C	C
Macau	1991	C	C
Mongolia	1989	..	..
Republic of Korea	1990	C	C
<b>SOUTH-EAST ASIA</b>			
Brunei Darussalam	1991	C	C
Cambodia	1962	I	I
Indonesia	1990	I	I
Lao People's Democratic Republic	1985	I	I
Malaysia	1991	C	C
Myanmar	1983	I	I
Philippines	1990	I	I
Singapore	1990	C	C
Thailand	1990	I	I
Viet Nam	1989	I	I
<b>SOUTH ASIA</b>			
Afghanistan	1979	I	I
Bangladesh	1991	I	I
Bhutan	1980-81	I	I
India	1991	I	I
Islamic Republic of Iran	1986	I	I
Maldives	1990	C	C
Nepal	1991	I	I
Pakistan	1981	I	I
Sri Lanka	1981	C	C
<b>PACIFIC</b>			
American Samoa	1990	C	C
Australia	1991	C	C
Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands	1990	I	I
Cook Islands	1991	C	C
Federated States of Micronesia	1985-89	I	I
Fiji	1986	C	C
French Polynesia	1989	C	C
Guam	1990	C	C
Kiribati	1990	I	I
Nauru	1983	C	C
New Caledonia	1989	C	C
New Zealand	1991	C	C
Niue	1991	C	C
Papua New Guinea	1990	I	I
Republic of the Marshall Islands	1988	I	I
Republic of Palau	1990	I	I
Samoa	1991	I	I
Solomon Islands	1986	I	I
Tonga	1986	C	C
Tuvalu	1985	C	C
Vanuatu	1989	I	I

C = Data considered to be virtually complete enough to obtain reliable estimates of vital statistics.

I = Data considered to be incomplete.

.. = Information not available.

Note: Completeness codes, in some cases arbitrary, are based on the latest information provided by countries and reports of U.N. advisers.