

**COUNTRY REPORT ON CIVIL REGISTRATION AND VITAL
STATISTICS SYSTEMS**

MALAWI

**Prepared for the African Workshop on Strategies for Accelerating the Improvement of
Civil Registration and Vital Statistics Systems**

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**Mr. J. S. Ndawala,
Principal Statistician,
National Statistical Office,
Zomba, Malawi.**

**Mr. V. J. Mzumara,
Senior Assistant Registrar General,
Registrar General Department
Blantyre, Malawi.**

I. GENERAL BACKGROUND

Malawi is a landlocked country bordered to the north and northeast by the United Republic of Tanzania, to the east, south and southwest by the people's Republic of Mozambique and to the west by the Republic of Zambia. It is 901 kilometres long and ranges in width from 80 to 161 kilometres. The country has a total area of 118,484 square kilometres, of which 94,276 square kilometres is land area. Fifty-six percent of the land area is arable.

Malawi's most striking topographic feature is the Rift Valley which runs through the entire length of the country, passing through Lake Malawi in the northern and central part of the country to the Shire Valley in the south. To the west and south of Lake Malawi are fertile plains and mountain ranges whose main peaks range from 1,698 to 3,002 metres. The country is divided into three administrative regions; Northern, Central and Southern. There are twenty four districts, five in the Northern Region, nine in the Central Region and ten in the Southern Region. In each district there are Traditional Authorities (or chiefs) and the smallest administrative unit is the village. There are 43 Traditional Authorities in the Northern Region, 79 in the Central Region and 83 in the Southern Region.

Malawi experiences tropical continental climate with some maritime influences. Rainfall and temperature are greatly influenced by the Lake and altitude, which varies from 37 to 3,050 metres above sea level. From May to August, the climate is cool and dry. From September to November, average temperatures rise and the rainy season begins towards the end of this period. The rainy season extends to April or May.

Malawi is predominantly an agricultural country. Agricultural produce accounts for 90 percent of Malawi's exports; tobacco, tea, and cotton are the main export commodities. The total GDP at current market prices in 1993 was about K8,882.6 million implying a GDP per capita income of about K920 or roughly around US\$210. The economy of Malawi improved in 1991 over performance in the three preceding years. Real gross domestic product (GDP) grew at a rate of 7.8 percent in 1991 compared to growth of 4.8 percent, 4.1 percent and 3.3 percent recorded in 1990, 1989, and 1988, respectively. The agricultural and distribution sectors accounted for most of the increase in real GDP.

II. DEMOGRAPHIC BACKGROUND

The population of Malawi is growing at a rate of around 3.2 percent per year based on the 1987 Population and Housing Census, up from 2.9 percent in 1977 (this considers only natural or intrinsic growth and does not include refugee population, estimated at about 1 million persons in 1992). The total Malawian population in the 1987 census was enumerated at around 8 million persons, having roughly doubled since 1966 census. Given current growth estimates, the 1994 mid year population is estimated at approximately 10 million persons. With a doubling of the size of Malawi's population over the last two decades has come a doubling of population density from 43 to 85 persons per square kilometre during the period 1966 and 1987. By 1994, Malawi's population density will exceed 100 persons per square kilometre.

Of the 8 million people in Malawi in 1987, 52 percent were females and about 46 percent were aged under 15 years. Malawi's population is predominantly rural with only 11 percent of the population living in urban areas in 1987 and was expected to reach 15 percent by 1994. Among the 3 regions, the Southern Region with about a third of the total land area is the most populous with about 50 percent of the population followed by the Central Region with 39 percent and then the sparsely populated Northern Region with 11 percent despite the fact that the 3 regions do not differ much in land area.

The current rapid population growth in Malawi is largely due to the declines in general levels of mortality with almost constant and high levels of fertility. Fertility in Malawi has been relatively high for quite a long time, the latest estimate of fertility from 1992 Demographic and Health Survey indicate a total fertility rate (TFR) of 6.7 as compared to 7.6 for 1977, 1982 and 1984 and 7.4 for 1987. Mortality has shown a relatively declining trend with crude birth declining from 25 in 1977 to about 19 in 1987. However of much concern has been the high levels of childhood mortality as given in the table below. For 1992 infant mortality rate is estimated 134 deaths for every 1,000 births while under five mortality is around 234 deaths implying that about a quarter of all births do not reach their fifth birthday. Malawi has also a high maternal mortality rate of 620 deaths.

The Childhood Mortality Rate in Malawi, 1992

Period	Infant Mortality	Child Mortality	Under 5 Mortality
88 - 92	134	115	234
83 - 87	138	126	246
78 - 82	136	141	258

III. THE CIVIL REGISTRATION SYSTEM

a. Legal Frame of the System

Virtually every country in the world has enabling legislation to register what might be termed vital events, that is, birth and death among others. In Malawi registration of births and deaths occurring in Malawi for both Malawians and foreigners and of Malawians living abroad is done under the Births and Deaths Registration Act Cap. 24:01 of the Laws of Malawi which came into force in 1904 and has remained unaltered in all material provisions. While this Act may have served well for policy makers of the then colonial administration, its provisions are now considered to be largely inadequate for effective notification and registration of vital events as they are out of touch with the prevailing social and economic development of Malawi. Cabinet has recently approved in principle the review of the Births and Deaths Registration Act to provide for compulsory civil registration.

The Births and Deaths Registration Act, which provides the legal basis for registration of births and deaths in Malawi, makes registration compulsory for all non-African births and deaths in Malawi. Non-African birth according to Section 18(1) of the Act is a birth of a child whose one or both parents are of European, American or Asiatic race or origin and in the case of an illegitimate child not recognized by its father, if the mother is of European, American or Asiatic race or origin. While Section 18(3) of the Act makes registration of death compulsory for persons of European, American or Asiatic race or origin, in terms of Section 13 of the Act the Registration Officer shall not enter in the register a death more than 3 months after the date of death, except that where the registration of such death is compulsory the Registration Officer shall enter it upon receiving the written authority of the

Registrar and upon payment of the prescribed fee.

Some data of births and deaths are currently available from the Ministry of Health but these relate only to births and deaths taking place in hospitals or clinics. For example, a comparison of births reported in the census for the period of 12 months prior to the enumeration with births in hospitals etc indicates that between 1/3 and 2/3 of births go unrecorded, the figure varying between districts.

b. Administrative Arrangements of the Civil Registration System and Procedures for Registration

The office of the Registrar General has legal responsibility for the registration system but the events are registered first at the 24 District Administration Headquarters where District Commissioners act as District Registration Officers on behalf of the Registrar General. The office of the Registrar General is under the Ministry of Justice and it has responsibility for the administration/implementation of the following: Marriage Act, Births and Deaths Registration Act, Trustees Incorporation Act, Bankruptcy Act, Estate Duty Act, Companies Act, Business Names Registration Act, Trade Marks Act, Registered Designs Act, Adoption of Children Act, Business Licensing Act and Commercial Credits Act.

At the District Commissioners' offices births and deaths report forms are completed and entries made in appropriate registers. These forms are then sent to the Registrar General's office in Blantyre where the events are entered in a central register, indexed and certificates issued upon payment of a prescribed fee. The Registrar General has custody of all filled register books and all quarterly returns made by the Registration Officers. It is the duty of the Registrar, after the close of each year, to compile a summary of the births and deaths of such year and make a report on the increase or decrease of the population of Malawi. Currently, it is not possible for the Registrar to make such reports due to the optional application of the Act and the irregular submission of returns from Registration Officers.

c. Proposed Reform of the Civil Registration System

Following an advisory mission undertaken by an expert from the United Nations Fund for Population Activities (UNFPA) in 1983, project proposal was made and recommendations

to the government for improvement and expansion of the civil registration system in Malawi. The essential feature of the registration system proposed in the project document is that the registration facilities will be taken as close as possible to the informants to make it convenient for them to comply with the legal requirements of the system. The offices of Traditional and Local Authorities will be made reporting centres for vital events. At the traditional authority or local authority headquarters, a Registration Assistant will complete birth/death report forms in triplicate. The third copy will be retained at the reporting centre and the duplicate given free to the informant as proof of the reporting of the event. The original of the report forms will be forwarded monthly to District Registration Offices located at District Commissioners' Offices where the events will be legally registered. Legal Certificates of registration signed by District Commissioners on behalf of the Registrar General will be issued to applicants on payment of a fee.

The District Registration Office will record the registration numbers of events on the report forms and forward them at the end of every quarter to the Registrar General's Office for indexing, statistical processing and storage. In order to make the system more dynamic, notifiers will be appointed to motivate informants to register events. The notifiers will also inform Registration Assistants about the occurrence of such events. It is expected that the village headmen will be appointed as notifiers since such persons currently receive information about vital events in their areas in the normal course of their duties. In addition to the reporting centres at Traditional Authority and Local Authority headquarters, hospitals and health centres will be made reporting centres for the completion of births/deaths report forms in respect of vital events which will occur at health institutions.

d. The Local Registrars

Although the Registration Officers at the district centres are highly trained people in their profession, they also perform other governmental administrative duties apart from civil registration and they may not fully appreciate the importance of a good civil registration system. There has been virtually no training of personnel in civil registration and there is a significant limitation in human, administrative and financial resources allocated to civil registration activities.

e. The Informant

The duty to report vital events in the case of births placed primarily upon the father or mother of the child. In default of the father and mother the duty may alternately be exercised by the occupier of the house in which the birth occurred or by any person who witnessed the birth of who has charge of the child. In the case of deaths the duty to report the event is placed upon the nearest relatives who were present at the time of death or in attendance during the ;last illness. In default of such near relative, any relative dwelling within the district or any person who was present at the time of death or any occupier/inmate of the house in which the death took place may report the event to the Registration Officer.

f. Assessment of the Civil Registration System

It has already been mentioned that the civil registration system in Malawi is optional to Africans. Consequently, there is a large sector of the population for whom civil registration has no immediate significance and this contributes to the present under registration of births and deaths to the extent that the system cannot be used to maintain meaningful statistics which would serve as a continuous source of reliable and up to date data which are vital for planning for economic and social development programmes. The system therefore needs significant improvement and reorganization in order to make it more effective.

h. Uses of Registration Records

Registration of births provides a ready means of identification and evidence of birth date which can be used to satisfy government needs (in the case of such matters as passports and pensions) or those of other bodies such as insurance companies (e.g. for life insurance or annuities) when evidence of age is needed. Registration of deaths provides the basic evidence needed to enable a person's affairs to be settled after his death (e.g. the terms of his will to be implemented, or life insurance benefits to be paid).

IV. THE NATIONAL VITAL STATISTICS SYSTEM

a. The Legal Frame of the System

The National Statistical Office (NSO) was established in 1964 and is empowered to conduct its activities under the 1967 Statistic Act of the Laws of Malawi Cap 27:1. The Act provides for the collection, compilation, analysis, abstraction and publication of statistical

information and matters connected therewith and incidental thereto. The Act also provides for the NSO to organise a coordinated scheme of statistics relating to Malawi and to ensure that common definitions for statistical purposes are used in respect of all official statistics collected or published by any department of the government. Matters concerning which statistical information may be collected, compiled, analyzed, abstracted and published are contained in the First Schedule of the Act and includes among others; population, vital occurrences and morbidity, immigration and emigration, trade and industry, agriculture, education, employment and earnings, finance, etc.

b. Administration Arrangements of the System

The NSO is a department under the Ministry of Economic Planning and Development and is headed by the Commissioner for Census and Statistics which is the equivalent of a Principal Secretary. The work of the department is organized into the following divisions/sections: Economic Statistics; Agricultural, Transport Statistics and Data Collection; Demographic and Social Statistics; Publication, Information and Training; Data Processing, Cartography and Administration.

In addition to the work being done in the various division of the NSO, the department provides statistical services directly to various Ministries through its administration of the statistical common service. Under the statistical common service scheme, NSO has recruited and posted statistical staff to the Ministries of Agriculture and Livestock Development, Labour and Manpower Planning, Health and Population, Natural Resources, Finance, Energy and Mining, Transport and Civil Aviation, Housing and Education, Science and Technology.

The NSO through the Demographic and Social Statistics Division has over the years has been responsible for conducting population censuses and national demographic sample surveys. The censuses include the 1966, 1977 and 1987 and among the most notable demographic sample surveys are 1970/72 Population Change Survey, 1982 Demographic Survey, 1983 Labour Force Survey and 1983 Survey of Handicapped Persons, 1984 Family Formation Survey, and 1992 Demographic and Health Survey. Data from these censuses and surveys has been the main base for establishing the levels, trends and patterns of fertility.

mortality, migration, family planning among other things. This has been so in view of the absence of a complete civil registration system. The Division is headed by an Assistant Commissioner and is divided into two sections: Demography Section and Social Statistics Section, each headed by a Principal Statistician.

c. Procedure for Reporting and Statistical Processing

At the moment, there is no further statistical processing of the civil registration data. This is because the system is only compulsory to a small fraction of the Malawi population (less than 1 percent of the population) and any indicators derived from such data could not be representative of the country. If the proposed universal civil registration system is in place, the information collected could be processed to provide annual statistics on births and deaths which will be used, among other things, to assess the rate of population growth.

The processing of such data will be done by NSO using its own data processing facilities. NSO at present has a decentralised computer system such that each division is capable of processing its own type of data collected. The capabilities of these divisions in data processing cannot be overemphasised, for example, the Demography and Social Statistics Division was able to process the data collected during the 1987 Population and Housing Census thus:- coding and editing, computer data entry, verification and validation, tabulation, report writing and production of a print ready proof of the reports for publishing. Further, the division recently processed the 1992 Demographic and Health Survey data. In this light, the division has the capacity to continuously process the data from the civil registration system, however there might be need for some computer equipment to be devoted to this work full time as the process will be continuous. The Register General Department will send the returns to NSO after all the legal aspects have been dealt with. The processing would be for statistical purposes only and not as a retrieval to seek various legal information which can be left with the Register General.

e. Publication and dissemination of Vital Statistics

Currently NSO has the capacity to publish its reports. The Publication, Information and Training Division has printing equipment which is used to print various reports produced by

NSO. It is envisaged then that statistics recorded from the Civil Registration System would be statistically analyzed and published annually. The reports should include a section presenting summary findings and detailed statistical tables to allow further analyses by interested individuals or organisation. These results will be disseminated through the normal NSO dissemination channels, thus the reports from NSO are distributed to key organisation free while others have to purchase from the NSO Sales Office.

f. Uses of Vital Statistics

Universal registration of births and deaths provide the most important information needed to up-date population details continuously. In addition the certificates may provide data on date of birth and death and other characteristics which are useful in data collection through censuses and surveys. Age reporting has been found to be highly defective due to lack of knowledge of date of birth since there are no records. Civil Registration System cannot replace population censuses, which collect more detailed information than is available from registration, but it does very significantly improve the estimates of demographic statistics for intercensal years and also can serve as a useful check on certain aspects of census results.

V. COORDINATION AMONG GOVERNMENT INSTITUTIONS

The Registrar General will have to work hand in hand with other government institutions to ensure the success of the project. At the moment the District Commissioner who belongs to the Office of the President and Cabinet are involved in registration. Various meetings which have been held to discuss the introduction of the universal registration of births and deaths has involved the Office of the President and Cabinet, National Statistical Office, Ministry of Justice, Registrar General, Ministry of Health, Ministry of Finance and Immigration department.

The results of these meetings were the invitation of a consultancy mission from UNFPA to look into the problems and ways of implementing universal registration of births and deaths. Thus a United Nations Economic Commission for Africa Regional advisor in Demographic Statistics visited Malawi in April 1983 for this purpose. Furthermore, this visit culminated in the formulation of the draft project document for civil registration which was

intended to solicit donor funding of the project. However no source of funding for the project has been identified to date and therefore the issue of establishing a universal registration of births and deaths in Malawi has been in a stalemate.

VI CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The essential features of any registration system are that it must be easy to register and people must be willing to do so. It is therefore necessary to have a fine net-work of offices where people can register. It is also important that registration should not be a financial burden and it is recommended that it should be free. So far there has not been any agreement on whether registration should be compulsory, with penalties under the Law for non-compliance, but it seems possible that this would not be a critical factor in the success of any scheme in Malawi and that political encouragement would be more effective at least at the beginning.

It is therefore proposed that in addition to Registration Offices of District Commissioners and Assistant District Commissioners, reporting centres should be established at every hospital and clinic, and every Traditional Court, where a Birth Report, or Death Report can be completed by an appointed officer. Reporting should be free and a duplicate copy should be provided to the person reporting. No register will be kept at these reporting centres, but a working ledger of no legal significance. The top copy of each Report will be sent monthly to the nearest Registration Office for insertion of details into the official Register, after which the report will be sent to the Registrar of Births and Deaths. Reporting Centres will not issue certificates which will remain the function of the Registration Officers of the District Commissioners or Assistant District Commissioners.

It will also be necessary to extend the staff at the Registrar General's Office to deal with the recording and filing of all the reports, and in addition to provide a few statistical clerks to deal with statistical aspects on the forms before being sent to NSO for further processing. A full time Registrar of Births and Deaths and a Deputy will also be needed. Before any start can be made to introduce the system it is necessary to decide:

- (i) Whether advice or other assistance is required from overseas;
- (ii) Whether the system should be introduced in a few areas first and then gradually

extended to all areas in the country or whether it should be introduced countrywide in one step;

- (iii) Whether registration should be compulsory or optional, and regulations issued if appropriate;
- (iv) The exact form of the system, the cost and source of funds.

When the above points have been agreed then the introduction of the system will require recruitment and training of registration and processing staff and it will be necessary to have effective publicity campaign to encourage people to register. It is evident from the foregoing that the human and material resources allocated to the civil registration system are arguably inadequate and that the organization and accessibility to the public of the civil registration system leaves much to be desired. In order to effect improvement to the system it is recommended that there should be:-

- (a) establishment of National Coordinating Committee on civil registration and vital statistics which would draw up necessary guidelines to ensure compliance with set procedures.
- (b) review of the Births and Deaths Registration Act and enactment of a new civil registration regime.
- (c) strengthening of the births and deaths registration section/vital statistics unit at Registrar General's office in co-operation with the National Statistical office;
- (d) revision of the births and deaths report forms and preparation of instruction manuals; and
- (e) preparation and implementation of a publicity/public education programme.