OBSERVATIONS ON CIVIL REGISTRATION AND

VITAL STATISTICS IMPROVEMENT

by

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The improvement of civil registration and vital statistics systems, particularly in developing countries, has been a recurrent theme and the topic of numerous international conferences over the past four decades. The meetings have reviewed the advantages of well-functioning systems, discussed the problems of existing systems, and presented ideas for the improvement of these systems. At the end of these meetings, the participants - commonly the directors or senior members of CR/VS systems from different nations - have returned to their countries, hopefully with a renewed committment to the improvement of their system. Whether because of the meetings or due to domestic interest, over the years many nations have organized projects to improve civil registration and vital statistics. Many of these projects have received international or bilateral technical and financial assistance.

Can systems be improved?

What has been the result of all this activity? Have the civil registration and vital statistics systems of these countries truly improved, or has all this effort been for nothing? Should some countries settle for less than complete coverage of events? Are there countries where well-functioning systems are simply impossible? I am asking these questions because many people believe that these systems have hardly improved at all, or that the gains have not been worth the effort invested.

I do not consider myself a part of this group of pessimists, and in this paper I would like to explain why I feel this way. I was part of a bilateral technical assistance project on civil registration and vital statistics that began almost 20 years ago. One of the first activities that we carried out under this project was to prepare descriptions of CR/VS systems in five selected countries: Honduras, Mexico, Philippines, Thailand, and Jamaica. Shortly thereafter we began an improvement project in Peru. Comparing the coverage rates for vital events then and now (table 1), we can see that over two decades significant gains have been made in certain countries, smaller gains in others, and one appears to have remained unchanged.

However, it should also be noted that a well-functioning system is not defined solely by the percentage of vital events registered. Other major issues include the quality of data collected, uniformity of definitions and registration procedures,

timeliness of transmittal of forms to the central office, and certificate services. All of these countries have experienced improvements in one or more of these areas.

What are the factors that explain the different outcomes in these countries? Clearly a part of it is economic development. With development comes additional funds for government activities, an increased need on the part of individuals for identification and other documents, and an increased need by individuals and government for statistical information. So is this the explanation? Should countries simply wait for development to occur, and assume that this will inevitably lead to improved CR/VS systems? Certainly we can say that economic development by itself is not a sufficient condition for system improvement.

Similarly, one cannot say that well-functioning systems are simply impossible in certain countries. That is, because these countries are too poor, too illiterate, or for whatever reason, complete coverage and accurate statistics will never be achieved. We cannot say this because a reliable system is within the reach of every country. Now I do not intend to provide a detailed discussion of all the necessary conditions for a satisfactory system; several excellent papers on this topic will be presented later in the program. However, I must say that **any** country can have a satisfactory system if the government has sufficient interest. The interest and support of the central government will translate into sufficient funding to support a satisfactory system. In some cases, this will be due to a interest in providing desired services to citizens, or to obtain necessary statistics; it may also be because of a need to maintain a population register. Regardless, with sufficient governmental support these systems can function well in any country.

Need for CR/VS systems

How then does one go about increasing governmental interest in civil registration and vital statistics? In my opinion, the first step is to establish the reason or need for the system and its products. You know these reasons quite well, all of you who are responsible for the management of CR/VS systems:

- individuals require documents for proof of identity, school enrollment, work permits, voter registration, passports, inheritance, life insurance claims, etc.;

- governments need statistical data to measure population growth, prepare current population estimates, plan for future population needs (schools, hospitals, water supply, etc.), maintain population register;

- businesses need statistical data for planning, market research, and other activities.

Activities to increase interest in CR/VS

In order to attract the interest and support of the government, you need to take these reasons for the existence of a CR/VS system and combine them with some specific activities. In general, these activities should be designed to raise the visibility of the system or of the products of the system.

National Committee. There are many activities you can carry out to increase interest in civil registration and vital statistics, but remember that a group commands more attention than an individual. For that reason, it is important to organize a National Committee on CR/VS to help attract the attention of government leaders. In choosing members of this committee, it would be helpful to make its representation as broad as possible. That is, include senior members of not only your own ministry, but of other ministries or departments as well, such as statistics, economic planning, health, justice, and interior. You should also include prominent individuals from the private sector, such as physicians and business leaders. A committee with broad representation of the public and private sectors will be more likely to attract the attention of senior government leaders, and will also highlight the importance of civil registration and vital statistics to many aspects of public and private life.

Registration areas. One way to attract the attention of government leaders is to demonstrate success, even within a limited area of the country. An approach that has been successful in the past involves the selection of one or more areas - cities, provinces, or regions - with high registration coverage rates and at least the potential for reliable vital statistics. These areas may then be given additional resources to improve registration coverage even more, to improve the quality of service to the public, and to produce useful vital statistics data. The areas can then serve as models for the improvement of CR/VS in other parts of the country. In addition, these registration areas can be used to demonstrate to senior

government leaders the potential benefits of a well-functioning system, and as a successful accomplishment of the CR/VS system.

Demonstration projects. The intent of demonstration projects is to show the improvements that are possible to achieve within a pilot area. That is, within a demonstration area a variety of activities are carried out to improve the functioning of the CR/VS system, including staff training, publicity campaigns, additional staff and registration sites, mobil registrars, preparation of vital statistics data, and the like. The aim may be to enhance the system in an area already above average, or to upgrade the system in an area where the system scarcely existed before.

However, the objective should be to demonstrate the improvements that can be accomplished with the resources available under the existing budget of the CR/VS system. The criticisms of demonstration projects that you have heard arise from the fact that many of these projects have depended on outside budget sources, often involving relatively large sums of money. Once the outside funding stops, the existing CR/VS system is unable to continue these activities and the improvements in the demonstration area collapse. On the other hand, a demonstration project designed to function within local financial means may serve as a useful way to attract the attention of government leaders.

Increase need for certificates. The government can raise public interest in the CR/VS system simply by enacting or enforcing regulations requiring certificates for a variety of activities. For example, birth certificates could be required for school enrollment, work permits, marriage, or other activities. These regulations would directly increase public interest in a well-functioning system, particularly in the areas of registration and certificate services. This would serve to improve public compliance with the need to register events, and would establish the public as another interest group promoting CR/VS improvement.

Experiments. Testing new approaches to civil registration and vital statistics can also serve to attract the attention of government leaders and to raise public interest in system improvement. Experiments typically appear within a larger activity, such as a demonstration project or a registration area. The types of experiments undertaken often include publicity campaigns to increase public compliance, increasing the number of registration staff to improve registration

coverage within an area, using mobile registrars to cover sparsely populated regions, or employing health professionals as part of the registration process.

Who is responsible. Ultimately, you and your staff will have to take responsibility for raising interest in CR/VS improvement within your country. As we have discussed, improvements are unlikely to take place, particularly in the short run, without increased interest in system improvement on the part of senior government officials. You can establish committees and identify allies in government and the private sector, but **you** will have to be the driving force behind improvement activities. There are some outside sources of support you can turn to, particularly the local representatives of the United Nations or various binational assistance programs. These organizations may be able to provide some modest additional funds, but may be most useful as lobbyists for you with senior government leaders of your country.

Considerations for CR/VS Improvement

One or more of the activities mentioned above may be appropriate to include as part of an overall civil registration and vital statistics improvement project. Several of the presentations that are part of this workshop will discuss in detail exactly how one should go about carrying out the specific parts of an improvement project, and therefore I will not enter into such details here. Instead, in the remainder of my presentation, I will list some issues related to CR/VS improvement projects that I have found to be relevant in many countries.

Need for (powerful) friends. In almost every case, you will need help to make your voice heard. The way in which you do this will depend on the circumstances within your country, but supporters from outside the CR/VS system will be very helpful in making your case for an improved system. Supporters can come from a national committee on CR/VS as discussed earlier, or from local or regional United Nations representatives, or binational representatives. The key is to use these groups to raise your profile within your government.

Start small. In designing a CR/VS improvement, it is tempting to design a package that will address all of the shortcomings of the current system. Indeed, knowing the system and its problems as well as you do will only encourage you to think in this way. Outside funding sources, if they exist, may also push you to think of a global project. But one of the most important things you can do is to keep your initial effort relatively small and simple. Certainly a

modest project will be easier to supervise and will involve somewhat less of your time; but the most important reason to think small is that you are much more likely to succeed with a small activity. You can then use that success to argue for additional funds and support for further improvement activities. Your prospects for obtaining the additional funding will be much greater than if your initial project is judged a failure.

Test before implementation. The likelihood of success also will be greater if proposed improvement activities are carefully tested before full-scale implementation. The need for testing applies whether the proposed activity is a routine part of improvement projects or is some entirely new approach to CR/VS improvement. Even for standard improvement activities, the probability of success may depend on local circumstances that differ substantially from the situation in most countries. Testing also may also provide insights that will allow you to modify or fine-tune proposed activities, thereby improving the chance of success when implemented.

Experimentation is a typical part of CR/VS improvement projects. For example, a recent UN-supported project in Tanzania attempted to improve registration coverage in selected provinces by involving village personnel in the registration of events occurring at home, and health personnel for events occurring in health institutions. The project also tested the feasibility of establishing a sample registration system for the estimation of national vital rates. Results of this test indicated that most of the improvement in event coverage was due to the involvement of health institutions. Accordingly, in other areas added to the improvement project, registration centers were established only in health institutions. In addition, the idea of a sample registration system was abandoned because of the excessive cost of this approach.

Registration law. At some point in the improvement process, you will probably need to revise the laws and regulations governing vital event registration. For those of you whose systems require that vital events be declared by a relative of the person involved, this may be a good opportunity to modify the law so that health personnel can be used to report vital events. Demonstration projects or experiments in many countries, including several African nations, have shown that health personnel can be a key addition to the network of CR/VS system officials.

Legal reform is rarely an easy or rapid process, and that is likely to be true for revision of registration laws as well. One consideration that you should keep in mind is that it may be easier to revise these laws during the favorable environment created during a CR/VS improvement project. On the other hand, you should be careful not to design your project so that success depends on the revision of registration laws. The revision process may well get bogged down in your congress or parliament, and may only succeed after an extended period of time. In addition, once the revision process starts you may have little control over it, so that the results may be quite different from what you initially proposed.

Information flow. CR/VS improvement projects typically are focused on improving the flow of information to the national level, as the most common registration problems involve incomplete coverage of vital events, significantly delayed registration, or major delays in the transmission of data. However, long-term success of the project will require improvements in information flow in **both** directions: to the central office, but a return flow of data to the sources as well. Provincial, regional or local offices may have a need for national vital statistics data, but will also benefit from data for their own area. The data can be provided in the form of standard statistical tables, but can also be presented in ways useful for performance evaluation: for example, the percent of certificates submitted to the national office on time, or the percent of certificates requiring queries/corrections at a higher level. This return flow will be particularly important if your system will make use of health personnel. Physicians and hospital officials are much more likely to cooperate in the registration process if they obtain something in return, such as information on vital events occurring in their institution.

Make affordable improvements. Remember that your CR/VS system must be able to function over the long run, and for that to occur, regular funding must be available for all activities. As discussed above, this is the major criticism of demonstration projects: that is, often outside funding is used to create a system far beyond the means of the government to maintain over the long run. The danger of such a project is that the short-term improvements will disintegrate when the outside funding ends. The negative consequences of such a situation is to create the image of a CR/VS system unable to properly plan a well-functioning system - a negative image unlikely to inspire the confidence of government leaders.

There are many examples of overly expensive improvements enacted in the CR/VS systems of various countries. Some examples include: installing mainframe computers whose cost of maintenance exceeds the budget available; introducing expensive bank note paper for certificates to control document fraud; adding central or field personnel beyond the capacity of the system budget. This problem can obviously extend to many areas, even to popular concepts for increasing registration coverage.

The issue I have in mind is the practice of increasing the number of local registrars to improve the reporting of vital events. We all know that raising the number of registrars should improve the system: a greater number of local registrars should simplify the process of registration, and should lead to increases in the coverage rate. However, there is the danger that so many local registrars could be hired that the system would be unable to pay them adequately. This would be even more true if these registrars were paid on the basis of events registered, since the more local registrars there are, the fewer events each one on average will register. The same applies to the cost of training, re-training, hiring replacements, and supervising all of these registrars. In sum, you must consider the long-term budget implications of any proposed improvements, regardless of the potential impact of the improvement. This should include both direct and indirect costs (i.e., supervision, training, etc.) of these improvements.

Use your imagination. In devising improvements to your CR/VS system, you should not feel limited to standard improvement techniques. Based on unique circumstances within your country, you may be able to devise a new approach to system improvement. Your new approach may yield better results, may be more appropriate to the local situation, or may be more cost-effective than more traditional approaches to CR/VS improvement.

For example, many countries have difficulty ensuring complete coverage of events in rural areas, particularly in those areas with widely dispersed population. Traditional solutions, such as increasing the number of local registrars or installing mobile registrars may not be appropriate because of a lack of skilled manpower, or the expense of mobile registrars. Such a situation exists in Morocco, where registration completeness is lowest in rural areas, and in particular in areas of very low population density. Standard solutions to this problem would involve substantial costs.

Morocco however also has an extensive system of weekly markets in rural areas. These markets occur in designated locations once every week, bringing together a large proportion of the rural population within 10-20 kilometers of the market site. Simply by providing a registration official at an easily identified location within each market (such as at the entrance), the civil registration system can offer all visitors the opportunity to declare births and deaths that have occurred within their families. The cost of this approach to rural registration will obviously be much lower than the use of mobile registrars, since in this approach it is the declarant who travels to the registrar, rather than the reverse.

Of course, it is not certain that this approach would prove workable in Morocco or in other countries with such weekly rural markets. For example, visitors to the markets may be unwilling to report family births or deaths to registrars within the market area; another problem may be that individuals may visit more than one market each week, and may report the same event to the registrar in each market they visit. This reinforces a point made above: the need to test improvement activities thoroughly before full-scale implementation.

Be patient, but persistent. There is no doubt that CR/VS improvement may take substantial time. As shown earlier, meaningful improvement in coverage rates has required a decade or more in countries located in very different parts of the world. Thus you must have patience in working for the improvement of your system. However, being patient does not mean being placid. In order to achieve real improvement, you must be willing to try different approaches, and to keep on trying. Think of each of your improvement activities as battles within a war: you want to plan carefully, take account of all possible variables that may affect the outcome, test each activity before committing fully to this approach. Then remember that if an activity does not succeed, you may have lost a battle, but you have not lost the war. The key is to continue your effort over the long run.

Table 1. Level of vital event coverage, selected countries.

Country and year	Births	Deaths
Honduras		
1973	89%	56%
1995	~90%	75%
Peru		
1975	80%	70%
1995	80%	75%
Mexico		
1975	Incomplete	Incomplete
1995	~90%	90%
Philippines		
1974	79%	77%
1990	84%	73%
Thailand		
1969	84%	70%
1990	80%	82%
Jamaica		
1975	90%	90%
1995	90%	90%