



**Conference of African Ministers
Responsible for Civil Registration**
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Expert segment

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**Leadership, budget advocacy and sustainability in civil registration
and vital statistics systems**

**Leadership and budget advocacy for sustainable civil registration and vital
statistics systems**

I. Background

1. Civil registration has many benefits. It gives individuals a legal identity and it allows governments to maintain an accurate, up-to-date database of the population and to produce vital statistics. It is critical for governments to have access to a population database and to vital statistics as they plan, implement and monitor their programmes and public policies. Despite the huge potential value of civil registration and vital statistics, a staggeringly large proportion of the world's population still lives, and will die, without leaving any official records. These people are not counted, and are therefore not accounted for in the systems that oversee the rights, protections, entitlements and social services to which they should have access.

2. Recent experience in countries in Africa and around the world has demonstrated that it is feasible to incorporate technical solutions and standards into routine country practice in a way that is legal and sustainable, and that doing so can quickly yield significant systemic changes to civil registration and vital statistics systems.

3. Nevertheless, for technical interventions to achieve their intended impact and for civil registration and vital statistics systems to function properly and run continuously, it is necessary to harness country champions and leaders. In addition, effective multisectoral collaboration,

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sufficient resources, the necessary infrastructure, and adequate and sufficiently trained staff are key ingredients. For the purposes of this discussion, leaders and champions include high-level policymakers as well as technical and operational personnel working to implement improvements at the local level. The principles of universality and permanency of civil registration and vital statistics systems imply the need for a commitment at all levels to continually allocate sufficient resources to the provision of permanent and easy access to registration services. Champions and leaders may need to mobilize additional resources to ensure that these principles are applied and that investment in civil registration and vital statistics yields the greatest possible benefits for individuals and for society as a whole.

4. Despite their importance as core administrative functions of governments, civil registration and vital statistics systems are weak and underfunded in many countries. In a survey conducted among African countries in 2016, more than two thirds of countries reported that government funding for their national civil registration systems was inadequate or irregular, while five countries reported that there were no recurring budgetary allocations from government to the civil registration system.¹ Participants in an expert group workshop held in Dar es Salaam, United Republic of Tanzania, in June 2009 recognized that political commitment was essential to strengthening civil registration and vital statistics systems.

5. In 2012, the Africa Programme on Accelerated Improvement of Civil Registration and Vital Statistics Systems was created to guide and accelerate improvements to such systems across the continent, in alignment with each country's national civil registration and vital statistics goals and strategies. In concert with a group of global technical partners, the Programme supports African Union member States in evaluating their civil registration and vital statistics systems to identify weaknesses and in selecting an appropriate set of evidence-based interventions to strengthen their systems. Whether a country is seeking to implement new civil registration and vital statistics laws, improve business processes, automate systems, ensure access for vulnerable and marginalized populations, or achieve other policy goals, strong leadership and adequate and permanent government funding are necessary to ensure that a robust civil registration and vital statistics system is continually strengthened and sustainably maintained.

6. The Conference of African Ministers Responsible for Civil Registration has mentioned budget allocation and funding sustainability in every declaration it has made since its first session, more than a decade ago, in 2010. The Conference has also consistently called for strong political support and leadership for civil registration and vital statistics systems to ensure that efforts to maintain and strengthen them are successful so that they can serve governments and the general public.

7. At the first session of the Conference, held in Addis Ababa in August 2010, ministers acknowledged that the key challenge ahead would be to continue mobilizing and rallying political commitment and leadership to improve civil registration and vital statistics systems in Africa by allocating adequate human and financial resources for that purpose.²

¹ United Nations, Economic Commission for Africa, "Report on the status of civil registration and vital statistics in Africa" (Addis Ababa, 2017).

² Conference of African Ministers Responsible for Civil Registration, first session, "Declaration of African ministers responsible for civil registration: improving civil registration and vital statistics in Africa". Available at: <http://citizenshiprightsafrika.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/Addis-Ababa-Declaration-African-Ministers-CRVS-2010-Eng.pdf>.

8. At the second session, held in Durban, South Africa, in September 2012, ministers recommitted to achieving viable, sustainable and efficient civil registration and vital statistics systems in Africa. The resolutions passed at the session included a commitment to accord high priority to civil registration and vital statistics and ensure allocation of adequate human and financial resources for the day-to-day operations of civil registration and vital statistics in African countries, including implementation of the national action plans in order to ensure sustainability.³

9. The Yamoussoukro Declaration, from the third session, in 2015, included a commitment to take up the responsibility for financing and sustaining national civil registration and vital statistics plans and, when necessary, to mobilize resources to cover the financing gap.⁴

10. Two years later, ministers upheld these goals in the Nouakchott Declaration at the fourth session. In addition, they requested that African Union member States implement the decision to allocate 0.15 per cent of their national budgets to promote effective statistical systems in Africa, including civil registration and vital statistics systems.⁵

11. At the fifth session, in Lusaka, ministers acknowledged that many civil registration and identification systems in Africa were under resourced and called upon member States of the African Union to strengthen their budget allocations for civil registration and vital statistics and identity management systems.⁶

12. The achievements so far have fallen short of the aspirations, however, and a substantial increase in international and domestic investment is still needed to fund intensified efforts to strengthen civil registration and vital statistics so that the full potential of the available technical interventions can be achieved. With less than a decade remaining for countries to deliver on the civil registration and vital statistics targets of the Sustainable Development Goals, and less than three years remaining in the decade for repositioning civil registration and vital statistics in the development agenda of Africa,⁷ and with country-level leaders offering their support, a critical window of opportunity has opened to accelerate progress towards achieving the goals of universal civil registration and representative vital statistics.

II. Key issues

13. With the increasing recognition of the value of civil registration as the foundation of an integrated civil registration and vital statistics and identification management system,⁸ government leaders in several African countries have been taking steps to strengthen civil registration and vital statistics systems, which are a critical component of a country's digital

³ Conference of African Ministers Responsible for Civil Registration, second session, ministerial statement. Available at: https://archive.uneca.org/sites/default/files/uploaded-documents/Statistics/CRMC3/crvs-conference-ministerial-statements_en.pdf.

⁴ Conference of African Ministers Responsible for Civil Registration, third session, Yamoussoukro Declaration. Available at: https://unstats.un.org/unsd/demographic/crvs/global_crvs_docs/news/thirdconf_resolutions.pdf.

⁵ Conference of African Ministers Responsible for Civil Registration, fourth session, Nouakchott Declaration. Available at: <http://citizenshiprightsafrika.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/Nouakchott-Declaration-CRVS-Dec-2017-English.pdf>.

⁶ Conference of African Ministers Responsible for Civil Registration, fifth session, Lusaka Declaration. Available at: https://au.int/sites/default/files/newsevents/workingdocuments/38223-wd-declaration_crvs_after_adoption_english.pdf.

⁷ United Nations, Economic Commission for Africa, "Ministers propose 2015-2024 as decade on civil registration".

⁸ United Nations Legal Identity Expert Group, *Implementation of the United Nations Legal Identity Agenda: United Nations Country Team Operational Guidelines* (2020).

public infrastructure.⁹ As a key aspect of these strengthening efforts, it should be noted that these systems are more likely to be successful if they are well coordinated from within and have good leadership to ensure that they are used across government agencies. One of the reasons why coordination is particularly important is because civil registration and vital statistics systems commonly involve several government agencies. Given that the United Nations Legal Identity Agenda¹⁰ clearly establishes the foundational role of civil registration, vital statistics and identification systems, leaders in these areas of endeavour have the opportunity to garner broader government involvement and support in strengthening those systems.

14. Leaders of civil registration and vital statistics systems can create a strong vision and can help to build organizational interoperability to ensure that all vital events are registered and to enable relevant government agencies – such as those that run social protection programmes – to be informed of events and take relevant actions as efficiently as possible. Leaders can also ensure that the systems are fully utilized for the benefit of individuals and governments and that the system promote good governance overall by improving the implementation, monitoring and evaluation of wide range of government programmes.

15. Good coordination and collaboration within a civil registration and vital statistics system can lead to the development of an inclusive inter-agency strategy and action plan. These integrated, cross-stakeholder plans include a common vision for success and provide all stakeholders with a holistic view of interdependence in the smooth operation of civil registration and vital statistics systems.¹¹ Furthermore, the establishment of governance bodies for such systems at the strategic and technical levels and, as applicable, at subnational levels, will strengthen coordination with the civil registration and vital statistics systems and ensure broader government awareness of their value for the whole of government, as explained in the “Guidelines on the drafting of memorandums of understanding for better coordination among national stakeholders of civil registration and vital statistics systems at the country level”, drafted by the Conference of African Ministers Responsible for Civil Registration at its fifth session, and in other documents.¹² In particular, high-level governance bodies make it more likely for the systems to be led by senior government officials, who can also facilitate the coordination required for budget advocacy to strengthen and maintain the systems.

16. Budget advocacy is the process through which country stakeholders work together, in a coordinated manner, to systematically analyse needs and opportunities, strategically intervene in the annual budget process to influence resource allocation decisions, secure more or better government funding for civil registration and vital statistics, and institutionalize gains.

17. In many countries, those who are responsible for civil registration and vital statistics still find it difficult to engage in the budget advocacy that is necessary to secure adequate domestic resources for high-quality civil registration and vital statistics systems. Such resources are required to ensure that civil registration is universal and generates a timely, continuous and representative vital statistics. Countries face these difficulties, among other reasons, because

⁹ David Eaves, “The Digital Systems Every Country Needs to Succeed in the 21st Century”, 25 May 2022.

¹⁰ United Nations Legal Identity Expert Group, *Implementation of the United Nations Legal Identity Agenda*.

¹¹ Africa Programme on Accelerated Improvement of Civil Registration and Vital Statistics Systems, *CRVS Systems Improvement Framework*, version 1.0 (2021).

¹² CRMC5/2019/12; Get every one in the picture, “National multi-sectoral CRVS coordination mechanisms”, information note. Available at <https://getinthepicture.org/sites/default/files/resources/Information%20Note%20National%20multisectoral%20CRVS%20coordination%20mechanisms.pdf>; Martin Bratschi and Joan Sara Thomas, “Guidance for Civil Registration and Vital Statistics (CRVS) Governance Mechanisms”.

they rely on donor funding and out-of-pocket payments from individuals and because of competing priorities, such as the fight against the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic.¹³

18. Although donors play an important role in funding civil registration and vital statistics in many countries, there is still a shortfall of more than an 85 per cent in the funding needed for investment in civil registration and vital statistics, and countries that rely on external funding are vulnerable to the future withdrawal of support. According to an Open Data Watch analysis of national strategies for the development of statistics in 20 developing and least developed countries in Africa, Asia and South America, as part of their national strategies for the development of statistics, countries planned to receive donor aid at an average level of 52 per cent of their annual budget.¹⁴ As a country's economy grows and donor assistance declines, there is a greater opportunity (that is, more fiscal space) and greater urgency (that is, looming funding gaps) for the country to mobilize domestic sources to fund civil registration and vital statistics systems. Donor transition will progressively shift responsibility to Governments to wholly finance and manage their civil registration and vital statistics systems and services. This requires government leadership, advance planning and capacity-building. Complementary financing from domestic sources will therefore ensure the long-term sustainability of efforts to strengthen those systems.

19. Many countries rely heavily on revenue generated from fees collected from individuals when they use civil registration and vital statistics services, such as when they request a birth or death certificate. In high-income countries, charging fees can be a viable way to top up revenue from general taxes, provided that there are policies in place to waive fees for those with low incomes. In low and middle-income countries, however, registration fees may discourage individuals and families from registering their vital events, and deaths in particular, and may pose a decisive barrier for people in low-income communities who might otherwise register their vital events.¹⁵ In sub-Saharan Africa, the problem is widespread: roughly 75 per cent of children live in countries that impose fees on birth registrations. In countries that have abolished fees, birth registration rates have increased significantly.¹⁶ For countries to make civil registration and vital statistics free at the point of service, as recommended by global experts in the field, they need to progressively increase their investment in civil registration and vital statistics systems and find other revenue streams.

20. In addition to changes in donor funding and out-of-pocket expenditures, governments around the world are grappling with falling public revenues, growing expenditure and rising debt obligations as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic has adversely affected the principles, operations, and functions of civil registration and vital statistics systems at a time when they are most needed.¹⁷ It has shown that civil registration and vital statistics systems and the timely and accurate death registration data and mortality statistics recorded in the systems are core components of emergency response. Many countries are facing a double bind, with cuts in staffing and budgets as a result of the economic recession caused by COVID-19, coupled

¹³ Carla AbouZahr and others, "The COVID-19 pandemic: effects on civil registration of births and deaths and on availability and utility of vital events data", *American Journal of Public Health*, vol. 111, No. 6 (June 2021), pp. 1123–1131.

¹⁴ Sustainable Development Solutions Network, *Data for Development: A Needs Assessment for SDG Monitoring and Statistical Capacity Development* (2015). Available at <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5b4f63e14eddec374f416232/t/5b578044352f5384d78a4f10/1532461154817/Data-for-Development-Full-Report.pdf>.

¹⁵ United Nations Children's Fund, "A Snapshot of Civil Registration in sub-Saharan Africa", 2017.

¹⁶ World Bank, *Incentives of Improving Birth Registration Coverage: A Review of the Literature* (Washington, D.C., 2016).

¹⁷ United Nations, Inter-agency Task Force on Financing for Development, *Financing for Sustainable Development Report 2021* (New York: United Nations, 2021).

with pressure to generate new data to analyse the effects of the pandemic on mortality. Despite the burden of COVID-19 and its negative effects on financing and human resources, governments must ensure that essential civil registration and vital statistics systems and services are reliably maintained without interruption so that hard-won gains are not erased. Leadership and investment must remain a priority so that the human, social and economic effects of COVID-19 can be understood, managed and mitigated. Countries need to build resilient funding plans for civil registration and vital statistics, so they can weather the current pandemic, prepare for future disasters and make progress towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals.

21. Strategic local leadership and advocacy can help to secure the political will and budgets necessary to achieve and maintain well-functioning civil registration and vital statistics systems while improving long-term sustainability by reducing the reliance on development partner financing. For systems to be sustainable, they must have revenue streams that are aligned with national civil registration and vital statistics policy objectives and that are large enough to achieve those objectives. Revenue streams must also be predictable and stable enough for long-term maintenance and monitoring programmes to be developed confidently; resilient enough to mitigate shocks and stresses and to allow the system to adapt to them and recover from them; and adaptable to changing circumstances and needs.

22. As part of a comprehensive assessment of their civil registration and vital statistics systems and their efforts to strengthen those systems, countries are advised to develop budget advocacy strategies to mobilize domestic financing to support their national (or subnational) plans and priorities.⁹ To enable the budget advocacy process and, more broadly, to achieve the full potential of civil registration and vital statistics systems, partners in the Bloomberg Philanthropies Data for Health Initiative and beyond have launched the “CountingEveryone” campaign to showcase bold leadership, strong governance, and the benefits of clear coordination in building civil registration and vital statistics systems.¹⁸ The campaign is intended to support leaders at all levels of civil registration and vital statistics systems to promote the systems and highlight how valuable they are for the whole of government. By showcasing leaders who are championing strong civil registration and vital statistics systems, the campaign is intended to broaden the coverage and completeness of civil registration. The “#CountingEveryone” campaign is also aimed at highlighting the work of champions who might inspire Governments to enact system-wide changes by highlighting the remarkable and measurable improvements that are being made. The outputs of the campaign are also intended to illustrate the ways in which strong and comprehensive civil registration and vital statistics systems can positively affect people’s lives through improved public policy and access to government and private sector services.

23. To build on the country-level leadership captured by the “#CountingEveryone” campaign and ensure there is sufficient financing for civil registration and vital statistics systems, new resources will soon be available to help member States of the African Union to plan and conduct effective budget advocacy. The Bloomberg Philanthropies’ Data for Health Initiative, in coordination with the Global Health Advocacy Incubator, is developing a toolkit that will support civil registration and vital statistics stakeholders in leading an intentional, step-by-step approach to increasing and sustaining domestic investment in civil registration and vital statistics systems by engaging in locally led budget advocacy. The budget advocacy toolkit, due to be published by the Data for Health Initiative in early 2023, can help to facilitate this important process.

¹⁸ Vital Strategies, “#CountingEveryone”. Available at www.vitalstrategies.org/CountingEveryone/.

24. The toolkit will offer a structured but customizable method focused on reaching government decision-makers, convincing them to drive transformative change and promoting dynamic linkages among stakeholders, institutions and sectors. Recognizing that countries are at various stages in improving their systems, the creators of the toolkit have adopted an inherently flexible approach that can provide value to any country that needs to address financing challenges and is adaptable to each country's unique policy and political environment. They are designing the toolkit in a way that will provide a comprehensive road map for setting and achieving budget advocacy objectives and creating modular information, tools and activities that can be deployed individually in response to the specific context of a country and the advocacy priorities and opportunities of stakeholders. The four chapters of the toolkit match the four interconnected phases of the budget advocacy cycle, namely, advocacy of planning, advocacy of implementation, budget accountability and budget sustainability (see figure).

Cycle for Budget Advocacy and Funding Sustainability



- 1 Advocacy Planning:** Conduct a political and financial landscape analysis to pinpoint a budget advocacy objective and plan the political strategy with indicators to track success.
- 2 Advocacy Implementation:** Build coalitions, generate economic evidence, and engage policymakers to make the case for increased investment in CRVS, while monitoring the strategy.
- 3 Budget Accountability:** Track budget allocations and spending of increased resources, identify bottlenecks to spending, assess and build capacity to increase accountability, and promote transparent disbursement and effective spending.
- 4 Budget Sustainability:** Assess budget needs for the next budget cycle, scale up successful strategies, and build demand to sustain and/or increase the investment in the medium and long term.

*This figure was adapted from the **GHAJ Budget Advocacy Framework for Increased and Sustained Epidemic Preparedness Investment** and is considered a draft at this stage.*

Source: Global Health Advocacy Incubator.

25. By following the process presented in the toolkit and reinforcing coordination and leadership in the local civil registration and vital statistics system, country stakeholders can form alliances and work together to transform the environment for the long-term, sustainable strengthening of their national systems. In ensuring that the systems benefit from strong leadership and that they are prioritized, sustainably financed, and responsive to new and emerging challenges, countries will create an environment that is conducive to generating wide-ranging and cascading benefits for government stakeholders and the general population.

III. Key messages

26. The key messages that flow from the key issues presented above are as follows:

(a) Civil registration and vital statistics systems are essential for human rights, societal inclusion, good governance and sustainable development. Strong domestic leadership and investment in the systems are therefore critical, because the systems provide benefits to all individuals and to society at large;

(b) For the systems to meet their full potential to provide universal registration of vital events and to serve as a foundational piece of the government data infrastructure, it is necessary to harness the involvement of champions and leaders in Government to provide leadership and coordination for the systems;

(c) Although the systems are often underfunded, especially in low- and middle-income countries, the current ambition and readiness at the global, regional and country levels to improve them is unprecedented, and a key window of opportunity has been opened for action to be taken in the coming years to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030;

(d) As national financial resources increase, leading to a transition away from international aid, the systems will become more reliant on domestic funding. Doing so is imperative to raising the resources needed to create, reform and further strengthen the systems so that they can rise to the challenges posed by new, emerging and unprecedented phenomena such as the COVID-19 pandemic;

(e) Securing domestic public funding for civil registration and vital statistics is important because it can help to ensure sustainability. Budget advocacy is a strategic approach that can be employed by civil registration and vital statistics stakeholders to improve the mobilization and management of domestic resources;

(f) The toolkit, which is being developed to facilitate collaboration among country civil registration and vital statistics stakeholders in identifying sustainable funding sources and applying locally appropriate strategies, will help to strengthen domestic financing for civil registration and vital statistics systems.

IV. Questions for group discussion and reflection

27. The following questions are posed for further consideration:

(a) How can senior government decision-makers outside of the civil registration and vital statistics systems be convinced to increase their leadership, political commitment and financial support for those systems?

(b) Do you think your Government invests enough in your country's civil registration and vital statistics system?

(c) Can you provide examples of funding challenges or domestic resource mobilization successes from your own country?

(d) Can you provide examples of actions taken in your country to promote the involvement of senior leaders in championing civil registration and vital statistics system and where such efforts have facilitated increased use of the system across government agencies?

V. Key recommendation

28. Leaders in civil registration and vital statistics systems should continue to take steps to promote government support for the systems and the use of data generated by the systems across government agencies. In addition, member States of the African Union that are facing current or anticipated funding gaps that might inhibit the implementation of their respective national costed plans for civil registration and vital statistics should engage in strategic, multi-stakeholder budget advocacy aimed at mobilizing strong political support and domestic financing that can enhance the long-term sustainability of their systems.
