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**Statistical programme of the Economic Commission for Africa:
statutory issues**

Progress report on the Africa Programme on Accelerated Improvement of Civil Registration and Vital Statistics Systems

I. Introduction

1. The Africa Programme on Accelerated Improvement of Civil Registration and Vital Statistics Systems is a continental initiative that began in 2010, with a view to helping Governments in Africa to fast-track improvements to their civil registration and vital statistics systems through the provision of a systematic and coordinated technical, advocacy and policy framework for country support, as needed. The initiative was a response to the critical need to address what was referred to by authors in 2007 in the “Who Counts?” series of *The Lancet* as the “scandal of invisibility”,¹ a phenomenon in which the identities of a majority of individuals lack legal recognition owing to the non-registration of vital events, mainly births and deaths, and which results in the absence of reliable data and statistics needed for planning and policymaking.

2. With only six years left before the conclusion of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, it is important to reflect on the performance of the Programme and its future trajectory. The present report provides an overview of the progress made in implementing the Programme in the period from October 2022 to October 2024, since the eighth session of the Statistical Commission for Africa, and, more broadly, over the past 10 years. Following the first, introductory section, the second section of the present report concerns the importance of civil registration and vital statistics systems in the current development context, highlighting the use of population registers and unique identifiers as critical and novel advances of the past decade that should be given attention. In section III, the progress of the implementation of the Programme over the past 10 years is reviewed, highlighting its various phases and the performance of Africa in broad terms. Section IV is focused on relevant interventions made in the period from October 2022 to October 2024. Section V concerns the investment that is needed for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. In section VI, an update is provided on the preparation of the sixth

* E/ECA/STATCOM/9/2024/1/Rev.1.

¹ Philip W. Setel and others, “A scandal of invisibility: making everyone count by counting everyone”, *The Lancet*, vol. 370, No. 9598 (November 2007).



session of the Conference of African Ministers Responsible for Civil Registration. Recommendations for consideration by the Statistical Commission are included in the final section.

II. Background

3. Civil registration and vital statistics systems are a development imperative for Africa, in particular in the current data era. Civil registration is defined by the United Nations as the continuous, permanent, compulsory and universal recording of the occurrence and characteristics of vital events pertaining to the population, as provided through decree or regulation in accordance with the legal requirements in each country.² Civil registration is undertaken for the primary purpose of establishing legal documents provided for under the law. The secondary purpose is to provide a source of vital statistics.

4. The United Nations describes a universal and well-maintained civil registration system as being the single best source of information on vital events for administrative, demographic and epidemiological purposes.³ Civil registration systems are recognized as the secure basis for establishing legal identities and have a unique position as the means through which an individual's existence can be recognized closest to its commencement (birth), can be updated with changes in civil status, such as marriage, divorce and adoption, and can be marked as inactive upon death. Those critical functions of the systems underline their value as tools of governance, including in helping to fulfil the demands for current, timely and granular data that are greatly needed today.

5. In the past, owing to the critical contribution that civil registration makes to vital statistics, the two systems have often been seen as two sides of the same coin. Since 2019, with the strong emergence and adoption of digital identity systems by Governments, the United Nations has issued guidance on the recommended organization of civil registration, vital statistics and digital identity systems, mainly advocating their integration.

6. Population registers are a tool for integrating records and information captured through civil registration, vital statistics and digital identity systems. In a well-functioning population register, every birth record should be issued with a unique identifier to be used throughout an individual's life and that connects all the individual's vital event records with those of the individual's family relations. Population registers extend the scope of civil registration and vital statistics systems by recording population movements within, into and out of a country. They enable Governments to derive statistics beyond those collected by the civil registration and vital statistics systems. For example, it is possible to estimate the number of people in a country or geographical area, which is critical for planning and delivering services. Unique identifiers applied in civil registration, vital statistics and digital identity systems are immensely valuable to statistical production, given that they enable Governments to produce more robust population statistics, including longitudinal demographic statistics, than using statistics on individual vital events alone.

7. The development of civil registration and vital statistics systems is a priority in the 2030 Agenda: indicator 17.19 concerns the proportion of countries that have achieved 100 per cent birth registration and 80 per cent death registration. Countries are encouraged to make statistics from the systems available to Governments for planning and policymaking. The systems are critical for monitoring and achieving 12 of the 17 Sustainable Development

² *Principles and Recommendations for a Vital Statistics System*, Series M, No. 19/Rev.3 (United Nations publication, 2014).

³ *Ibid.*

Goals by providing information for 67 of their indicators.⁴ Given that a greater contribution can be made when the systems are linked with population registers, the need to develop the systems collectively cannot be overstated.

III. Developing civil registration and vital statistics systems under the Programme: a decade of progress

8. The implementation of the Africa Programme on Accelerated Improvement of Civil Registration and Vital Statistics Systems broadly follows a three-phase approach:

(a) Phase one is reorientation, which involves rigorous advocacy efforts with senior government officials and political leaders in order to promote the civil registration and vital statistics agenda and make the case for investment;

(b) Phase two concerns preparatory activities, which involves laying the foundations for the implementation of civil registration and vital statistics programmes, including creating national coordination frameworks, building knowledge and capacity among relevant national focal points, undertaking assessments of relevant systems to establish the challenges and bottlenecks that affect the civil registration and vital statistics programmes and developing strategic action plans to help to address the issues identified;

(c) Phase three is implementation, during which a focus is placed on implementing national civil registration and vital statistics action plans, monitoring and evaluating progress and ensuring that knowledge and lessons learned are shared among stakeholders at the national and regional levels.

9. In line with that approach, the past 10 years of the Programme have been marked by numerous initiatives to accelerate progress with regard to civil registration and vital statistics systems in Africa at the national and regional levels. At the regional level, a robust policy and advocacy framework for developing the systems has been established which, among other outcomes, facilitates continuous engagement with relevant government officials at the highest policy levels, such as through the Conference of African Ministers Responsible for Civil Registration and meetings of registrars general. A regional group of partners, known as the core group, has been formed and continually provides technical assistance on civil registration and vital statistics in line with the regional policy framework. Guidance and support have been provided in the form of guidelines, manuals, technical resources, such as templates for data analysis, training of national staff members and direct financial assistance to complement national resources in the area.

10. Considerable efforts have been made at the national level. By September 2020, 42 African countries had conducted comprehensive assessments of their civil registration and vital statistics systems, and 32 had completed the development of their national action plans. This marks a significant milestone in the development of the systems: the assessment findings provide the foundation for identifying strategic approaches to enhance the systems. The production of vital statistics using civil registration has improved considerably. A survey conducted by the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) in August 2019 showed that 68 per cent of the 40 countries that responded had compiled vital statistics on births and deaths using civil registration data, with 38 per cent of those countries producing regular vital statistics reports. In addition, the survey, which also assessed the status of the digitalization of civil registration and vital statistics systems, revealed that about 50 per cent of countries in Africa

⁴ Samuel Mills and others, *Civil Registration and Vital Statistics (CRVS) for Monitoring the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)* (Washington, D.C., World Bank, 2017).

had fully or partially computerized registration systems, with 12 countries having fully digitized systems. It was noted that only 28 per cent of African countries were able to capture death records electronically. Furthermore, important national projects focused on improving stakeholder coordination, decentralization of civil registration services, enhancing national registration forms and guidelines, public education, advocacy and digitalization, including promoting interoperability with health and other national systems, were ongoing.

IV. Implementation of the Programme in the period 2022–2024

11. In the period from 2022 to 2024, numerous activities were undertaken by countries and partners to advocate the development of civil registration and vital statistics systems and to strengthen the associated capacity of African countries. Highlights of those activities are provided below.

A. Continental webinar to review progress in Africa towards achieving target 16.9, legal identity for all, of the Sustainable Development Goals

12. In line with its mandate to track and report the progresses made towards target 16.9, legal identity for all, of the Sustainable Development Goals, the secretariat of the Programme, in collaboration with partners of the regional core group, in particular the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) and the World Health Organization, organized a continental webinar on progress in Africa towards achieving the target. The aim of the webinar, which was a pre-event to the tenth session of the Africa Regional Forum on Sustainable Development and was attended by 250 participants from Africa and other parts of the world, was to engage stakeholders in reviewing the progress and achievements in the development of civil registration and vital statistics systems and the remedial action that needs to be taken. By analysing recent data and highlighting the strategies that would accelerate progress, including twinning or fostering the interoperability of health and civil registration and vital statistics systems, and cost-effective digitalization, participants were able to review in depth the progress made by African countries towards achieving the target. As a result of the webinar, it was clear that, although there has been progress in the development of civil registration and vital statistics systems over the past 10 years, concerted efforts were needed from all stakeholders for Africa to achieve the target.

B. Civil registration and vital statistics applied research training initiative

13. In April 2024, ECA, in partnership with the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, launched the civil registration and vital statistics applied research training initiative, which is aimed at building the capacity of countries on research methods and, more broadly, generating critical evidence and knowledge for enhancing the development of civil registration and vital statistics systems. The training responds to a lack of research capacity, insufficient use of national civil registration and vital statistics data for evidence-based policymaking and a scarcity of peer-reviewed papers and published research that provide insights and recommendations for the improvement of the systems. The training helped to promote the sharing of knowledge and experience of developing the systems in Africa, Asia and the Pacific. A total of 24 applicants representing the public institutions of 12

African countries have enrolled in the initiative,⁵ and are expected to produce policy briefs and peer-reviewed research papers in order to contribute to the body of knowledge. A second round of the training is expected to be launched in the second half of the year.

C. Training workshops to strengthen the capacity of countries across various thematic areas

14. ECA, in collaboration with partners of the regional core group, organized several training workshops aimed at building the capacity of countries and providing critical technical skills on civil registration and vital statistics. The workshops included:

(a) Regional training on assessing inequalities in the registration of vital events using data collected from the census;⁶

(b) Regional training workshop on the analysis of mortality and cause-of-death data;⁷

(c) Global training workshop on strengthening end-to-end civil registration and vital statistics systems, which helped to build capacity in relation to the application of the systems improvement framework;⁸

(d) Training on data analysis and reporting for the production of vital statistics reports.⁹

15. In addition, with the objectives of raising awareness among countries and partners about the available civil registration and vital statistics resources, harmonizing resources and identifying areas for which new resources would need to be developed, a regional workshop that included civil registration experts from 12 African countries¹⁰ and members of the regional core group¹¹ was held in February 2024. The principal outcomes of the workshop included an agreement by partners on the need to coordinate the development of resources, including new resources, and the recognition of the importance of the secretariat to the Programme in regional knowledge management in the area.

⁵ Burkina Faso, Burundi, Chad, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Guinea-Bissau, Kenya, Lesotho, Madagascar, Rwanda, Somalia and Uganda.

⁶ Delegates from 11 countries that had conducted a population census in the 2020 round and had included questions on civil registration benefited from the training, namely: Benin, Burkina Faso, Cabo Verde, Cameroon, Kenya, Mali, Namibia, Togo, United Republic of Tanzania, Zambia and Zimbabwe.

⁷ The workshop was attended by delegates from: Benin, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cameroon, Cabo Verde, Central African Republic, Comoros, Côte d'Ivoire, Djibouti, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Madagascar, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Senegal and Togo. Training was given to 43 country focal points.

⁸ Delegates from the following countries benefited from the training: Cameroon, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ghana, Liberia, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Togo and Zambia.

⁹ Delegates from the following countries benefited from the training: Angola, Burkina Faso, Chad, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Djibouti, Equatorial Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Kenya, Lesotho, Malawi, Somalia, Sao Tome and Principe, Togo and Zimbabwe.

¹⁰ Cameroon, Ethiopia, Ghana, Guinea, Kenya, Lesotho, Liberia, Nigeria, Rwanda, South Africa, United Republic of Tanzania and Zambia.

¹¹ African Development Bank, African Union Commission, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, ECA, Global Financing Facility for Women, Children and Adolescents, International Organization for Migration, Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, UNICEF, United Nations Development Programme, United Nations Population Fund, Vital Strategies and World Bank.

D. Strengthening capacity through the civil registration and vital statistics mentorship programme

16. The civil registration and vital statistics mentorship programme is designed to provide targeted support to countries with a history of systematically low civil registration coverage and completeness, including those that have recently emerged from civil conflict or war. The programme provides participating countries with an expert mentor, supported by ECA, to supplement national technical capacity. The expert works with staff at civil registration offices of participating countries and other stakeholders to undertake various activities to strengthen systems, such as: providing support for the establishment of a national coordination framework for civil registration and vital statistics stakeholders; facilitating the identification of national priorities, including through the application of the systems improvement framework; and providing support and guidance for the implementation of national plans, drawing on United Nations guidelines and recommendations.¹²

E. Celebration of African Civil Registration and Vital Statistics Day

17. The secretariat of Programme and partners of the core group supported countries in the annual celebration of African Civil Registration and Vital Statistics Day, which is an initiative to raise awareness of the importance of civil registration and vital statistics systems and draw the attention of Governments to the need to invest in strengthening them. Since the eighth session of the Statistical Commission, the Day has been celebrated twice. In 2023, the celebration was held under the theme “The potential to increase coverage and improve the quality and timeliness of data through the digitalization of civil registration systems”, when countries reflected on advancing the digitalization of civil registration data as part of critical digital public infrastructure to promote the interlinkage and use of civil registration, vital statistics and identification data across government agencies. In 2024, the theme of the Day was “Strengthening linkages of civil registration, vital statistics and legal identity systems through digitalization for enhanced inclusivity”.

F. Technical support for the implementation of the civil registration and vital statistics systems improvement framework

18. The civil registration and vital statistics systems improvement framework is a tool designed to provide systematic support to countries in the end-to-end analysis and design of efficient civil registration and vital statistics processes. Central to the framework is a process-centric approach to the analysis of civil registration and vital statistics that helps countries to identify weak or inadequate processes, revise them and develop an enabling environment in which the systems can thrive. The secretariat and partners of the core group have continued to train country experts on using the tool and supporting its implementation, including through the civil registration and vital statistics mentorship programme.

19. During 2023, ECA, in collaboration with the African Development Bank, provided technical assistance, guided by the framework, to Burundi and South Sudan for the assessment of their civil registration and vital statistics systems.

¹² Countries that are currently benefiting from the programme include: Angola, Burkina Faso, Chad, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Djibouti, Equatorial Guinea, Eswatini, Guinea-Bissau, Kenya, Lesotho, Malawi, Somalia, Togo and Zimbabwe.

The assessments included a gender analysis, in order to understand and help to address gender biases in civil registration, vital statistics and identity management systems. The assessment reports that were produced will inform the next steps in guiding the countries to develop a national strategy and action plan for civil registration and vital statistics. In addition, as part of the exercise, ECA is supporting South Sudan with a review of draft regulations for civil registration, vital statistics and identity management. Other countries that have been supported in conducting such assessments include the Central African Republic, Eritrea, Ghana and Somalia.

G. Development of the strategic plan for the Programme for the period 2023–2027

20. With the conclusion of the strategic plan for the Programme for the period 2017–2021, the secretariat, supported by partners of the core group, launched the regional strategic plan for the period 2023–2027. The development of the plan was informed by: the findings of a regional evaluation of the Programme, which was conducted in 2022; a review of the status of implementation of the previous strategic plan; and a review of the global, regional and national contexts and emerging trends affecting civil registration and vital statistics systems, such as the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic and the prioritization of digital identification systems by Governments. A draft of the plan was presented for review at the expert segment of the sixth session of the Conference of African Ministers Responsible for Civil Registration, held in October 2022.

H. Meetings of the regional core group

21. One of the primary objectives of the Programme is to facilitate a coordinated approach to the implementation of civil registration and vital statistics improvement initiatives across the continent, including by ensuring that the initiatives of partners and the support that they provide to countries are holistic, sustainable and well-coordinated and that resources are adequately used. The secretariat continued to convene meetings of the core group, providing good opportunities to share knowledge and information.

I. Development of R pipelines for analysis of civil registration and vital statistics data to generate vital statistics reports

22. ECA collaborated with the Office for National Statistics of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland in the development of R¹³ pipelines for the analysis of civil registration and vital statistics data and a training guide. Those resources help countries to analyse data and produce vital statistics reports, in line with recommendations of the United Nations. An initial draft of the pipelines and guidelines has been created and is due to be tested in selected countries. Following the testing, the resources will be finalized and disseminated to countries through training workshops.

¹³ R is a domain-specific statistical programming language.

J. Launch of the e-newsletter

23. The secretariat has successfully launched an e-newsletter, which was a significant milestone in the efforts to enhance communication and dissemination of information within the civil registration and vital statistics community. The purpose of the e-newsletter is to provide a dynamic platform on which to share the latest updates, best practices, research findings and success stories from various initiatives across Africa, fostering greater collaboration and knowledge exchange among stakeholders, including government agencies, non-governmental organizations and international partners. The six editions that have been released to date have each received positive feedback for their comprehensive coverage and user-friendly design, laying a strong foundation for future publications. The digital newsletter, available on the Programme website, plays a crucial role in keeping the community informed and engaged, ultimately contributing to the strengthening of civil registration and vital statistics systems across the continent.

V. Civil registration and vital statistics systems, investment and the 2030 Agenda

24. A region-wide review of the progress in implementing the Programme that was conducted in 2022 showed that, in the period 2012–2022, most countries had successfully participated in training and similar capacity-building activities facilitated by partners on civil registration and vital statistics, indicating an increase in the levels of knowledge and awareness on the subject across the continent. In addition, 77 per cent of countries had undertaken a comprehensive assessment of their civil registration and vital statistics system, and 59 per cent had developed a national action plan, which potentially demonstrates a higher level of awareness of the main challenges facing such systems and the possible solutions to addressing them. A major challenge that was identified during the review was the unsystematic implementation of national action plans; although many countries had plans in place, there was minimal evidence to show that the plans were being implemented and were contributing directly to improvements in registration completeness.

25. According to various reports, Africa remains the global leader for the region with the highest proportion of unregistered births and deaths. According to data published by UNICEF,¹⁴ sub-Saharan Africa is reported to account for 57 per cent of all unregistered births worldwide. Less than half of children aged under one year in West and Central Africa and in East and Southern Africa (45 per cent and 33 per cent, respectively) had their births registered as of 2019, and a much lower proportion were in possession of birth certificates.¹⁵ In a global analysis of the distribution of children aged below five years whose births are not registered, Nigeria, Ethiopia and the Democratic Republic of the Congo are highlighted as having 11 per cent, 10 per cent and 7 per cent, respectively, of all unregistered births globally.¹⁶

26. Death registration lags far behind that of births, and, in regard to the recording of causes of death, a lot of progress is needed.¹⁷ It was apparent from the COVID-19 pandemic that most countries on the continent do not have civil registration and vital statistics systems that are capable of producing cause-of-death statistics of sufficient quality to guide public health decision-making.

¹⁴ UNICEF, “Birth registration for every child by 2030: are we on track?” (New York, 2019).

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ For more information see United Nations, Economic Commission for Africa, and others, “Death registration”. Available at https://archive.uneca.org/sites/default/files/uploaded-documents/Statistics/CRMC3/death_registration_en.pdf.

27. The lack of functional civil registration and vital statistics systems has a direct impact on the livelihoods of individuals by denying them the ability to establish critical rights and privileges, including the right to a name and identity, and further denies Governments the critical data and statistics needed to provide public administration, deliver services and guide policy and planning.

28. Countries in Africa and other regions of the world have made commitments relating to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, target 16.9 of which is the provision of legal identity for all, and indicator 17.19.2 of which is the proportion of countries that have achieved 100 per cent birth registration and 80 per cent death registration. The implementation of the 2030 Agenda provides a critical opportunity for civil registration and vital statistics stakeholders to mobilize and advocate greater investments in the establishment of well-functioning civil registration and vital statistics systems.

29. Considering the progress that has been made in developing digital identity systems, including investments in state-of-the-art technology for their operation and maintenance, it is evident that opportunities are available to countries to access the resources needed to establish, maintain and modernize civil registration and vital statistics systems, including ensuring that they achieve completeness. National statistical offices are urged to play a critical role in advocating the establishment of integrated civil registration, vital statistics and digital identity systems, including population registers, in recognition of the potential benefits that such systems could offer to national statistical systems, in particular the continual provision of robust population data.

VI. Sixth session of the Conference of African Ministers Responsible for Civil registration

30. The sixth session of the Conference of African Ministers Responsible for Civil Registration was scheduled to be held from 24 to 28 October 2022 under the theme “A decade into the Africa Programme on Accelerated Improvement of Civil Registration and Vital Statistics Systems: reflecting on progress and accelerating efforts towards 2030 through transformed systems”. Owing to resource limitations, however, the session was cancelled with an expectation that it would be rescheduled once the limitations were overcome. From 2022 to 2024, the secretariat actively engaged partners of the core group in mobilizing resources for the organization of the Conference. In addition, the secretariat engaged with members of the bureau of experts to inform them of the preparatory activities and associated challenges. The sixth session is now expected to be held in the first quarter of 2025.

31. Building on the discussions and recommendations of the expert segment of the sixth session of the Conference, which was held in 2022, the Conference is expected to reflect on the progress that has been made in the development of civil registration and vital statistics systems over the past 10 years, celebrate a decade since the initiation of the Programme and provide policy directions for the next phase of its implementation. In addition, the participants are expected to discuss new and emerging developments, such as digital identity systems, and challenges, including managing the systems during humanitarian crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, and make recommendations on the ways countries and partners should address them.

VII. Conclusion and the way forward

32. Although progress has clearly been made under the Programme, in particular regarding building the capacity of national civil registration and vital

statistics stakeholders, implementing policy and advocating the development of systems, Africa is lagging in demonstratable improvements in registration completeness. Strategic measures must, therefore, be identified that are achievable, evidence-based and sustainable and that will enable the continent to make strides in the coming years.

33. The Statistical Commission should consider the following recommendations:

(a) Civil registration offices should collaborate closely with ministries for health to ensure that all events recorded by the ministry are notified and registered, and national statistical offices should support any such initiatives, including by supporting the harmonization of forms and data tools to enable the functional interoperability of systems;

(b) National statistical offices should support initiatives to monitor civil registration and vital statistics completeness, including at the subnational level;

(c) Countries should take advantage of the resource opportunities that are available in order to advocate the modernization, in particular digitalization, of civil registration and vital statistics systems, and national statistical offices should engage in initiatives for the development of civil registration, vital statistics and digital identity systems and explore potential opportunities to use those initiatives to derive robust population data;

(d) Countries should embed disaster planning into their civil registration and vital statistics plans and identify strategic measures to strengthen the resilience of civil registration and vital statistics systems, including the digitalization of the systems;

(e) National statistical offices should be commended for the efforts that they have made to produce vital statistics from civil registration systems over the past 10 years, providing a critical contribution to the good functioning of the systems, and they should continue in that vein.
