Is everyone in the picture? Civil registration in the middle of the coronavirus disease pandemic

Note by the secretariat

Summary

The present document contains a brief situation analysis of civil registration and vital statistics in the region based on the midterm review of the Asia and Pacific Civil Registration and Vital Statistics Decade (2015–2024) as agreed in the Ministerial Declaration to “Get Every One in the Picture” in Asia and the Pacific (resolution 71/14 of the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific). It also contains an overview of the centrality of civil registration and vital statistics systems to supporting the monitoring of and responses to the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) and other emergencies. Further highlighted is the link between civil registration and vital statistics and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, especially with regards to the principle of leaving no one behind.

The Commission may wish to reaffirm its commitment to the vision that all people in Asia and the Pacific will benefit from universal and responsive civil registration and vital statistics systems facilitating the realization of their rights and supporting good governance, health and development, the need of which has been highlighted during the current COVID-19 crisis. The Commission may further wish to acknowledge the work of the Regional Steering Group for Civil Registration and Vital Statistics in Asia and the Pacific and the regional progress made through the first half of the Asia and Pacific Civil Registration and Vital Statistics Decade.
I. Key findings from the midterm review of the Asia and Pacific Civil Registration and Vital Statistics Decade (2015–2024)

1. Civil registration is closely linked to a person’s legal identity. Birth registration provides an official and permanent recognition of a child’s existence. Birth registration also establishes the connection of a child to her or his family through the recording of the parents’ names. Later in life, the proof of legal identity provided by birth registration and the subsequent issuance of an official birth certificate, as well as the registration of other vital events such as marriages, allows individuals to access services and exercise their rights. Finally, the registration of a death and the issuance of a death certificate represents a final and permanent record of the fact of death and can help family members in subsequent legal procedures. The United Nations Principles and Recommendations for a Vital Statistics System recognizes a universal and well-maintained civil registration system as the best source of information on vital events. Statistics based on registration records, with causes of death recorded and disaggregated by key demographic characteristics, are critical to design, implement and monitor public health policies. They are also necessary for monitoring progress towards the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which includes 67 indicators drawing on data from civil registration and vital statistics systems.

2. Civil registration and vital statistics benefit from a strong commitment in Asia and the Pacific, reflected by the adoption of the Ministerial Declaration to “Get Every One in the Picture” in Asia and the Pacific at the First Ministerial Conference on Civil Registration and Vital Statistics in Asia and the Pacific, in 2014. Under the purview of the Ministerial Declaration, Governments proclaimed the Asia and Pacific Civil Registration and Vital Statistics Decade, providing a clear timeframe for realizing the shared vision that all people in Asia and the Pacific will benefit from universal and responsive civil registration and vital statistics systems facilitating the realization of their rights and supporting good governance, health and development. They further delineated how to realize this shared vision by endorsing the Regional Action Framework on Civil Registration and Vital Statistics in Asia and the Pacific. Acting upon this decision and using the Regional Action Framework to accelerate and focus efforts to improve civil registration and vital statistics systems, members and associate members have since strived to realize this shared vision.

3. Members and associate members are supported by the Regional Steering Group for Civil Registration and Vital Statistics in Asia and the Pacific, which guides the implementation of the Regional Action Framework and acts as the custodian of the Asia and Pacific Civil Registration and Vital Statistics Decade. The Regional Steering Group met twice in 2020. First in April 2020 to discuss the postponement of the Second Ministerial Conference on Civil Registration and Vital Statistics in Asia and the Pacific, initially planned for October 2020 and postponed to November 2021. The second time they met to discuss regional progress, key issues and the way forward to ensure continued attention to the improvement of civil registration and vital statistics systems in the region. The Regional Steering Group discussed the impact of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) on civil registration and vital statistics systems and the importance of improving these systems to respond better to future crises.

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1 Revision 3 (United Nations publication, 2014).
4. On the occasion of the midpoint of the Decade in 2019–2020, 44 countries in the region submitted a report on their progress in the implementation of the Regional Action Framework in which they not only described their progress but also some of the activities they conducted to improve their systems. Members of the Regional Steering Group were consulted on the monitoring process and reviewed the key findings.

5. Civil registration has markedly improved since the beginning of the Decade, with both birth and death registration rates increasing throughout the region. Since the rate of progress has been greatest in countries that had lower registration rates at the beginning of the Decade, the gap between countries with the highest and lowest registration rates is closing. For example, while Cambodia and Samoa registered respectively 40 per cent and 53 per cent of their births within a year in 2014, in 2018 they were at 66 per cent and 80 per cent, rapidly catching up with the 26 countries registering more than 90 per cent of their births within a year. Similarly, Fiji improved the percentage of deaths registered within a year from 73 per cent to 88 per cent over the same period, while Bangladesh went from 7 to 22 per cent. They will hopefully manage to join the growing number of countries registering more than 90 per cent of deaths within a year by the end of the Decade in 2024 or by 2030.

6. However, despite significant progress, there remain large subregional differences. East and North-East Asia and North and Central Asia are registering almost all births and deaths, reflecting the fact that civil registration and vital statistics systems in these regions benefit from well-institutionalized processes. The situation is more mixed in the Pacific, South-East Asia and South and South-West Asia, where many countries are still far from the goal of universal civil registration and will need to accelerate progress to reach their targets by 2024. Although the number of children under the age of 5 whose birth is registered is rapidly increasing in these subregions, and especially in South Asia, which has experienced the fastest increase in the world since 2011, there are still about 65 million children under the age of 5 in Asia and the Pacific whose birth has never been registered, representing 39 per cent of all unregistered children under 5 globally.

7. Although the pace of progress in birth and death registration rates is similar, death registration rates are often lower than birth registration rates. The cause is the lack of incentive to register deaths, which has had a noticeable impact on the use of civil registration data to monitor the impact of COVID-19.

8. As civil registration is improving, its use for vital statistics is also becoming more widespread in the region, with 31 countries reporting using birth and death registration records for vital statistics and disseminating them in the public domain. Nevertheless, 13 countries in the Pacific, South-East Asia, and South and South-West Asia have yet to harness their civil registration records for statistics. With universal and well-maintained civil registration systems, the use of civil registration records rather than surveys or censuses for vital statistics will help to improve the timeliness, accuracy and completeness of vital statistics. It is also a more cost-effective source of statistics than surveys.

9. A crucial component of civil registration and vital statistics systems, and one of the reasons they are so important for monitoring the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, is that they include the recording of causes of death as

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3 For the midterm questionnaire responses, see https://getinthepicture.org/regional-picture/midterm-reporting.

well as the fact of death. The medical practitioner attending the death is required to complete the international form of the medical certificate of cause of death; this information is sent to the civil registrar, which will ensure the form is combined with other information needed for statistical purposes. Twenty-one countries in the region reported recording a medically certified cause of death for all deaths taking place in health facilities or with the attention of a medical practitioner. Four countries have reported that between 80 and 99 per cent of deaths were recorded with a medically certified cause of death for deaths occurring in health facilities or with the attention of a medical practitioner, while nine reported figures below 80 per cent. However, as many deaths in Asia and the Pacific are not necessarily taking place in a health facility or with the attention of a medical practitioner and are not recorded by the health sector, the percentage of all deaths with a medically certified cause of death is lower. Further, countries which were able to report data are probably also performing better than the ones which could not report any data, and the overall picture in the region is likely worse than that presented by the reported data.

10. Nevertheless, recording the causes of death is not sufficient to calculate cause-specific mortality rates, which are paramount in monitoring the impact of diseases. The underlying cause of death needs to be coded to a statistical category according to the World Health Organization (WHO) International Classification of Diseases. In some cases, the information on the medical certificate with regard to the cause of death is either too limited or absent, making it difficult to accurately classify the cause of death, and it will be given an “ill-defined code”. Although many countries have managed to lower the proportion of ill-defined codes since the beginning of the Decade, there are still five countries which reported having more than 20 per cent of deaths coded to ill-defined codes. A significant proportion of ill-defined codes could hide the severity of the impact of some diseases, such as COVID-19, on mortality.

II. Civil registration, vital statistics and progress towards attaining the Sustainable Development Goals

11. A well-functioning civil registration and vital statistics system helps to ensure that every person has a legal identity, facilitating access to the benefits and protections of the State. Despite national and universal efforts to “get every one in the picture”, disparities in coverage of hard-to-reach and marginalized populations remain. For children, birth registration supports access to education and can help to prevent child marriage by providing proof of age. Legal documentation can also facilitate access to the health system and allow individuals to participate in civic life. The more than 385 million individuals lacking a legal identity in Asia and the Pacific⁵ are at increased risk of being excluded from social protection programmes implemented to support people through the COVID-19 pandemic as well as national vaccination schemes.

12. Civil registration and vital statistics play a key role in facilitating the monitoring of progress towards the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals and the shared aim of leaving no one behind. A well-functioning civil registration and vital statistics system is the best source of continuous and up-to-date information on birth, death and population statistics. These statistics in turn are used to directly report on indicators such as infant mortality and the adolescent birth rate and serve as the denominator for a wide range of population-based targets and indicators for the Goals. Cause of death data from

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civil registration and vital statistics systems are also required to directly report on other indicators. These include maternal mortality, infant mortality, road accident deaths, deaths from communicable and non-communicable diseases and more. Complete and timely vital statistics provide policymakers with better data on which to base policies and Goal implementation plans.

III. The importance of civil registration and vital statistics during the coronavirus pandemic

13. Understanding the true impact of COVID-19 on mortality requires reliable data that are not always available in a timely manner in many low-resource settings. While cause of death data is important for measuring COVID-19 deaths, many low- and middle-income countries have little capacity for COVID-19 testing or clinical case detection, especially when most deaths occur outside of a health facility. This makes the registration of all deaths even more imperative when using total mortality to measure the impact of the pandemic. The role of the health sector in these areas needs to be strengthened if the region is going to be able to provide timely vital statistics, including on causes of death, by the end of the Decade and be ready for future health crises. Equally important is the statistical data drawn from civil registration for governments to plan and deliver services during pandemics and other crises and to better meet the needs of their most vulnerable populations.

14. There are still significant gaps in death registration in Asia and the Pacific. Deaths in some population groups in particular are less likely to be registered. These groups can include people living in rural, remote, isolated or border areas, minorities, indigenous people, migrants, non-citizens, asylum seekers, refugees, stateless people and people without documentation. These are also the same populations that are often disproportionately affected by COVID-19. Therefore, it is likely that in many countries in the region, the true impact of COVID-19, and the resultant excess mortality, will never be truly known.

15. The provision of legal identity will also be critical for facilitating the effective and equitable provision of vaccinations. Prioritization is essential to protect the most vulnerable populations but where people do not have evidence of their identity, this can be challenging as the limited evidence coming from the vaccine roll-out campaigns thus far demonstrates. Additionally, the timely and disaggregated population data which can be provided through civil registration and vital statistics systems can be used to focus vaccination campaigns on areas with more vulnerable people; for example, areas with a more elderly population or more densely populated areas.

16. On a positive note, the current crisis has already resulted in closer collaboration between health ministries and civil registration and national statistical offices in several countries in Asia and the Pacific. Governments have highlighted these positive developments during the Asia-Pacific Stats Cafe series of the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), which have included sessions on challenges to civil registration and vital statistics systems during the COVID-19 pandemic, death registration and measuring excess mortality. The Commission also initiated global guidance for civil registration authorities in collaboration with the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) and the Pacific Community. This guidance was further developed in collaboration with the United Nations Legal Identity Task Force, supplementing a global short survey to assess the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

pandemic on the functioning of civil registration worldwide, provide information regarding national solutions and provide a forum for the exchange of experiences.

17. Most respondents from Asia and the Pacific consider civil registration an essential service, and therefore continued services during COVID-19 restrictions. Despite this, reduced opening hours and restricted access to offices, as well as people’s decreased mobility, has resulted in fewer registered events in some countries. It is yet to be seen whether there will be an increase in the proportion of vital events which go unregistered, potentially another negative consequence of the pandemic. The countries with the least impact on registration services were those with highly digitalized processes, such as Armenia, New Zealand and the Republic of Korea, although several countries with well-functioning systems reported further improvements to systems as a result of the increased demand for timely mortality statistics.

IV. Leaving no one behind and social protection

18. There is strong momentum in the region to improve civil registration and vital statistics systems since the inception of the Decade. In the spirit of the Regional Action Framework, countries are implementing key steps to strengthen their civil registration and vital statistics systems in a coordinated and multisectoral manner. As discussed above, this has resulted in significant progress during the first part of the Decade. Nevertheless, civil registration and vital statistics are too important, and all countries, even the ones with high civil registration rates, should ensure their civil registration and vital statistics systems are covering all subgroups of the population, including hard-to-reach and marginalized populations. This is especially relevant for countries which are implementing identity management systems founded on civil registration, which could result in further marginalization of specific subgroups of their populations if they are not included in civil registration.

19. The 2020 report “The Protection We Want: Social Outlook for Asia and the Pacific”7 demonstrated the value of social protection in addressing inequalities and promoting inclusive and sustainable societies in Asia and the Pacific. One of the factors undermining the effectiveness and efficiency of social protection systems is that potential beneficiaries are not accurately identified and targeted, which can lead to gaps in coverage, management and monitoring. Holistic civil registration, vital statistics and identity systems can facilitate the provision of indispensable demographic and health information, strengthening the evidence base and rendering redistributive policies and interventions more effective and responsive to the needs of all and the most vulnerable in particular.8 Grounded in robust civil registration and vital statistics systems, countries also need to establish and enhance national registry databases of beneficiaries and social protection management and monitoring mechanisms, as well as promote results-based and evidence-based national assessments and benchmarking of social protection delivery services. The ones left farthest behind include poor and rural populations, as registration rates have repeatedly been shown to be lower among these groups.9

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7 United Nations publication, 2021.
9 UNICEF, “Birth registration for every child by 2030”.
20. Children’s characteristics, as well as those of their mothers, could affect their chances of registration. For example, globally, 80 per cent of children under age 5 whose mothers have at least a secondary education have their births registered, compared to just 60 per cent of children whose mothers have no education. \[^10\] Global data on civil registration completeness also indicates that migration status, rural versus urban residence and income quintile have large impacts on registration rates. In its 2019 report “Birth registration for every child by 2030”, UNICEF highlighted some of those inequalities, showing that globally, children from households in the lowest income quintile are one quarter less likely than their counterparts from the highest income quintile to be registered. In South Asia, 86 per cent of children under 5 years of age are registered in the richest households but that proportion falls to 53 per cent for the poorest. The intersectionality of these different characteristics is an understudied issue. An ESCAP study on birth registration in Pakistan highlighted how lack of registration has a higher impact on girls’ educational attainment than boys’, although overall registration rates are similar between them. \[^11\]

21. Achieving the Sustainable Development Goals means pursuing inclusive development and ensuring no one is left behind. Universal civil registration is essential to avoid having people be invisible because they lack identity credentials. Individuals need legal identity credentials to access health care (including vaccinations), education, economic opportunities and representation. During the COVID-19 pandemic, this has been further highlighted as national identification systems have been the backbone of the distribution of support in 2020, and will no doubt continue to be essential. The United Nations launched the United Nations Legal Identity Agenda in June 2019 and it was officially endorsed in March 2020. It builds on the existing international methodological framework for civil registration and vital statistics and expands on it to ensure a holistic and interoperable approach between civil registration, vital statistics production and identity management.

22. Social protection systems are necessary to shield people’s incomes and well-being during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and in future emergencies. The recent crisis has highlighted the role well-designed, fully implemented and coordinated social protection systems have in protecting people. The link between legal identity and social protection goes two ways: individuals that do not have official identity credentials have difficulty accessing social protection benefits and, at the same time, not having access to social protection benefits means there are fewer incentives for individuals to register their vital events (births, marriages, divorces and deaths) with governments.

23. Countries with well-developed social protection systems have been in a much better position during this pandemic than those that need to resort to ad hoc measures of social relief which can be imprecise, inefficient and costly. \[^12\] Timeliness has been a key factor in addressing the health and socioeconomic impacts of COVID-19, and countries with pre-existing social protection frameworks with well-functioning registries underpinning these schemes should be able to react more promptly. Such functional registries ideally rely on universal civil registration systems linked to national identification systems. A holistic approach to identity management reflects the understanding that legal

\[^10\] Ibid.


\[^12\] *Building Back Better from Crises through Regional Cooperation in Asia and the Pacific* (United Nations publication, forthcoming).
identity is conferred by the registration of vital events, limiting the necessity for costly enrolment campaigns for social protection schemes.

24. Migrants are a particularly vulnerable group who have been adversely affected by COVID-19 and their lack of birth registration. In the Asia-Pacific region, migrants often have limited access to birth registration for their children. This is especially the case when they are undocumented but also applies when they have a regular migration status. Migrants in Asia and the Pacific have been disproportionately affected by COVID-19 due to their socioeconomic situation, concentration in essential worker jobs and limited access to health services. The pandemic has highlighted the dangers of excluding migrants and other marginalized groups from civil registration systems and the importance of all individuals having a legal identity. As early as April 2020, The Lancet published a call for urgent global action to include migrants in the COVID-19 response, highlighting legal status as a key barrier for inclusion. The issues of migrants’ access to health care due to lack of identification documents have also been highlighted by the International Organization for Migration.

V. The Second Ministerial Conference on Civil Registration and Vital Statistics in Asia and the Pacific

25. The Second Ministerial Conference on Civil Registration and Vital Statistics in Asia and the Pacific is due to be convened from 16 to 19 November 2021 at the request of member States, in line with Commission resolution 74/8 on accelerating the implementation of the Regional Action Framework on Civil Registration and Vital Statistics in Asia and the Pacific. In light of the importance of civil registration and vital statistics and the broad impact they have on sustainable and inclusive development, the Ministerial Conference is being co-organized in partnership with UNICEF, the United Nations Development Programme, the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women), the United Nations Population Fund, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, WHO, the World Bank, the Pacific Community, the Centre of Excellence for Civil Registration and Vital Statistics Systems, World Vision International, the CDC Foundation, Vital Strategies, the Data for Health Initiative of Bloomberg Philanthropies, Plan International and ESCAP. Preparations for the Ministerial Conference are being overseen by the Regional Steering Group for Civil Registration and Vital Statistics in Asia and the Pacific.

26. The COVID-19 pandemic has once again highlighted the importance of improving civil registration and vital statistics systems in Asia and the Pacific. The Second Ministerial Conference will give countries and development partners a chance to renew their commitment to this important issue and move forward on ensuring civil registration reaches its potential to support the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and its promise to leave no one behind.

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14 Ibid.


VI. Issues for consideration by the Commission

27. The Commission may wish to reaffirm its commitment to the vision that all people in Asia and the Pacific will benefit from universal and responsive civil registration and vital statistics systems facilitating the realization of their rights and supporting good governance, health and development, the need of which has been highlighted during the current COVID-19 crisis.

28. The Commission may further wish to acknowledge the work of the Regional Steering Group for Civil Registration and Vital Statistics in Asia and the Pacific and the regional progress made through the first half of the Asia and Pacific Civil Registration and Vital Statistics Decade and in the preparation for the Second Ministerial Conference on Civil Registration and Vital Statistics in Asia and the Pacific.