

**Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific****Seventy-ninth session**

Bangkok and online, 15–19 May 2023

Item 4 (j) of the provisional agenda*

Review of the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in Asia and the Pacific and issues pertinent to the subsidiary structure of the Commission: statistics**Getting everyone in the picture for more effective climate change action****Note by the secretariat***Summary*

The present document contains a brief analysis of the importance of having resilient civil registration and vital statistics systems in order for climate change action to be more effective, in particular in the context of ensuring a legal identity for all.

Ensuring that everyone has a legal identity is critical for enabling the global community and national Governments to uphold their promise to leave no one behind, including those affected by climate change.

Having resilient civil registration and vital statistics systems is also central to supporting efforts aimed at adapting to climate change, now and in the future. When they are well-functioning, such systems are the best source of timely and granular data on the population and of statistics that can be used in planning, implementing and monitoring policies, including policies addressing the impacts of climate change. Unregistered people are often invisible to the State and, as a result, their level of vulnerability and the limitations they experience in accessing social protection and services can be very difficult to assess.

Millions of people around the world are displaced or move often in response to disasters and the adverse effects of climate change. These numbers are likely to increase, highlighting the need for supportive governance structures. In the present document, the secretariat discusses how displacement creates major challenges for civil registration and vital statistics systems and can compound the negative impacts of non-registration. At the same time, displaced persons are among those most in need of the social and legal protection underpinned by civil registration and vital statistics systems, which makes it critically important for Governments to strengthen these systems in their efforts to mitigate the impacts of climate change.

The Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific may wish to acknowledge the importance of well-functioning civil registration and vital statistics systems for effective climate change action. It may also wish to reaffirm its commitment to the vision of ensuring that all people in Asia and the Pacific can benefit from universal and responsive civil registration and vital statistics systems, facilitating the realization of their rights and supporting good governance, health and development. It may further wish to stress the need to accelerate efforts to support resilient civil registration and vital statistics systems, including as a means of addressing the impacts of climate change.

* ESCAP/79/1/Rev.2.

I. Introduction

1. Having resilient civil registration and vital statistics systems is important in order for climate change action to be more effective, in particular in the context of ensuring a legal identity for all. At its seventy-eighth session, the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) endorsed the Ministerial Declaration on Building a More Resilient Future with Inclusive Civil Registration and Vital Statistics.¹

2. Ensuring that everyone in Asia and the Pacific has a legal identity is critical for enabling the global community and national Governments to uphold their promise to leave no one behind, including those affected by climate change, now and in the future. Key to the provision of a legal identity for all are well-functioning civil registration and vital statistics systems. In the context of climate change, these systems can be an important tool in adaptation efforts and will play a crucial role in supporting the lives of those affected by climate change. The more robust these systems are, the more resilient will future generations be to those impacts.

II. Supporting adaptation to climate change through resilient civil registration and vital statistics systems

A. Importance of a legal identity to ensure that no one is left behind and the current situation in Asia and the Pacific

1. What is legal identity?

3. Legal identity is defined as the basic characteristics of an individual's identity, for example name, sex, and place and date of birth, conferred through registration and the issuance of a certificate by an authorized civil registration authority following the occurrence of birth. In the absence of birth registration, legal identity may be conferred by a legally recognized identification authority; this system should be linked to the civil registration system to ensure a holistic approach to legal identity from birth to death. Legal identity is retired by the issuance of a death certificate by the civil registration authority upon registration of death.²

4. At the Second Ministerial Conference on Civil Registration and Vital Statistics in Asia and the Pacific, held in 2021, participants noted the critical role of civil registration and its basis for legal identity, highlighting the importance of universal birth registration and the implementation of a holistic approach to legal identity that is inclusive of vulnerable and hard-to-reach populations. The United Nations Legal Identity Agenda (2020–2030) brings the United Nations development system together in support of States building holistic, country-owned, sustainable civil registration, vital statistics and identity management systems. Governments in Asia and the Pacific have expressed significant commitment to achieving their shared vision that, by 2024, all people in the region should benefit from universal and responsive civil registration and vital statistics systems.

5. Civil registration and vital statistics systems provide individuals with the official recognition and documentation necessary to establish legal identity

¹ Resolution 78/4.

² United Nations, *Implementation of the United Nations Legal Identity Agenda: United Nations Country Team Operational Guidelines* (New York, 2020).

and civil status, which contributes to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. In recent years, there has been an increased focus on how to ensure the resilience of civil registration systems so that identity documents can be issued during disasters and emergencies. Civil registration and vital statistics systems need to be digitalized so that they can be more easily linked to identity management systems, which will in turn increase resilience and strengthen the ability to support adaptation to climate change. Unless urgent attention is given to these systems, they will not realize their full potential.

6. The coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic posed significant challenges to the delivery of civil registration and vital statistics services. It widened existing inequality gaps and is likely to have disproportionately affected populations who were already being left behind. Similar or even more severe challenges will be posed by climate change-induced disasters, which are expected to increase in frequency and severity. The challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic can therefore be seen as a harbinger of the pressure that will probably be placed on civil registration and vital statistics systems by climate change.

2. Status of civil registration and vital statistics systems in Asia and the Pacific

7. Despite the importance of civil registration and vital statistics systems, many countries in Asia and the Pacific are still far from achieving the shared vision agreed to in 2014. In 2021, at the midpoint of the Asia and Pacific Civil Registration and Vital Statistics Decade (2015–2024), ESCAP published *Getting Every One in the Picture: A Snapshot of Progress Midway through the Asia and Pacific Civil Registration and Vital Statistics Decade*.

8. Some encouraging trends in the region were highlighted in that report. First, the percentage of births registered, also referred to as birth registration completeness, has been rapidly increasing in countries that had low birth registration completeness at the beginning of the Decade. These countries are rapidly catching up with those countries in the region with higher levels of birth registration completeness.³ Despite this progress, the COVID-19 pandemic has shown that births in hard-to-reach and marginalized communities are even less likely to be registered during crises and that sustained efforts to establish resilient systems that can ensure universal registration are needed. This includes classifying civil registration as an essential service so that registration facilities do not get closed down during times of crisis.

9. The civil registration of deaths follows the same encouraging trend as the registration of births, with countries from the Pacific, South-East Asia, South and South-West Asia – which had low death registration completeness at the beginning of the Decade – catching up. Nevertheless, there are still an estimated 8.3 million unregistered deaths in Asia and the Pacific each year⁴ and a significant lack of recording, coding and analysis of causes of death.

³ *Getting Every One in the Picture: A Snapshot of Progress Midway through the Asia and Pacific Civil Registration and Vital Statistics Decade* (United Nations publication, 2021).

⁴ ESCAP, “Reaching a regional estimate of death registration completeness”, Stats Brief, No. 32 (January 2023).

10. As civil registration improves, more countries can use this data for producing vital statistics. According to the information contained in *Getting Every One in the Picture*, 32 countries reported that they already produced vital statistics based on registration records. Still, 17 countries had yet to do so; all were located in South and South-West Asia, South-East Asia and the Pacific. Moreover, dissemination practices have changed recently in many countries, with key vital statistics such as the number of births and deaths being released more frequently, sometimes on a quarterly or monthly basis. These changes have been partially driven by the demands of the COVID-19 pandemic, which led to the more frequent publication of mortality statistics.

11. Despite all the progress, there is still a long way to go for the region to ensure that everyone is accounted for and to achieve universal registration of vital events, in particular when it comes to those left furthest behind, who are among those most likely to bear a disproportionate burden of the effects of climate change.

III. Role of civil registration and vital statistics in supporting climate change adaptation

A. Data

12. To be effective, climate action taken by national, regional and global stakeholders must be underpinned by internationally comparable climate-related data.

13. Climate change-related information encompasses data, statistics and indicators on drivers; impacts; population, social, environmental and economic vulnerabilities; and efforts to mitigate the effects of and adapt to climate change.⁵ Much of that information is collected and held by various government agencies, as well as scientific and research institutions, with each institution often using different concepts, methods, terminologies and definitions in data production, including data from civil registration and vital statistics systems. This fragmentation makes it challenging to provide coherent evidence for use in national climate decisions, let alone internationally comparable information to inform multilateral climate negotiations and decisions on action. The challenge is compounded by issues related to data coordination and data governance. The production and policy use of climate change-related information will benefit immensely from internationally agreed concepts and frameworks.

14. At its fifty-third session, held in March 2022, the Statistical Commission adopted the global set of climate change statistics and indicators⁶ as the framework for climate change statistics and indicators to be used by countries when preparing their own sets of climate change statistics and indicators according to their individual concerns, priorities and resources.⁷ The global set is the result of more than a decade-long effort to scope climate change-related information including on drivers, impacts, vulnerabilities,

⁵ Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, *Climate Change 2022: Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability: Contribution of Working Group II to the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change*, Hans-Otto Pörtner and others, eds. (Cambridge, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, Cambridge University Press, 2022).

⁶ See <https://unstats.un.org/unsd/envstats/climatechange.cshtml> for further information.

⁷ *Official Records of the Economic and Social Council, 2022, Supplement No. 4* (E/2022/24-E/CN.3/2022/41), chap. I, sect. C, decision 53/116.

mitigation and adaptation. In addition, it outlines linkages to commitments embedded in the Paris Agreement, the Paris Agreement work programme, the Katowice climate package and other relevant internationally agreed development agendas, including the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015–2030. Many indicators within these frameworks are best measured through robust civil registration and vital statistics systems.

15. The Statistical Commission also oversees the Inter-Agency and Expert Group on Disaster-related Statistics, which is co-chaired by ESCAP and the United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction. The Inter-Agency and Expert Group works to build and strengthen a common framework and a network of expert communities on disaster-related statistics. Global statistical standards and classifications on disasters will strengthen data and analyses of disaster risks and hence also contribute to an increased evidence base for common and coordinated action to mitigate the effects of and adapt to climate-induced disasters.

16. At its eighth session, held in August 2022, the ESCAP Committee on Statistics decided to focus, in its future work, on developing measures of progress on climate change-related statistics. That effort is an urgent priority, as is the need to build capacity to navigate complex data governance choices.

17. Engaging in regional collaboration to strengthen climate change statistics is an opportunity to replicate an earlier success of ESCAP, that of making disaster-related statistics a global priority for statistics development. Thus, the Asia-Pacific region, guided by ESCAP, was an early proponent of strengthening disaster-related data. Those efforts resulted in the Disaster-related Statistics Framework, which serves as the substantive starting point for the above-mentioned global Inter-Agency and Expert Group on Disaster-related Statistics. They also led to the establishment of a technical working group on disaster-related statistics in Asia and the Pacific that currently supports the implementation of the Disaster-related Statistics Framework in the region.

18. Global and regional actions taken by the statistical community, including to develop and agree upon terms, concepts, classifications and definitions, are instrumental because they help to shape a common global language that can be used by policymakers in negotiations and consensus-building. As the impacts of climate change are expected to become more frequent and severe in the future, having a common language will be essential in continuously monitoring and reacting to the challenges ahead.

19. ESCAP analysis shows that, under all climate change scenarios, as well as in comparison to global averages, Asia and the Pacific will be most affected by heavy precipitation, followed by agricultural drought, hot temperatures/heatwaves and warming winds with intensifying tropical cyclones.⁸ The most recent data points to significant regression for climate action (Goal 13) against the 2015 baseline.⁹ It is clear that the Asia-Pacific region will experience more natural disasters as a consequence of climate change in the future. A critical part of disaster risk management and climate

⁸ *Asia-Pacific Riskscape @ 1.5°C: Subregional Pathways for Adaptation and Resilience – Asia-Pacific Disaster Report 2022 for ESCAP Subregions – Summary for Policymakers* (ST/ESCAP/3011).

⁹ *Asia and the Pacific SDG Progress Report 2022: Widening Disparities Amid COVID-19* (United Nations publication, 2022).

change adaptation is managing the flow of information. Getting the right information to the right people at the right time saves lives and reduces losses while also strengthening people's resilience to disasters and the impact of climate change. Well-functioning civil registration and vital statistics systems can provide timely and accurate data on the population, which is a critical aspect of a response strategy for climate change-induced disasters preparedness and response. When civil registration data is used for population registers, as is increasingly the case in Asia and the Pacific, the data can become even more useful. That usefulness is further enhanced when the data used are kept updated.

20. Population data based on civil registration and vital statistics, among other sources, can be used for climate change adaptation, as well as to prepare for and respond to climate change-induced disasters. This information can be processed to produce detailed maps, which can give information about the location and extent of damages, the populations affected and the communities in vulnerable situations. However, many countries in the Asia-Pacific region encounter challenges in developing disaster information management systems and appropriate responses owing to major gaps in data and analysis. Where data do exist, it can be challenging to integrate across different data sources, which can also limit their usefulness. Without accurate information that is timely, granular and easily accessible, disaster risk reduction programmes cannot be efficiently developed or implemented.

21. It is therefore critical to ensure that births and deaths are notified and registered before, during and after disasters and that such data are made available to the relevant authorities for planning and support service delivery. Civil registration processes can provide essential information on what happens during natural disasters at the individual level, in terms of deaths and causes of death, and at the population level, in terms of changes in mortality patterns related to extreme weather events or disaster-induced outbreaks. As an example, the Government of Vanuatu has developed a central civil registration database suited to the specific needs of the country. In post-disaster registration campaigns, the database ensures the availability and accuracy of data.¹⁰ As Vanuatu is one of the countries most vulnerable to natural hazards, the effort to increase the resilience of its civil registration and vital statistics system is critical. More countries in the region will need to follow this example to better manage civil registration during post-disaster situations.

22. In addition, the long-term demographic changes and dynamics likely to occur as a result of climate change can best be monitored using vital statistics based on civil registration records. It is likely that climate change will seriously affect fertility, mortality and migration patterns; these changes should be closely studied over the coming years. Without well-functioning civil registration and vital statistics systems, however, these studies will probably be delayed and much less granular.

23. The digitalization of civil registration processes can make data more easily available for vital statistics and make civil registration and vital statistics systems more adaptable and resilient. Digitalization includes ensuring ongoing data backup, thereby protecting the database in case of natural disaster. Countries' experiences show that developing a digitalized system can help to overcome the challenges linked to geography and access to physical infrastructure that are exacerbated in times of disaster. Digitalization facilitates

¹⁰ *Getting Every One in the Picture.*

the timely exchange of data and information and can facilitate collaboration across government institutions.

B. Health

24. As the World Health Organization (WHO) has stated:

Climate change is already impacting health in a myriad of ways, including by leading to death and illness from increasingly frequent extreme weather events, such as heatwaves, storms and floods, the disruption of food systems, increases in zoonoses and food-, water- and vector-borne diseases, and mental health issues. Furthermore, climate change is undermining many of the social determinants for good health, such as livelihoods, equality and access to health care and social support structures. These climate-sensitive health risks are disproportionately felt by the most vulnerable and disadvantaged, including women, children, ethnic minorities, poor communities, migrants or displaced persons, older populations, and those with underlying health conditions.¹¹

25. WHO has also observed that, “between 2030 and 2050, climate change is expected to cause approximately 250,000 additional deaths per year, from malnutrition, malaria, diarrhoea and heat stress”.¹² Notably, between 2000 and 2016, the number of people exposed to extreme temperatures and heatwaves in Asia and the Pacific increased by 125 million.¹³ In addition, climate-induced disasters such as floods and storms are estimated to cause 43,000 casualties on average each year in the region.¹⁴ Research using empirical data from 43 countries has found that 37 per cent of deaths between 1991 and 2018 were attributable to climate change.¹⁵ The ability to monitor these impacts in the future should be safeguarded by making investments now in civil registration and vital statistics systems.

26. The health sector plays a unique and fundamental role in protecting individuals and communities. The most vulnerable members of society are those most exposed to environmental risks and at the same time at particular risk of experiencing adverse health outcomes. Risks are especially pronounced in low-resource settings, where health systems are already inadequately equipped, understaffed and overburdened.¹⁶ Universal health coverage and civil registration are inextricably linked. When Thailand launched its universal health care policy in 2021, the provision of health insurance was enabled and facilitated through the national civil registration and identity management system, which supported the rapid enrolment of beneficiaries. Moreover, the use of unique identification numbers and personal demographic information

¹¹ WHO, “Climate change and health: key facts”, 30 October 2021. Available at www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/climate-change-and-health.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ *Asia-Pacific Disaster Report 2021: Resilience in a Riskier World – Managing Systemic Risks from Biological and Other Natural Hazards* (United Nations publication, 2021).

¹⁴ *Asia-Pacific Disaster Report 2017: Leave No One Behind – Disaster Resilience for Sustainable Development* (United Nations publication, 2017).

¹⁵ Ana Maria Vicedo-Cabrera and others. “The burden of heat-related mortality attributable to recent human-induced climate change”, *Nature Climate Change*, vol. 11 (May 2021), pp. 492–500.

¹⁶ WHO, “Environment, climate change and health in relation to universal health coverage”, Technical Brief (October 2022).

from the civil registration system significantly improved the quality of health care information.¹⁷ Similarly, the civil registration and vital statistics system of the Republic of Korea facilitates the provision of universal health coverage in that country.¹⁸

27. Universal and ongoing civil registration of births and deaths, together with causes of death, provides a real-time source of data for Governments to identify population health risks and inform the design of effective public health policies and resource allocation. Therefore, complete and timely civil registration data for monitoring the impact of disasters as well as population dynamics and for informing evidence-based responses is critical, in particular with an increased risk landscape.¹⁹

28. Disasters are often associated with a significant increase in mortality both upon immediate impact and in the aftermath of disaster. To monitor the impact of disasters on mortality rates, especially among those most vulnerable, robust death registration systems are needed that can cope with the sudden increase in deaths, including those that occur outside of hospitals.

29. The recording of causes of death is one of the key elements of a well-functioning civil registration and vital statistics system. Globally, the International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems is the standard that underpins the ability to release comparable statistics on causes of death. Across most of Asia and the Pacific, countries need to strengthen their capacities to notify and register deaths and to record, medically certify and code causes of death in line with the International Classification of Diseases. Systems that are unable to properly register, record, certify and code the causes of deaths are likely to take significantly longer to pick up on emerging health trends and patterns, diminishing Governments' ability to respond to health crises in a timely manner.

30. The International Classification of Diseases, when used correctly, can be useful in identifying deaths caused by exposure to extreme forces of nature. Both the currently most used version of the standard (version 10) and the version recently launched (version 11) have specific codes that can be assigned to causes of death associated with various extreme forces of nature, including cataclysmic storms and floods. The accurate codification of causes of deaths using international standards can therefore support Governments in quantifying the impacts of natural disasters, including climate change-induced disasters, on human lives.

C. Effective identity management and service delivery to decrease vulnerability to climate change

31. Civil registration and identity management systems constitute the foundation of legal identity systems and civil registration at birth serves as the

¹⁷ Supasit Pannarunothai, Boonchai Kijsanayotin and Samuel Mills, "Thai civil registration and vital statistics and unique identification number systems for universal health coverage: a case study", Health, Nutrition and Population Discussion Paper (Washington, D.C., World Bank, 2019).

¹⁸ Minah Kang and others, "Korean resident registration system for universal health coverage", Health, Nutrition and Population Discussion Paper (Washington, D.C., World Bank, 2019).

¹⁹ ESCAP/78/26, para. 11.

critical entry point into the legal identity system. Identity management can be critical in reducing vulnerability to climate change.

32. Governments and private companies need trusted ways of verifying individuals' identities so that they can provide more accessible, efficient and effective services. This is particularly true as more and more transactions are conducted online and as entities endeavour to modernize the way in which they provide public services. Looking ahead, reliance on such trusted verification systems will only become a more integral part of service delivery.

33. Public services and social protection measures can reduce people's vulnerability to climate change. According to the World Bank, timely, equitable development can potentially halve the number of people in South Asia who will fall into poverty due to climate change by 2030.²⁰ Many measures addressing well-being, education and health are more efficiently implemented if they are based on sound legal identity systems and timely and complete data, including vital statistics.

34. The effectiveness of social protection schemes can be severely reduced if the underlying administrative systems, such as civil registration and identity management systems, are weak. Civil registration systems support social protection administrations to correctly identify recipients. The success of different protection schemes depends on a range of processes, many of which, including identification, registration, contribution collection and delivery of benefits, can be improved by sound identity management systems.²¹ Linking social protection databases to identity management systems can help increase the efficiency and effectiveness of social protection programmes.

35. Formalizing economies and labour has a positive impact on closing gaps in social protection, but in Asia and the Pacific there is a high prevalence of informal employment, involving close to 70 per cent of all workers. Informal workers and employers are much more likely to be outside the legal framework of contributory schemes.²² Employers and employees need to have a legal identity for social insurance systems to be able to identify them. Those without identity documents are more likely to be involved in informal work.²³

36. Financial inclusion can also support the delivery of social protection benefits, but individuals without a legal identity often struggle to gain access to banking services. Less educated households with higher levels of poverty, women and minority populations are less likely to be included in the civil registration system or to have a bank account.²⁴ Financial inclusion can play an important role in building resilience and adapting to the effects of climate change. Access to financial services helps to provide a safety net to individuals and communities and to support them in meeting the shifting needs that come with changing weather patterns and natural disasters.²⁵

²⁰ Martin Raiser, "The resilience imperative: for South Asia, strengthening resilience to climate change has never been more critical", World Bank Blogs, 3 November 2022.

²¹ *The Protection We Want: Social Outlook for Asia and the Pacific* (United Nations publication, 2021).

²² Ibid.

²³ Julian Koschorke, "Leveraging identification to extend social insurance to the informal sector", World Bank Blogs, 23 December 2021.

²⁴ *The Protection We Want*.

²⁵ Danielle Moore and others, "Building resilience through financial inclusion: a review of existing evidence and knowledge gaps" (Innovations for Poverty Action, 2019).

D. Displaced populations

37. Climate change is driving displacement and making life harder for those who have already been forced to flee. This trend is likely to demand more attention in the future, as more people become displaced. The Asia-Pacific region hosts some of the most vulnerable communities, which also have to deal with the compounding risks associated with climate-induced disasters. The impacts of climate change are numerous and are already leading to population displacement and the deterioration of economic conditions and loss of livelihoods. Hazards and disasters resulting from the increasing intensity and frequency of extreme weather events, such as abnormally heavy rainfall, prolonged drought, desertification, environmental degradation, sea level rise and cyclones, are further causes of displacement linked to climate change. In addition, climate change can act as a threat multiplier, exacerbating existing tensions and adding to the potential for conflicts and associated displacement.²⁶

38. The number of people displaced as a result of climate change will almost certainly increase sharply, highlighting the need for supportive governance structures. Most people displaced by climate change remain in their own countries instead of crossing borders. The predominant causes of internal displacement in the Pacific are currently natural disasters (both weather-related and earthquakes).²⁷

39. For example, the severity of the recent floods in Pakistan is thought to have been increased by climate change. Some 32 million people (15 per cent of the country's population) are assumed to have been displaced as a result of the floods.²⁸ In Afghanistan, adverse environmental changes have compounded the drivers of displacement and resulted in more than 4.3 million internally displaced persons.²⁹ Furthermore, the inhabitants of Pacific small island developing States are among those most at risk of being displaced by disasters linked to climate change.³⁰ Thus, the civil registration and vital statistics systems in these countries and in those to which people will flee must be strengthened to provide coverage to displaced populations.

40. Displacement creates major challenges for civil registration and vital statistics systems. However, the displaced are among those most in need of the social and legal protection underpinned by civil registration and vital statistics systems. For example, establishing the legal identity of children displaced from birth can help to enhance their protection, facilitate the finding of durable solutions, including through access to property and inheritance, prevent statelessness and provide information for policy development and humanitarian planning.

²⁶ Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), "Climate change and disaster displacement". Available at www.unhcr.org/climate-change-and-disasters.html.

²⁷ Report of the Pacific Civil Registrars Network on its disaster preparation and response workshop held in Suva from 2 to 4 October 2017.

²⁸ Smriti Mallapaty, "Pakistan's floods have displaced 32 million people — here's how researchers are helping", *Nature*, vol. 609 (September 2022), p. 667.

²⁹ Nasrat Sayed and Said Hashmat Sadat, "Climate change compounds longstanding displacement in Afghanistan", Migration Policy Institute, 29 June 2022.

³⁰ Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, "Displacement, disasters and climate change". Available at www.internal-displacement.org/research-areas/Displacement-disasters-and-climate-change.

41. Unfortunately, displaced persons are often not able to prove their identity and at risk of statelessness because their civil registration and identity documents may have been lost or destroyed by displacement, conflict or disaster. To replace documents, displaced persons need to gain access to civil registration systems that are capable of meeting their specific needs. Unfortunately, such systems can be under significant pressure during times of crisis and may therefore be even less able to facilitate universal registration than under normal circumstances. Thus, when conflicts and disasters occur, preserving civil registers and providing registration as an essential service becomes even more important.

42. By adopting the Ministerial Declaration on Building a More Resilient Future with Inclusive Civil Registration and Vital Statistics, ESCAP members and associate members agreed to work to remove all barriers to civil registration of vital events among all hard-to-reach populations and people in vulnerable situations, such as women and children, persons with disabilities, migrants, refugees, asylum-seekers, stateless persons, internally displaced persons, domestic workers, foundlings and persons without documentation. Moreover, they acknowledged that civil registration and vital statistics systems needed to be resilient and considered an essential public administration service of the government in order to protect the rights of everyone to be registered and to have access to official documentation at all times, including in times of disasters, pandemics and other crises.

43. As an example, in 2016 and 2017, over 1 million Rohingya refugees crossed from Myanmar into Bangladesh, where they are particularly vulnerable to the effects of climate change-induced monsoons, storms, floods and landslides, at risk of being subjected to secondary displacement and unlikely to be able to return home.³¹ Furthermore, it is thought that the vulnerability of Myanmar to climate-induced disasters has increased its overall fragility, which has exacerbated the Rohingya refugee crisis.³² The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has worked with the Government of Bangladesh to provide protection, identity management, assistance and population statistics for the Rohingya displaced population until such a time when this population will have access to full civil registration and vital statistics systems.

44. Another example comes from the response to Typhoon Haiyan, also known as Super Typhoon Yolanda, which hit the Philippines in 2013. In total, some 4.1 million people were displaced by the event and more than 6,000 people died. The Government of the Philippines, together with development partners, worked with local civil registrars to ensure that the affected population, including displaced persons, had access to civil registration services. Many displaced persons lost their identity or civil registration documents, making it harder for them to gain access to humanitarian assistance. The Government reconstructed documents destroyed during the typhoon and worked to ensure that individuals without documents could still use the civil registration system. Furthermore, equipment and staff were sent to enable the mobile registration of vital events among the affected populations, including displaced persons. Efforts were made to reach out to the affected communities in order to identify gaps and assist them in gaining

³¹ UNHCR, “Climate change and disaster displacement”.

³² American Security Project, “Vulnerability to climate change and gender-based violence in the Rohingya refugee crisis”, 26 October 2020.

access to the necessary services.³³ This was also an example of when disaster responses can lead to building back better, since the lessons learned were then used to improve access to civil registration and vital statistics for non-displaced populations in other contexts.

45. When the entire population of the island of Ambae in Vanuatu had to be relocated owing to volcanic activity in 2017, the evacuation required reliable information about the individuals concerned, and the register of evacuees was cross-referenced with the civil registry.³⁴ While that disaster was not related to climate change, the lessons learned from the evacuation will be useful in the future, when populations will have to be relocated due to climate change-related natural disasters, including the effects of rising sea levels. Several Pacific small island developing States have already been implementing preventive measures, including through the development of a regional framework on climate mobility, which is supported by ESCAP and other development partners.

46. Some communities have already started to relocate, for example in Kiribati and Solomon Islands. In Maldives, residents of the more densely populated northern atolls have volunteered to evacuate because their homes have become more vulnerable to tidal wave surges and coastal erosion. This will become a more common scenario in the future and civil registration will play a crucial role in supporting communities that need to be evacuated or relocate.

IV. Lessons from COVID-19 on system resilience

47. The risk of future pandemics may increase with climate change.³⁵ Furthermore, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on civil registration and vital statistics systems has provided lessons on the impact of other disasters and health crises on such systems. The COVID-19 pandemic has revealed that many civil registration and vital statistics systems in the region are weak and vulnerable to shocks. The sharp increase in deaths, restrictions such as lockdowns and staff absences only made things worse. These weaknesses in the region's civil registration and vital statistics systems made it impossible to measure the excess mortality and trace the progress of the pandemic.³⁶

48. The response to the COVID-19 pandemic showed the importance of treating civil registration as an essential service that should be mandated to continue operating during a pandemic. Although some physical offices may need to be closed and opening hours may need to be limited or staggered, operations should be maintained to the extent possible, whether through in-person or online service provision. Depending on capacity, certain registration processes (such as legitimations) may be put on hold, but the registration of births and deaths, including fetal deaths, and the codification of causes of death

³³ ESCAP, "Civil registration in the context of emergencies, displacement and to prevent statelessness", video, 24 November 2014.

³⁴ *Asia-Pacific Disaster Report 2015: Disasters without Borders – Regional Resilience for Sustainable Development* (United Nations publication, 2015). See also ESCAP/MCCRVS/2021/4, para.7.

³⁵ Colin J. Carlson and others, "Climate change increases cross-species viral transmission risk", *Nature*, vol. 607 (April 2022), pp. 555–562.

³⁶ Matthew Kelly, Gloria Mathenge and Chalapati Rao, "Lessons learnt and pathways forward for national civil registration and vital statistics systems after the COVID-19 pandemic", *Journal of Epidemiology and Global Health*, vol. 11, Issue 3 (September 2021), pp. 262–265.

should continue as a priority.³⁷ The categorization by New Zealand of civil registration as an essential service in emergency plans and in legislation has allowed for the continued provision of vital registration services to the population during the Government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic.³⁸

49. The pandemic highlighted the need to digitalize civil registration and vital statistics systems and provide online registration services. In Sri Lanka, a temporary online system was set up for the public to pre-request civil registration and vital statistics services whereas in Georgia existing online services were strengthened to cope with increased demand. In Bangladesh, new digitalization plans are under way, while in Solomon Islands registration forms are available online and can be sent by email. Finally, in Australia and New Zealand, for example, fully electronic registration services were already available, which reduced the interruptions to registration services during the pandemic.³⁹

50. Digitalization has the potential to improve the collection of civil registration and vital statistics data, in particular in respect of remote and hard-to-reach communities, which are especially vulnerable during disasters and emergencies. It should be noted that, although online services have the potential to improve the production of data on mortality, the provision of the entire suite of civil registration procedures online will require substantial legislative and procedural changes, given the requirement in most settings that people present themselves to validate information prior to receiving the legal documents produced by the registration system.

51. The need to integrate data from the health sector with civil registration and vital statistics systems has been highlighted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Carrying out verbal autopsies as part of routine mortality-related data collection efforts would improve the quality of data on the causes of deaths and strengthen the ability of the civil registration and vital statistics systems to report mortality data during disasters and emergencies.

52. The issue of system resilience is closely linked to the level of digitalization of existing systems. Many countries in Asia and the Pacific still have records in paper format, which not only increases the risk of loss or damage during storms, floods, fires or conflicts but also makes the records difficult and expensive to manage and safeguard. While most countries are moving towards more digitalized systems, there is still a long way to go before all systems are fully digitalized.⁴⁰

53. In many Pacific islands, civil registration systems are particularly far from being fully digitalized and are frequently based on spreadsheets updated

³⁷ United Nations Legal Identity Task Force, "Maintaining civil registration and vital statistics during the COVID-19 pandemic", 9 April 2020.

³⁸ Jeff Montgomery, "COVID-19 and CRVS in New Zealand: the show must go on", in *Compendium of Good Practices: Harnessing Civil Registration and Vital Statistics (CRVS) Systems in Conflict, Emergencies, and Fragile Settings* (Ottawa, Centre of Excellence for Civil Registration and Vital Statistics Systems, 2021).

³⁹ Matthew Kelly, Gloria Mathenge and Chalapati Rao, "Lessons learnt and pathways forward for national civil registration and vital statistics systems after the COVID-19 pandemic".

⁴⁰ An overview of the status of digitalization of civil registration and vital statistics systems in South-East Asia can be found in the forthcoming compendium based on discussions held during the first meeting of the South-East Asian Civil Registrars Network, held in Manila from 7 to 9 February 2023.

by a single individual. Similarly, the level of infrastructure support varies greatly, affecting both the operability and sustainability of these systems.⁴¹

54. The vulnerability of registration archives is also a concern. As an example, while most Pacific countries have established some kind of digital civil registry, many are still struggling with the backlog of old records yet to be digitized.⁴² Paper-based archives have in the past been completely destroyed or damaged in natural disasters. For example, as a result of the tsunami that hit Sri Lanka on 26 December 2004, not only did many of the survivors lose their legal documents, many also faced difficulties in gaining access to the services provided by the Government exactly for the purpose of helping them.⁴³

V. Issues for consideration by the Commission

55. The present document has shown the importance of data to address climate change and stressed the current and augmented future role and importance of well-functioning civil registration and vital statistics systems for effective climate change action. The Commission may wish to reaffirm its commitment to ensuring that all people in Asia and the Pacific can benefit from universal and responsive civil registration and vital statistics systems, facilitating the realization of their rights and supporting good governance, health and development. It may further wish to stress the need to accelerate efforts to support resilient civil registration and vital statistics systems. As the impacts of climate change are expected to increase in Asia and the Pacific, additional attention to ensuring the achievement of this shared vision becomes ever more urgent.

⁴¹ Report of the Pacific Civil Registrars Network on its disaster preparation and response workshop.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Plan International, *Birth Registration in Emergencies: A Review of Best Practices in Humanitarian Action* (2014).