

**Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific**Second Ministerial Conference on Civil Registration and
Vital Statistics in Asia and the PacificBangkok and online, 16–19 November 2021
Items 2 and 10 of the provisional agenda***Review of the progress and existing challenges in accelerating
the implementation of the Regional Action Framework on Civil
Registration and Vital Statistics in Asia and the Pacific****Towards a shared vision of universal and responsive civil
registration and vital statistics systems that facilitate the
realization of rights and support good governance, health and
development****Summary of Getting Every One in the Picture: A Snapshot of
Progress Midway through the Asia and Pacific Civil
Registration and Vital Statistics Decade****Note by the secretariat***Summary*

The present document summarizes the publication entitled *Getting Every One in the Picture: A Snapshot of Progress Midway through the Asia and Pacific Civil Registration and Vital Statistics Decade*, which was launched on 28 June 2021. The publication includes a more detailed account of progress in the region as well as countries' success stories, which could be replicated by other countries in the region.

The present document contains an overview of the progress countries have made towards the three goals of the Regional Action Framework on Civil Registration and Vital Statistics in Asia and the Pacific. The goals (universal civil registration, provision of legal documentation and production of vital statistics from civil registration) are supported by 15 nationally set targets as well as 8 implementation steps. In review of the progress made in the first half of the Asia and Pacific Civil Registration and Vital Statistics Decade (2015–2024), the document contains highlights of areas of success and areas requiring sustained efforts to achieve the shared vision that all people in Asia and the Pacific will benefit from universal and responsive civil registration and vital statistics systems by 2024, facilitating the realization of their rights and supporting good governance, health and development.

The Second Ministerial Conference on Civil Registration and Vital Statistics in Asia and the Pacific may wish to provide further information on national progress towards the shared 2024 vision. The Conference may also wish to discuss challenges ahead and identify common solutions to address them as well as consider the areas of action for the second half of the Decade outlined in section IV of the present document. Finally, the Conference may wish to renew its commitment to the shared vision of the Decade and provide guidance on how to accelerate progress towards this vision.

* ESCAP/MCCRVS/2021/L.1.

I. Background

1. Civil registration is closely connected to a person's legal identity. Birth registration provides an official and permanent recognition of a child's existence. Later in life, the proof of legal identity provided by the official birth certificate enables individuals to exercise their rights and access services. At the end of life, the death certificate represents a final and permanent record of the fact of death, which next of kin need to manage the legal and financial consequences of death. Registration records should also be an essential source of data for vital statistics on births and deaths, including on causes of deaths, as well as fetal deaths, marriages and divorces. These statistics are critical to design, implement and monitor public policies and to monitor progress on the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

2. There is a strong commitment to civil registration and vital statistics in Asia and the Pacific as shown by the Ministerial Declaration to "Get Every One in the Picture" in Asia and the Pacific, adopted by the First Ministerial Conference on Civil Registration and Vital Statistics in Asia and the Pacific, in 2014. In the Ministerial Declaration, Governments proclaimed the Asia and Pacific Civil Registration and Vital Statistics Decade (2015–2024). The Decade gives a clear timeframe for realizing their shared vision that all people in the region will benefit from universal and responsive civil registration and vital statistics systems to facilitate the realization of their rights and support good governance, health and development. They also endorsed the Regional Action Framework on Civil Registration and Vital Statistics in Asia and the Pacific to accelerate and focus efforts to achieve the shared vision.

3. Acting on commitments made at the First Ministerial Conference, Governments started implementing the Regional Action Framework. Forty-one members and associate members of the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) set national targets to be achieved by 2024. Most members and associate members of ESCAP established ambitious targets for improvements throughout the Decade. By themselves or with support from development partners and donors, they have since worked to strengthen different aspects of their civil registration and vital statistics systems, from improving birth registration processes to ensuring causes of death are assigned in compliance with international guidelines and standards.

4. The region has reached the midpoint of the Decade (see table below) and as agreed in the Regional Action Framework, this is the moment to review progress made since the beginning of the Decade and identify remaining barriers to achieving the shared vision. For this purpose, a questionnaire was prepared by the Regional Steering Group for Civil Registration and Vital Statistics in Asia and the Pacific and sent to all members and associate members. In all, 46 countries responded to the questionnaire on their progress towards the targets of the Regional Action Framework and the implementation steps conducted. Responses to this questionnaire were used as a basis for the publication entitled *Getting Every One in the Picture: A Snapshot of Progress Midway through the Asia and Pacific Civil Registration and Vital Statistics Decade*,¹ which is summarized in the present document.

¹ United Nations publication, 2021.

Timeline of the Asia and Pacific Civil Registration and Vital Statistics Decade (2015–2024)

<i>Year</i>	<i>Activity</i>
2014	First Ministerial Conference on Civil Registration and Vital Statistics in Asia and the Pacific
2015	Members and associate members submit baseline report to the secretariat
2016	Regional baseline analysis
2020	Members and associate members submit midterm report to the secretariat
2021	Regional midterm analysis (present report)
2021	Second Ministerial Conference on Civil Registration and Vital Statistics in Asia and the Pacific to conduct the midterm regional review
2024	Members and associate members submit final report to the secretariat
2025	Final regional review conducted

Source: Getting Every One in the Picture.

II. Progress towards the targets of the Regional Action Framework on Civil Registration and Vital Statistics in Asia and the Pacific

5. A series of specific targets that countries are expected to set and achieve by 2024 are associated with each of the three goals of the Decade (universal civil registration, provision of legal documentation and production of vital statistics from civil registration). The targets of the Regional Action Framework represent the range covered by civil registration and vital statistics and the priorities countries identified in 2014. Targets were endorsed on birth registration and the issuance of a birth certificate; death registration and the issuance of a death certificate; the recording of causes of death and the quality of the information collected; and the use of this information for vital statistics.

6. The targets are designed to enable monitoring and evaluation in ways that are objective, efficient, technically sound and time-bound during the Decade. National targets should respond to the national situation, ambition and capacity, including the resources dedicated to improving civil registration and vital statistics systems. They should reflect the consensus in the country with regards to its objectives for 2024 and be approved by all national stakeholders. As a result, targets for 2024 vary across countries.

7. Figure I shows the action status for key targets of the Regional Action Framework for the region as a whole. It indicates a contrasting picture of achievements and needs across targets. As reflected by targets 1.A and 1.B on birth registration, an increasing number of births are registered in the region. Furthermore, when a birth is registered, a birth certificate is issued free of charge in most countries. The situation is similar for death registration. However, as sadly revealed by the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) crisis, information on the cause of death remains limited in many parts of Asia and the Pacific. This is mostly due to the fact that many deaths take place outside health facilities or without the

attention of a medical practitioner. Even for deaths that have a medically certified cause of death, as monitored by target 1.E, the quality of the information on the certificate is often not sufficient to provide insights on cause of death and remains to be improved in many countries. Finally, targets on vital statistics, which are dependent on improvements in civil registration, all require action. Even “actioned” targets may require efforts in some countries which were not able to provide data for them.

Figure I
Status of action for key targets of the Regional Action Framework for the region as a whole at the midterm of the Asia and Pacific Civil Registration and Vital Statistics Decade (2015–2024)

Areas	Actioned	Being actioned	Need for action
Birth registration	2.A	1.A 1.B	
Death registration	2.B	1.D	
Causes of death recording	1.E		3.D
Vital statistics			3.F 3.G 3.H

Targets:

1.A: Birth registration within 1 year

1.B: Birth registration for children under five

2.A: Issuance of birth certificates

1.D: Death registration within 1 year

2.B: Issuance of death certificates

1.E: Recording of causes of death by the health sector

3.D: Reduction of ill-defined causes of death codes

3.F: Publication of births and deaths statistics

3.G: Publication of causes of death statistics

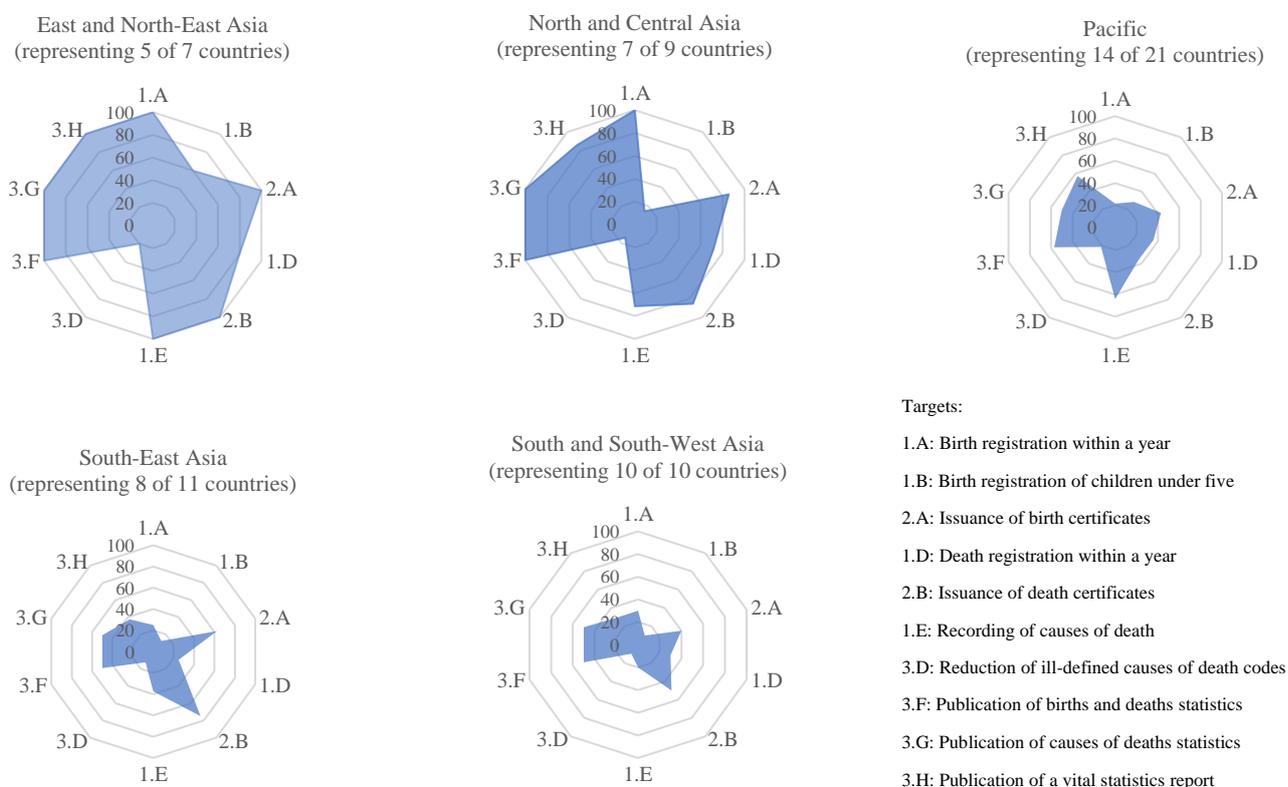
3.H: Publication of a vital statistics report

Source: Getting Every One in the Picture.

Note: Although the Regional Action Framework contains 15 targets, in order to summarize the information and because data are incomplete for some of the targets, only 10 of them are presented here. The status of action for each target is classified based on trends in country reporting data between the baseline and midterm years as follows: if fewer than 1 in 10 countries showed stagnation or regression, the target was considered “actioned”. If fewer than 1 in 3 countries were in the same situation, it was considered “being actioned” and if more than 1 in 3, it was considered “need for action”.

8. Looking at civil registration and vital statistics systems across different subregions, the level of development varies greatly in Asia and the Pacific. The bird’s eye view of civil registration and vital statistics displayed in figure II highlights major differences in the achievements of the targets of the Regional Action Framework in the five Asia-Pacific subregions. Most countries in East and North-East Asia and North and Central Asia benefit from well-functioning civil registration and vital statistics systems as almost all births and deaths are registered, and registration records are used for vital statistics. The situation in the Pacific, South-East Asia, and South and South-West Asia is vastly different, where many countries have weaker systems and progress is still needed to achieve the vision of universal and responsive civil registration and vital statistics systems by the end of the Decade.

Figure II
Proportion of reporting countries having achieved key targets of the Regional Action Framework, by subregion

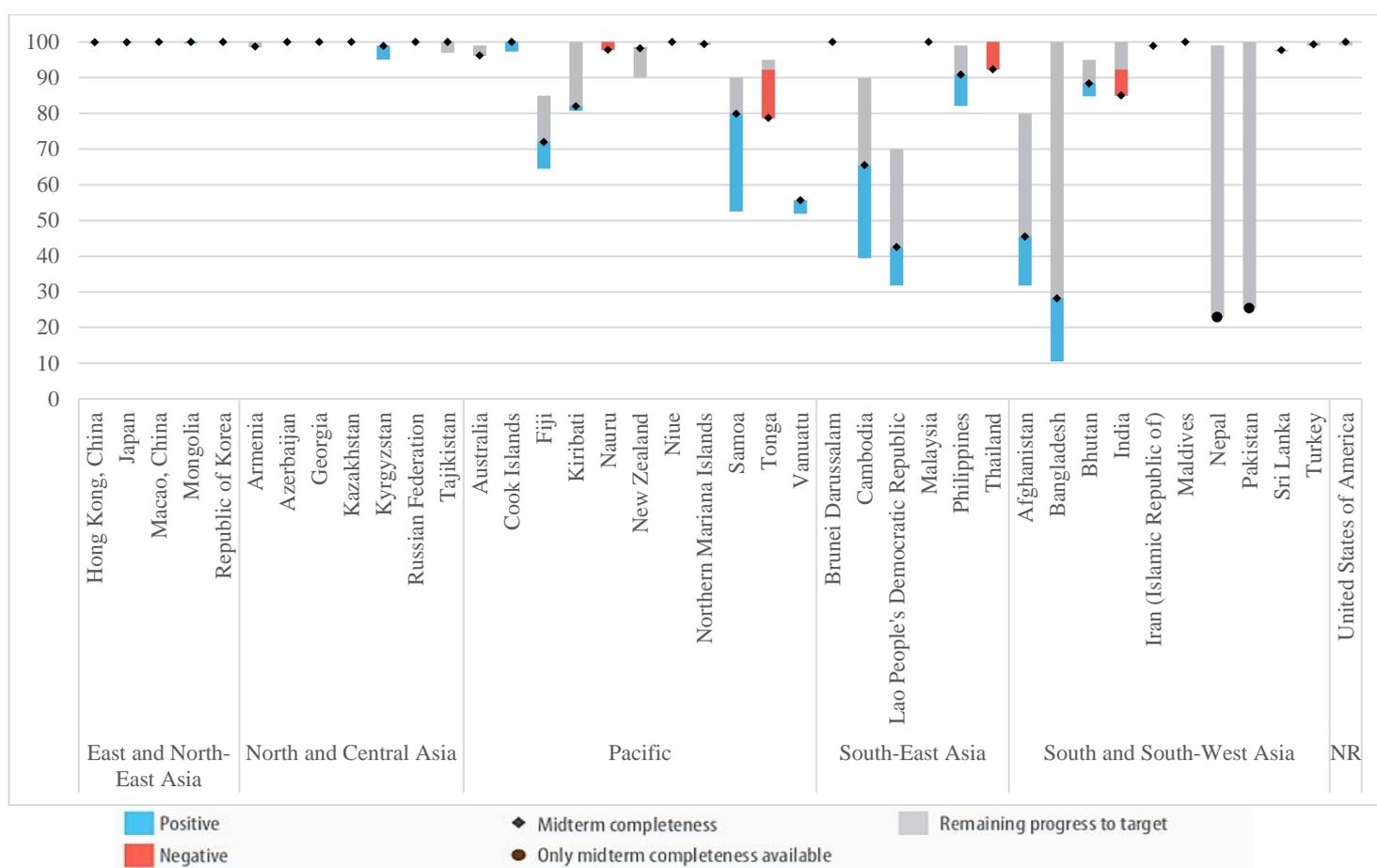


Source: Getting Every One in the Picture.

Note: Although the Regional Action Framework contains 15 targets, in order to summarize the information and because data are incomplete for some targets, only 10 targets are presented here. Non-regional member States are not included in this figure. For more information on the subregional groupings, see annex III to *Getting Every One in the Picture*.

9. There are some encouraging trends in the region. First, the percentage of births registered, also called birth registration completeness, is rapidly increasing in countries which had low birth registration completeness at the beginning of the Decade. As can be seen in figure III, this is true for all subregions. For example, from 2014 to 2018, birth registration completeness increased from 40 to 66 per cent in Cambodia. In other countries, such as Afghanistan and Fiji, significant progress was also made in the same period, increasing from 32 to 46 per cent and 64 to 72 per cent, respectively. These countries are closing the gap between them and the 26 countries that are already registering more than 90 per cent of their births.

Figure III
Birth registration completeness: progress towards target 1.A



Source: *Getting Every One in the Picture*.

Note: Birth registration completeness depends on the accuracy of the estimated number of births, which may vary. The figures should therefore be interpreted with caution and be understood as a general indicator of the situation rather than an exact representation of reality. For more information on the calculation of birth registration completeness, see *Getting Every One in the Picture*.

Abbreviation: NR, non-regional.

10. As a result, the number of children under 5 years old in Asia and the Pacific whose birth was never registered decreased from 135 million in 2012 to 64 million in 2019.² Of the 64 million unregistered children in the region, approximately 50 million of them live in South and South-West Asia, where they represent 27 per cent of all children under 5. The Pacific subregion has the highest percentage of children under 5 not registered (30 per cent). Nevertheless, due to the intrinsic difficulty of estimating the number of births, and thus the percentage of births registered, even for countries with high birth registration completeness, it is not clear if they have truly achieved universal birth registration.

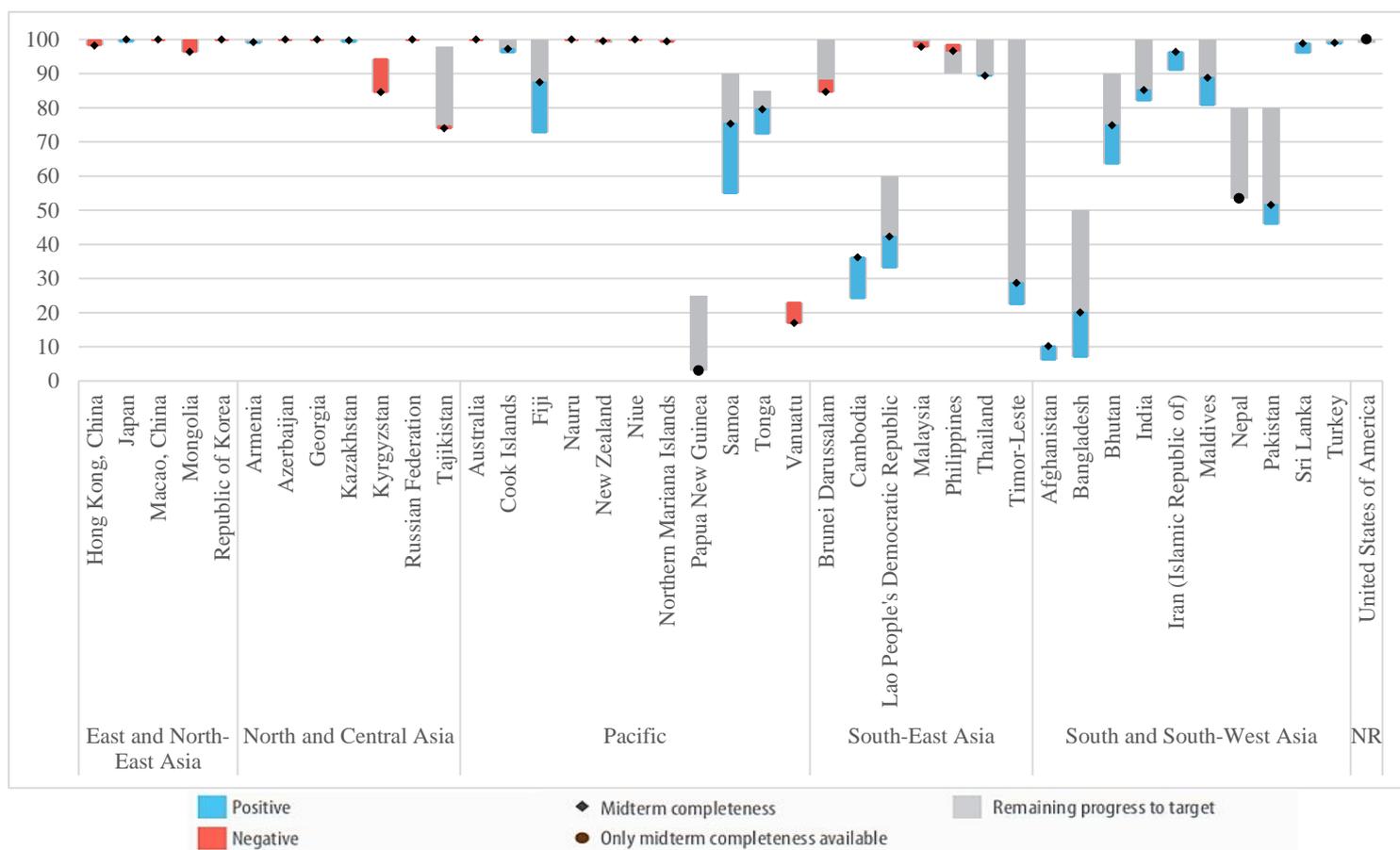
11. The registration of deaths follows the same encouraging trend as the registration of births, with countries from the Pacific, South-East Asia, and South and South-West Asia that had low death registration completeness at the beginning of the Decade catching up, as can be seen in figure IV. For example, from 2014 to 2018, in Fiji, the percentage of deaths registered improved from 73 to 88 per cent

² United Nations Children’s Fund, “Birth registration for every child by 2030: are we on track?” (New York, 2019).

while in the Lao People’s Democratic Republic that improvement was from 33 to 42 per cent. Nevertheless, in many countries, death registration remains less common than birth registration. This can be partially explained by fewer incentives to register deaths.

12. Another reason for the low completeness of death registration in the region is that many deaths take place outside of health facilities or without the attendance of a medical practitioner. These deaths are often not recorded by the health sector and thus do not have a medically certified cause of death. Moreover, six countries reported lacking legislation requiring the cause of death to be medically certified. Only a third of all deaths taking place in 33 countries in the region (those that provided data in their midterm reports) have a medically certified cause of death. For deaths without a medically certified cause, information on the cause can be partially obtained through a verbal autopsy on a sample population. Verbal autopsy involves interviewing persons familiar with the deceased to determine the likely cause of death. This is currently used by 13 countries, and more are planning to do so by the end of the Decade.³

Figure IV
Death registration completeness: progress towards target 1.D



Source: Getting Every One in the Picture.

Abbreviation: NR, non-regional.

³ See ESCAP/MCCRVs/2021/INF/2.

13. The provision of a medical certificate of cause of death alone does not mean the information available on the certificate is sufficient to accurately classify the cause of death. The lack of training for medical professionals is one reason for this. Among the countries that provided midterm reports, 17 countries did not have any regular training for doctors or coroners on medical certification of cause of death. Further, 22 countries did not provide regular training on cause of death coding (necessary to enable statistical use), and 9 of those countries did not have ad-hoc training either. Figure II shows that most countries in all the subregions have yet to achieve their targets on reducing the use of ill-defined codes for causes of death, although some have more ambitious targets than others. The implications of this are significant, as data on cause of death are key to understanding mortality in the region, including the impact of crises such as COVID-19.

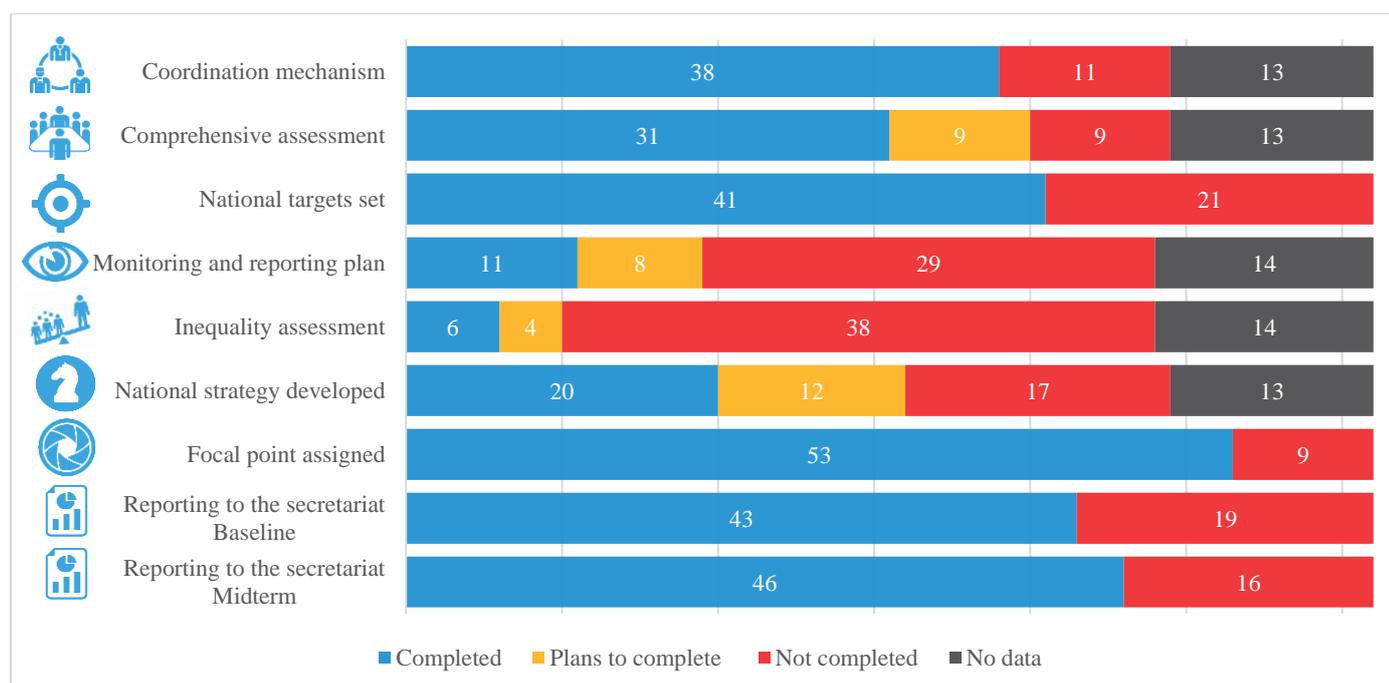
14. As civil registration improves, more countries can use it for vital statistics. In Asia and the Pacific, 32 countries reported that they already produce vital statistics based on civil registration. Still, 17 countries have yet to do so, and they are all located in South and South-West Asia, South-East Asia, and the Pacific. Also, dissemination practices have changed recently in many countries. The Regional Action Framework emphasizes annual releases of vital statistics; however, many countries are going further, releasing key vital statistics such as the number of births or deaths on a quarterly or monthly basis. This trend towards more timely releases took on new relevance during the COVID-19 pandemic, which intensified demand for almost instant information on mortality.⁴

III. Using the Regional Action Framework as a catalyst to improve civil registration and vital statistics systems

15. Progress in implementing the Regional Action Framework was shaped by the targeted efforts of all countries, ranging from institutional reforms to adequate monitoring of the performance of civil registration and vital statistics systems. The ambitious shared vision of the Decade can only be realized through a coordinated and multisectoral effort at local, national and regional levels. To achieve that vision, proactive measures, political commitment, collaboration and resources will be needed. The Regional Action Framework therefore requires members and associate members to complete a set of eight implementation steps (see figure V).

⁴ See ESCAP/MCCRVS/2021/5.

Figure V
Status of implementation steps



Source: *Getting Every One in the Picture*.

16. The implementation steps follow a logical sequence for Governments to identify areas where improvement is needed, set their objectives, monitor progress and report to the secretariat. However, the steps are not only relevant to the implementation of the Regional Action Framework but are more generally fundamental to the organization of national civil registration and vital statistics systems. They support the coordination, assessment, organization and monitoring of civil registration and vital statistics systems. They also aim to ensure inclusive and sustainable processes and outcomes.

17. Four implementation steps are particularly important to the improvement of civil registration and vital statistics systems and the achievement of the shared goal of universal and responsive civil registration and vital statistics systems: the establishment of a coordination mechanism; the comprehensive assessment of civil registration and vital statistics; the assessment of inequalities experienced by population subgroups related to civil registration and vital statistics; and the development of a national strategy for civil registration and vital statistics.

18. Civil registration and vital statistics are cross-cutting by nature, involving a wide variety of ministries and agencies at the national, provincial and municipal levels. This diversity of institutions requires a clear division of responsibilities and effective coordination to ensure a cohesive, inclusive and effective system. A national coordination mechanism can oversee the entire system and facilitate the provision of technical assistance by national stakeholders or development partners. It can guide efforts towards areas needing the most support and secure the participation of all relevant stakeholders, while ensuring activities do not overlap to maximize their impact. Thirty-eight countries in the region reported having a national coordination mechanism, showing its importance for the functioning of civil registration and vital statistics systems. Fifteen of those coordination mechanisms have been established since the beginning of the Decade or as recently as 2019 in Indonesia and Nauru. The improvement of national coordination is therefore one of the main successes of the regional initiative.

19. Conducting a standards-based comprehensive assessment of civil registration and vital statistics enables the identification of gaps and issues. The assessment usually covers the system's legal framework, the completeness and coverage of civil registration, registration practices, practices for coding causes of death, and the quality of data produced. It is therefore a crucial step in the development of a strategy and should involve all relevant stakeholders through the national coordination mechanism. As shown in figure V, 31 countries reported having conducted at least one comprehensive assessment, while 18 confirmed not having conducted any. Although most countries completed this implementation step before the Decade, 11 did so after its inception. Nine more countries plan to conduct an assessment before 2025. In addition, other countries plan to undertake a second assessment in the coming years, which only Fiji has done so far. Many of the countries which have not conducted a comprehensive assessment are high-income countries that reported high civil registration completeness and the use of registration records for vital statistics. A comprehensive assessment therefore might not be necessary for them. Nevertheless, they may wish to assess quality issues and experiences related to civil registration and vital statistics by specific population subgroups.

20. While the percentage of registered births and deaths in the region is rising year after year, most countries have yet to reach universal civil registration. One obstacle is the lack of information about the experience of the most marginalized and hard to reach members of society vis-à-vis civil registration and vital statistics. Assessing inequalities related to civil registration and vital statistics experienced by different subgroups of the population, including among people living in rural, remote, isolated or border areas and minorities, indigenous people, migrants, non-citizens, asylum seekers, refugees, stateless people and people without documentation is therefore a key step to understanding barriers to registration and developing a plan to overcome them. Few countries have conducted an inequality assessment, yet it is an agreed step in the implementation of the Regional Action Framework. It is also critical to fulfil the promise at the core of the 2030 Agenda to leave no one behind.⁵ Ensuring all vital events are registered is also fundamental in the fight for gender equality; one example of this is its role in preventing child marriage.⁶

21. A comprehensive multisectoral national civil registration and vital statistics strategy with a plan of work with clear delineation of responsibilities and backed by a detailed budget with adequate resources is paramount to addressing gaps identified by comprehensive and inequality assessments. The strategy should also reflect the principle of a stepwise approach, focusing on feasible and sustainable improvements. Through a common strategy, improvements to the civil registration and vital statistics system are implemented collaboratively, ultimately benefiting all stakeholders. Asia and the Pacific has seen an increase in the development of multisectoral civil registration and vital statistics strategies. In all, 19 countries have developed a strategy since 2013, of which 15 countries developed one since the beginning of the Decade. The civil registration offices or the ministries under which they operate are responsible for coordinating and overseeing the implementation of the strategy in most countries. This responsibility is often aligned with chairing the national coordination mechanism. In 17 countries, other stakeholders were involved in the development of the strategy through the national coordination mechanism. As presented through success stories in the full report,⁷ many countries have implemented the implementation steps and adapted them to

⁵ See ESCAP/MCCRVS/2021/4.

⁶ See ESCAP/MCCRVS/2021/6.

⁷ *Getting Every One in the Picture*.

their national context, setting solid foundations in the pursuit of universal registration.

IV. Areas of action for the second half of the Decade

22. Recognition of the importance of universal and responsive civil registration and vital statistics systems has increased since the beginning of the Decade. In the 2030 Agenda, launched after the declaration of the Decade, civil registration is acknowledged as a basis for legal identity and that good quality vital statistics are required to monitor progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals. Multiple countries have begun to implement identity management systems, often founded on civil registration. In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic underlined the need for accurate, complete and timely vital statistics, including on causes of death, for which civil registration is recognized as the best source. By progressing towards the three goals of the Regional Action Framework, that is universal registration, the provision of legal documentation from civil registration and the production of vital statistics based on civil registration, countries are also supporting their implementation of the 2030 Agenda, facilitating the implementation of identity management systems and preparing to monitor and respond to future pandemics.

23. As shown in the present document, countries have, to a large degree, taken advantage of the Decade and the momentum created around civil registration and vital statistics to strengthen their systems. Following recommendations in the Regional Action Framework and with the support of development partners, they have implemented key steps for improvement. Most importantly, an increasing number of countries are addressing civil registration and vital statistics issues in a coordinated and multisectoral manner rather than through ad-hoc, siloed activities. This is a testimony to increased national leadership and political commitment facilitating action at the local, provincial, national and international levels by enabling multiple stakeholders to align and prioritize their efforts, as well as monitor progress towards achieving shared results.

24. Thanks to these efforts, the region has made tremendous progress with respect to the three goals of the Regional Action Framework. The birth and death registration gaps in the region are closing, and countries that had low birth and death registration completeness at the beginning of the Decade are rapidly improving. Moreover, the use of civil registration records for vital statistics is continuously being enhanced to respond to the needs of users, as proven during the COVID-19 pandemic. Nevertheless, this midterm assessment of progress also highlighted areas in need of further action, including some areas that are relevant to a few countries only and others that are more widely relevant.

25. Although its time frame goes beyond the Decade, the 2030 Agenda includes a target to strengthen national statistical systems, specifically by achieving the registration of 100 per cent of births and 80 per cent of deaths by 2030.⁸ Moreover, in the 2030 Agenda, there is a strong emphasis on leaving no one behind. In terms of civil registration, that means that all vital events should be registered. To ensure everyone is in the picture, it is critical that countries conduct assessments of the inequalities related to civil registration and vital statistics experienced by subgroups of the population, including hard-to-reach and marginalized populations. Though the assessment of inequalities is an implementation step of the Regional Action Framework, it has been completed by only a few countries so far. Assessing inequalities, therefore, needs to be prioritized in the second half of the Decade if countries wish to ensure they achieve goal 1 of the Regional Action

⁸ See General Assembly resolution 71/313.

Framework and fulfil the pledge set out in the 2030 Agenda of leaving no one behind.

26. An increasing number of Governments are implementing identity management systems to improve the delivery of governmental programmes to the population and facilitate access to services such as banking. The provision of legal identity is included in the Sustainable Development Goals, with target 16.9 on legal identity for all, including birth registration, by 2030. To support the achievement of this target, the United Nations Legal Identity Agenda was launched in 2019. It defines civil registration as the basis for legal identity.⁹ Goal 2 of the Regional Action Framework, providing all individuals with legal documentation of civil registration, is therefore all the more relevant for countries moving towards implementing identity management systems founded on civil registration. Indeed, identity management systems should be implemented in conjunction with investments in civil registration, otherwise there is a risk of further marginalizing population subgroups that are not necessarily covered by civil registration.

27. Finally, accurate, complete and timely vital statistics, including on causes of death, are crucial to monitor progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals. The COVID-19 pandemic has further underlined the importance of vital statistics for evidence-based policymaking. Civil registration, unlike other systems conferring identity documents, can provide data on vital events, including causes of death. Nonetheless, to this day there are still at least 17 countries in the region that do not use registration records to produce vital statistics, including on causes of death. Further, for cause of death statistics, even when countries are able to produce them, a low proportion of deaths have a medical certificate of cause of death, and the information provided or the coding practices applied are of poor quality. The use of verbal autopsy in the region helps alleviate this issue by providing a temporary solution to the lack of information on causes of death. More efforts are needed to improve the recording of causes of death and to harness registration records for statistics to provide timely vital and accurate statistics on causes of death by the end of the Decade in the region. This will facilitate the monitoring of progress on the Sustainable Development Goals and of future health crises. Increasing the involvement of the health sector in civil registration and vital statistics systems will be one of the necessary steps for countries to achieve this.

V. Issues for consideration

28. The Second Ministerial Conference on Civil Registration and Vital Statistics in Asia and the Pacific may wish to take note of the present document and provide further information on national progress towards the shared vision that, by 2024, everyone in Asia and the Pacific will benefit from universal and responsive civil registration and vital statistics systems that facilitate the realization of rights and support good governance, health and development.

29. The Ministerial Conference may also wish to discuss challenges ahead and identify common solutions to address them, as well as consider the areas of action for the second half of the Decade as outlined in section IV of the present document.

30. Finally, the Ministerial Conference may wish to renew its commitment to the shared vision of the Decade and provide guidance on how to accelerate progress towards this vision.

⁹ See ESCAP/MCCRVS/2021/7.