**Summary**

The present document provides an overview of how civil registration and vital statistics in Asia and the Pacific are related to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and serves to highlight how progress in civil registration and vital statistics can accelerate progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals and the pledge to leave no one behind.

Progress in the implementation of the Regional Action Framework on Civil Registration and Vital Statistics in Asia and the Pacific is assessed through a development agenda lens, in particular the need to address disparities in civil registration coverage of hard-to-reach and marginalized populations, including people living in rural, remote, isolated or border areas, minorities, indigenous people, migrants, non-citizens, asylum seekers, refugees, stateless people, people without documentation and people with disabilities. In this regard, the results of the midterm review of the Asia and Pacific Civil Registration and Vital Statistics Decade (2015–2024) are examined, including registration completeness and inequality assessments, with recommendations for the way forward in the second half of the Decade.

The present document also serves to build on the findings of a series of expert group meetings on inequality assessments for civil registration and vital statistics systems in Asia and the Pacific held in early 2021. Good examples of engagement with hard-to-reach and marginalized groups are highlighted. The possible roles of non-governmental and civil society organizations are discussed to identify areas where additional progress can be made to reach these populations and make sure their voices are heard. Additionally, progress in supporting inequality assessments and providing guidance is presented.
The Second Ministerial Conference on Civil Registration and Vital Statistics in Asia and the Pacific may wish to take note of the documents and highlight the linkages between sustainable development and well-functioning civil registration and vital statistics systems, in particular to ensure that everyone realizes his or her right to a legal identity and is included in official statistics. The Conference may also wish to provide the secretariat and development partners with guidance and advice on how to accelerate inequality assessments for civil registration and vital statistics systems in Asia and the Pacific. The Conference may further wish to share experiences and discuss areas of efforts to continue addressing inequalities during the second half of the Asia and Pacific Civil Registration and Vital Statistics Decade.

I. Introduction and background

1. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development gives impetus to efforts to consolidate and accelerate development in civil registration and vital statistics systems. Similarly, civil registration and vital statistics can accelerate progress towards implementing the 2030 Agenda. According to the Asia and the Pacific SDG Progress Report 2020, the region is not on track to achieve any of the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030. More needs to be done to accelerate progress, and civil registration and vital statistics could be a catalyst to shift the current trajectory.

2. Civil registration and vital statistics have mutually reinforcing components which are critical to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals. First, strengthening civil registration and vital statistics systems in and of itself is part of several targets of the Sustainable Development Goals: target 16.9, to provide a legal identity for all, including birth registration; target 17.18, to increase the availability of high-quality, timely and reliable disaggregated data; and target 17.19, to build statistical capacity. Second, civil registration and vital statistics are an essential source of data to assess progress towards many targets and indicators of the Sustainable Development Goals, both directly and indirectly, by providing more reliable and timely population estimates, including with the necessary disaggregation. Lastly, well-functioning civil registration can be a backbone for service delivery, thereby supporting a multitude of targets, including targets of Goal 3 (Good health and well-being), Goal 4 (Quality education) and Goal 5 (Gender equality). A well-functioning civil registration and vital statistics system can also support the effective implementation of social protection and thus contribute to the achievement of Goal 1 (No poverty) because providing proof of legal identity is often the first step towards receiving any state support.

3. A proof of legal identity is crucial for every individual. Legal identity has an intrinsic value under human rights law. In addition, the 2030 Agenda includes the pledge to leave no one behind. Legal identity has a critical role in upholding this pledge, and thus it must be inclusive of all people. It is instrumental to achieving many of the other Sustainable Development Goals because it helps to unlock equal access to social protection systems and economic empowerment.

4. If certain population groups are born and die without any legal record or official statistics then they are further marginalized owing to the lack of any legal identity and to their invisibility in data for policies and programmes. Even

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2 See ESCAP/MCCRVS/2021/7.
worse, they are uncountable and thus uncounted, which means progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals cannot be assessed for them. This is relevant not just to those indicators for which data from civil registration and vital statistics are directly used but to any statistics requiring a population breakdown, and even more so if any kind of demographic or geographic disaggregation is needed.

5. The coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic has brought into sharp focus the dual and interlocked issues of legal identity and reliable and timely data. First, having a legal identity could prove critical for access to prevention or treatment for many individuals. Marginalized and vulnerable populations often face the most obstacles to establishing their legal identity and gaining access to public health care and vaccinations. In many countries, a proof of legal identity is also a requirement for access to social protection services, including financial and material support in the context of national COVID-19 response programmes, resulting in the further exclusion of already marginalized population groups. Second, many people in low-income countries will die without their cause of death being recorded correctly or their death even being registered. Thus, the precise degree of severity of the pandemic will never be truly understood by those who have been left behind. The situation is even more acute given how susceptible these populations can be to COVID-19 owing to overcrowded housing conditions, poor sanitation, inadequate health-care systems and food insecurity. Moreover, decision makers will not know the extent to which hard-to-reach and marginalized populations have been impacted by the crisis to ensure that they are not left further behind.

6. Consideration of experience from past crises beyond COVID-19 reveals the importance of proof of legal identity, appropriate documents, disaggregated data and statistics during any disaster, as highlighted in the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015–2030. Individuals need documents to prove who they are and register for other identity documents, such as national identity cards, which are often needed during disasters to gain access to support. The granular data provided from civil registration and vital statistics systems can be critical in response and recovery efforts.

II. Civil registration and vital statistics and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

7. Strengthening civil registration and vital statistics systems in and of itself is part of Sustainable Development Goal 16 (Peace, justice and strong institutions). Moreover, civil registration and vital statistics systems are the best – and sometimes indispensable – source of data to monitor and guide health policy and to assess progress towards numerous targets and indicators of the Sustainable Development Goals. They also provide the necessary documentation and proof of legal identity for service access and are critical for disaster preparedness and response, as well as conflict management. A critical part of disaster risk management 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. Some

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3 General Assembly resolution 69/283, annex II.
Asia-Pacific countries now have state-of-the-art disaster information management systems, but others have major gaps in data and analysis.\(^5\) As an example, in 2017, the entire population of the island of Ambae in Vanuatu had to be relocated owing to volcanic activity. The evacuation required reliable information about the individuals concerned, and the register of evacuees was cross-referenced with the civil registry.\(^6\) In addition, when conflicts occur, preserving civil registers and registration as an essential service becomes even more important. In cases of displacement, whether due to conflict or disaster, functioning civil registers and proof of legal identity are all the more necessary to facilitate the provision of protection and services, both in the home country and abroad, and to help to prevent statelessness and undocumented status. The protection of civil registers during disasters and conflicts and the protection of the ability of refugees, asylum seekers and other displaced populations to register their vital events in countries of asylum or the locations where they are displaced are essential to facilitate post-disaster or conflict recovery.

8. The fundamental principles behind civil registration and vital statistics are consistent with those of the Sustainable Development Goals, including the objectives to support good governance and promote inclusion. Investments aimed at improving countries’ civil registration and vital statistics systems constitute a meaningful step towards achieving inclusive and sustainable development globally.

A. **Sustainable Development Goal 16 (Peace, justice and strong institutions)**

9. Sustainable Development Goal 16 calls for the promotion of peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, the provision of access to justice for all and the building of effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels. Target 16.9 is focused on providing legal identity for all, including birth registration, by 2030. The indicator for measuring the target is the proportion of children under 5 years of age whose births have been registered with a civil authority.

10. Sustainable Development Goal target 16.9 is important, as a name and nationality is every child’s right, enshrined in the Convention on the Rights of the Child and other international treaties.\(^7\) In addition, the provision of legal documentation is recognized and addressed as a global development issue. It impacts many other targets of the Sustainable Development Goals because registering children at birth is the first step towards securing their recognition before the law and safeguarding their rights. The midterm review of the Asia and Pacific Civil Registration and Vital Statistics Decade (2015–2024) showed the following breakdown of countries’ birth certificate requirements: 18 countries require it for immunization or vaccination; 36 countries require it for primary school enrolment; 39 countries require it for obtaining national identification; 35 countries require it for obtaining a passport; 23 countries require it for childbirth allowance; and 20 countries require it for access to free health care.\(^8\) As birth registration becomes more common and the need to prove

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\(^6\) Ibid.


\(^8\) 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).
legal identity becomes more pressing, the lack of birth registration becomes more impactful for affected individuals. Clearly, children deprived of birth certificates, which are the first legal proof of identity, simply because their parents cannot afford it, cannot reach it or face some other barrier to learning about and accessing registration services, will miss out on essential programmes that help to secure their most fundamental rights.

11. Children are also entitled to certain protections under the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which might be denied if there is no legal proof of age such as a birth certificate resulting from birth registration. In other words, children without birth registration, who often come from more vulnerable or marginalized communities, are even more vulnerable to violence, abuse and exploitation. For example, a child without legal proof of age is at higher risk of being forced into early marriage, sexual relations or child labour or recruitment into the armed forces before the legal age. In addition, children without proof of their age who come into contact with the justice system may be treated as adults and denied the protections accorded to children. Children who cross international borders without legal identification and children born to refugee or migrant parents face added difficulties with gaining access to protection services or being returned home safely and are particularly vulnerable to statelessness, trafficking and illegal adoption. Furthermore, a lack of legal identification makes it difficult to prosecute cases of child abuse. Research shows that in the Philippines, approximately 50 per cent of cases involving child labour or prostitution could not be prosecuted because a birth certificate was not available to prove the alleged victim was a child. Later in life and in adulthood, people may be required to provide birth certificates for basic important transactions, such as to gain access to health care, to obtain social assistance or employment in the formal sector, to buy or prove the right to inherit property, to vote and to obtain a passport or a national identification card.

12. Moreover, achieving 67 indicators of the Sustainable Development Goals related to civil registration and vital statistics greatly depends on people having access to birth, death and marriage certificates, and facilitating that access is a critical service that only civil registration and vital statistics systems can provide. In addition, proof of legal identity is of particular importance during public health emergencies; individuals need to prove who they are to access public services, often including vaccinations. The COVID-19 response relies heavily on pre-existing coverage and the accessibility of enabling infrastructure, such as inclusive and comprehensive national identification systems.

13. Global data on civil registration completeness indicate that such factors as place of residence, mother’s education level and income distribution have significant impacts on registration rates. The latest study from UNICEF on birth registration served to highlight some of those inequalities, showing that globally, children from the lowest income households are one quarter less likely to be registered than their counterparts in the highest income

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households. In South Asia, 86 per cent of children under 5 years of age in the richest households are registered, but that proportion falls to 53 per cent for the poorest households. Poorer families and rural communities are more prone to exclusion as shown by data from Demographic and Health Surveys and Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (see table).

### Percentage of children under 5 years of age whose births are reported and registered, by place of residence and wealth quintile

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Total</th>
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**Source:** United States Agency for International Development, Demographic and Health Survey programme STATcompiler database. Available at www.statcompiler.com (accessed on 1 August 2021); and United Nations Children’s Fund, Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys. Available at http://mics.unicef.org/surveys (accessed on 1 August 2021).

**Abbreviations:** DHS, Demographic and Health Survey; MICS, Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey; WMS, Welfare Monitoring Survey; MIDHS, multiple indicator demographic and health survey; SDIS, social development indicator survey; ICHNS, integrated child health and nutrition survey.

14. The data highlight that, even in countries where the majority of children are registered, inequalities still exist, and in countries with low levels of completeness the differences can be very large.

**B. Sustainable Development Goal 17 (Partnerships for the Goals)**

15. Sustainable Development Goal 17 calls for strengthening the means of implementation and revitalizing the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development, and it includes two targets which directly relate to civil registration and vital statistics systems. The first, target 17.18, is aimed at significantly increasing the availability of high-quality, timely and reliable data disaggregated by income, gender, age, race, ethnicity, migratory status, disability, geographic location and other characteristics relevant in national contexts. The second, target 17.19, includes statistical capacity-building in developing countries, and indicator 17.19.2 measures the proportion of countries that have achieved 100 per cent birth registration and 80 per cent death registration.

16. Those two targets reflect the critical importance of civil registration and vital statistics systems as sources of statistical information on populations, generated from routine data collected by local administrations on a day-to-day basis. The collection of routine data, ideally carried out as part of the existing administrative process, requires little additional funding, especially in comparison with the other key sources of population data, such as censuses and large-scale household surveys. When collected in a timely manner and stored digitally, the data can be made available almost in real time, in stark contrast to other sources of population data. Indeed, unlike the other key data sources of vital statistics, the data from civil registration and vital statistics systems permit the production of statistics on population dynamics, health and inequities in service delivery on a continuous basis for the country as a whole and for local administrative subdivisions. This provides more accurate population information as the denominator for assessing the progress of socioeconomic development plans, policies and programmes across many sectors.}

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17. Few countries in Asia and the Pacific have achieved universal birth and death registration. It is important to assess the disparities in registration to understand the utility of existing registration systems and their capacity to inform government policymaking. If registration information is skewed, then the policy recommendations based on such information would also be distorted and unlikely to provide reliable data on which to base public policies. Given existing disparities in registration among populations, the data may tend to bias government attention towards areas that are already well served. Efforts to reach people living in less affluent and more remote regions are important with regard to ensuring equity for the population, and people are further disadvantaged when they are excluded from the most basic population statistics.

C. **Sustainable Development Goal 3 (Good health and well-being)**

18. Sustainable Development Goal 3 and its associated targets seek to ensure health and well-being at every stage of life. Several indicators of Goal 3 are best measured with data from civil registration and vital statistics systems, including adolescent birth rate; maternal, neonatal and infant mortality rates; and mortality rates due to specific diseases and causes.

19. Adolescent births to women and girls under age 19 must be registered. Sustainable Development Goal indicator 3.7.2 requires disaggregated reporting of births to those under age 15 and to those aged 15–19. Because surveys of women’s reproductive history often only include women and girls aged 15 and over, it is even more vitally important that births to girls under age 15 are recorded through a civil registration and vital statistics system. While the number of such births is usually small, the severe impacts of early childbearing on both the baby and the mother require targeted policy interventions. Furthermore, the denominator for maternal, neonatal and infant mortality rates is births in the calendar year, which means that the civil registration and vital statistics system needs to accurately record births according to the date of the event for the denominator to be accurate (as well as deaths in the same time period for the numerator). Delayed or late registration of births, while still preferable to non-registration, can skew these rates and therefore must be taken into account. Indicator 3.1.2, the proportion of births attended by skilled health personnel, can be derived from civil registration and vital statistics systems. Population-based surveys are useful in countries where low rates of childbirth in medical facilities result in a diminished capacity to record births, but routine service/facility records, including civil registration and vital statistics, are the more common data source in countries where a high proportion of births occur in medical facilities and are, therefore, recorded.

20. Sustainable Development Goal target 3.2 relates to ending preventable deaths of newborns and children. Progress is measured using the neonatal mortality rate (indicator 3.2.2.) and the under-5 mortality rate (indicator 3.2.1).

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16 University of Melbourne and Bloomberg Philanthropies Data for Health Initiative, “CRVS and SDGs: a well-functioning civil registration and vital statistics system is critical in monitoring country progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals”. Available at https://getinthepicture.org/sites/default/files/resources/CRVS%20and%20SDGs.pdf.
both of which rely on civil registration and vital statistics systems as the best source of data for both the numerator and the denominator.

21. Neonatal mortality refers to deaths of live-born children in the first 28 days of life, whereas under-5 mortality refers to deaths of live-born children in the first five years of life. Both rates are measured as the number of such deaths in a given period per live births in the same period. While data on household deaths or birth histories, including deaths of children, may be collected through censuses and surveys, by far the best data source, when well functioning, is a civil registration and vital statistics system. If registration is complete and the system functions efficiently, the resulting estimates will be accurate and timely. However, many countries do not have such a system. Thus, children may be born and die without either event being recorded in the vital statistics system, rendering the very existence of such children invisible and distorting evidence for policies to address the causes of preventable child and newborn deaths. Even more worrying is the fact that the population groups most likely to be excluded from civil registration and vital statistics systems are the ones most in need of such interventions.

22. While it is necessary to achieve high levels of death registration, the characteristics of the decedent that are required for death registration are insufficient for many Sustainable Development Goal indicators that require good quality reporting on causes of death for their measurement. These include the two indicators of target 3.4, which seeks to reduce premature mortality from non-communicable diseases: indicator 3.4.1, the mortality rate from cardiovascular disease, cancer, diabetes and chronic respiratory disease; and indicator 3.4.2, the suicide mortality rate. In addition, target 3.6, to halve the number of global deaths from road traffic accidents, is measured through mortality rates resulting from road traffic accidents. Indicator 3.1.1, the maternal mortality ratio, also requires good quality and universally reported cause-of-death information for reliable and frequent reporting on maternal deaths. A functioning civil registration and vital statistics system with universal death registration and good quality medical certification and verbal autopsy (where required) is the best source of the cause-specific mortality data required to monitor such indicators.

23. For certain causes and regions, cause-of-death estimates have large uncertainty ranges. Data gaps and limitations in high-mortality regions reinforce the need for caution when interpreting global comparative cause-of-death assessments and the need for increased investment in civil registration and vital statistics systems. The use of verbal autopsy methods integrated into civil registration and vital statistics systems, as well as in sample registration systems, demographic surveillance systems and household surveys, provides some information on causes of death in populations without well-functioning cause-of-death reporting systems, but there remain considerable challenges in the validation and interpretation of such data and in the assessment of uncertainty associated with diagnoses of underlying causes of death. Very few low-income countries currently have such systems in place, and so they rely on more expensive data sources that are deficient in dimensions such as accuracy, reliability, frequency or timeliness.

24. As demonstrated, continued improvements in civil registration and vital statistics systems are necessary to enable the national measurement of progress in confronting the burden of premature death, preventable mortality and unsafe pregnancy, and to design effective policies to address emerging threats to health, such as the current COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, since the people most likely to be excluded from civil registration and vital statistics systems
are often those facing the greatest health challenges, the impetus to ensure universal registration is even greater.

D. Nuptiality and gender: Sustainable Development Goal 5 and beyond

25. Gender inequalities are more pronounced when women and girls are uncounted, and well-functioning civil registration and vital statistics systems are instrumental in allowing women and girls access to their individual rights.\(^{17}\) While the focus of civil registration and vital statistics system improvements and discourse around them has usually been on registering births and deaths, nuptiality is an important but often neglected topic which should also be recorded by a civil registration and vital statistics system. With marriage registration data, a Government can plan for and respond to relevant social changes, such as establishing benefit structures for children born outside of marriage with or without information on the father. Examining divorce events and the number of children dependent on divorced parents may support the implementation of child support decisions and childcare policies.\(^{18}\)

26. Civil registration and vital statistics are a key data source for Sustainable Development Goal target 5.3 on the elimination of all harmful practices, such as early marriage and female genital mutilation. Child, early and forced marriage is a human rights violation and a harmful practice that disproportionately affects women and girls globally, preventing them from living their lives free from all forms of violence and coercion and from realizing their human rights. Target 5.3 highlights the need for functioning civil registers and the provision of legal identity during disasters and conflicts when vulnerability is high and the need for social protection is greatest. Child marriage is often accompanied by early and frequent pregnancy and childbirth, resulting in higher-than-average rates of maternal morbidity and mortality (as measured by the health-related indicators discussed above, which further highlight the need for disaggregation by age and other characteristics related to vulnerability).

27. One of the indicators of Sustainable Development Goal target 5.3 is indicator 5.3.1, the proportion of women aged 20–24 years who were married or in a union before age 15 and before age 18. While the indicator, being retrospective, is usually captured through household surveys, civil registration and vital statistics data can provide important context on current practice and age at marriage. Additionally, many countries do not carry out household surveys with the relevant questions on age at marriage and civil registration and vital statistics can therefore provide data where none would otherwise exist.

28. A birth certificate gives children a way to prove they are under the legal age of marriage, and marriage registration helps governments to identify and prevent early marriage. For example, Bangladesh has one of the highest rates of child marriage in the world. Even though the legal age of marriage for women is 18, an estimated two thirds of girls are married before reaching that

\(^{17}\) See ESCAP/MCCRVS/2021/6 for a discussion of broader issues related to civil registration and vital statistics and gender.

age, and one third are married before the age of 15. When civil registration can be falsified or is not available, it is difficult for children to be protected by the law. This difficulty has been highlighted during the COVID-19 pandemic as parents’ growing concerns over joblessness, poverty and food scarcity, and their fear and insecurity due to the pandemic itself, led to a surge in child marriages, to which children without a legal identity and documentation of age are even more vulnerable.

29. When deaths are not registered, it can be more difficult for families to inherit or for the surviving spouse to legally remarry. In addition, if the deaths of women and girls are unregistered, governments cannot identify preventable causes of death. Conversely, death registration with accurate cause-of-death information can reveal diseases that disproportionately burden women, and that information can enable policymakers to develop targeted public health interventions.

30. Well-functioning civil registration and vital statistics systems are particularly beneficial to women and girls, both because vital statistics provide sex-disaggregated demographic data on key issues such as population distribution and on many indicators of the Sustainable Development Goals, and because civil registration facilitates easier access to crucial services, such as health care and education, as well as to political representation. Registration is particularly crucial for women who are already disadvantaged, such as single mothers, widows, migrants, refugees and members of minority ethnic or religious groups, who may already find it difficult to exercise their rights or access services.

31. The COVID-19 pandemic is having a profound impact on the everyday lives of girls and the realization of their human rights. Empirical literature and theory on the drivers of child marriage as well as anecdotal evidence from a number of countries point to an increase in the risk of child marriage in the context of the pandemic and its consequences, making civil registration and vital statistics systems all the more important.

E. Disaggregation of indicators of the Sustainable Development Goals

32. Many indicators of the Sustainable Development Goals are population based (for example, indicators that measure per capita or per 1,000 population or that require the number of live births as the denominator). To calculate population-based indicators, the total population is needed as the denominator. At the most fundamental level, civil registration and vital statistics are essential for population data as a denominator for all population-based targets and indicators of the Sustainable Development Goals. While censuses provide robust and reliable population data once every 5 or 10 years, accurate up-to-date information is needed for responsive monitoring of population-based indicators, particularly during intercensal years. It is therefore essential to be able to accurately update population data between census years through either universal registration of births and deaths or, at the very least, through

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19 See UNICEF, “Timely and accessible birth registration: all births are vital events and must be recorded”. Available at www.unicef.org/bangladesh/en/timely-and-accessible-birth-registration.


21 Samuel Mills and others, Civil Registration and Vital Statistics (CRVS) for Monitoring the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).
accurate mortality and fertility estimates derived from civil registration and vital statistics data.

33. Furthermore, the indicator framework of the 2030 Agenda is predicated on the understanding that indicators at the national level provide only a partial picture and often mask wide subnational disparities. Leaving no one behind means reaching the poorest people, women, children, older people, indigenous people, migrants, people with disabilities and other groups in vulnerable situations. If the correct disaggregations are specified for the indicators of the Sustainable Development Goals and the necessary data are collected, more resources can be prioritized to fulfil the pledge to leave no one behind. According to Sustainable Development Goals metadata, the 97 indicators which can be disaggregated require a total of 283 disaggregations, an average of three types of disaggregation per indicator. The most common are disaggregation by sex, age, income or wealth, and education, though they are not always included even when it would be appropriate to do so. Further critical types of disaggregation, such as disability, race and ethnicity, urban or rural location, employment, citizenship and indigenous status, rarely appear. However, many indicators cannot be disaggregated, and the poorly functioning civil registration and vital statistics systems in many countries are a key reason.

34. The issue of disaggregated data is also addressed in the Regional Action Framework on Civil Registration and Vital Statistics in Asia and the Pacific, in which it is stated that disaggregated data enable Governments and development partners to continuously monitor civil registration coverage and the provision of legal documentation and vital statistics among all population groups and facilitate the targeting of actions to specific groups. Therefore, when members and associate members of the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) report on progress in implementing the Regional Action Framework, they are encouraged to provide data that can be disaggregated by age, sex and geographic area or administrative subdivision, as well as by other relevant subgroups.

III. Leaving no one behind and the Regional Action Framework on Civil Registration and Vital Statistics in Asia and the Pacific

35. Often it is the poorest, most marginalized and most vulnerable populations whose births and deaths are not registered. The equity gap closes (slowly, and critical challenges still exist in Asia and the Pacific. The region has the largest mobile population in the world, as well as a large stateless population. It is also the most disaster-prone region in the world, with many minority groups and vulnerable populations residing in the most disaster-prone areas. Clearly, to leave no one behind and implement the 2030 Agenda, these populations need to be included in civil registration and vital statistics systems.

36. The Regional Action Framework serves to highlight the importance of addressing inequalities. One of its implementation steps is to assess inequalities related to civil registration and vital statistics experienced by

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23 Jaap van der Straaten, Kristen Wenz and Stephen Blight, Unequal at Birth: Disparities in Birth Registration in East Asia and the Pacific (Bangkok, UNICEF, 2015).
subgroups of the population, including among hard-to-reach and marginalized populations and particular geographic areas and administrative subdivisions, and, where appropriate, set national targets to address those inequalities. The Regional Action Framework goes on to state that geographic location, gender, religion or ethnicity should not be barriers to civil registration. Many countries experience substantially lower civil registration coverage rates among certain population groups, geographic areas and administrative subdivisions. Members and associate members of ESCAP are thus encouraged to set separate national targets, where appropriate, for civil registration coverage, provision of legal documentation and vital statistics for these subgroups, including hard-to-reach and marginalized populations. These targets should be supported by specific activities, ideally as part of a comprehensive multisectoral national civil registration and vital statistics strategy, to address inequalities related to civil registration and vital statistics that these subgroups experience.

37. An example of an attempt to include hard-to-reach groups is seen in Kiribati, which has islands scattered across the Pacific Ocean in an area larger than India, yet it has only 120,000 inhabitants. In many Pacific island States, there are far-flung islands and their remoteness makes the registration of vital events challenging, as it would require a long, expensive and sometimes perilous journey that many cannot afford to make. Therefore, mobile registration teams were deployed and have proved to be a very effective tool to register hard-to-reach populations.24 Other innovative solutions can be used to meet the needs of other populations, because no matter where they live and which population group they may belong to, everyone has a right to legal identity.

38. Further examples include Indonesia and Thailand. The Government of Indonesia has set a specific target for birth certificate ownership of children from the poorest 40 per cent of households. It has also approved a regulation that stipulates special procedures to assist subgroups of the population that are experiencing difficulties in accessing identity cards and civil registration documents, including populations affected by natural hazards, populations living in remote areas or along international borders, and abandoned children/foundlings. The Government of Thailand reformed its civil registration act in 2008 to overcome significant gaps in the civil registration completeness of various subgroups of the population and to ensure non-discriminatory access to birth registration of all children born in Thailand, regardless of the nationality or legal status of their parents.25

39. Australia has an active data improvement strategy for the registration of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. The strategy is focused on the consistency and quality of indigenous identification across jurisdictions, the sharing of strategies relating to remote community engagement with those peoples, and other initiatives that will facilitate or simplify registration for all Australians.

40. In North and Central Asia, civil society has been heavily engaged in supporting hard-to-reach and marginalized populations to obtain documentation. In 2009, it was estimated that 20,000 individuals in Kyrgyzstan were stateless, but the combination of leadership from the state registration service, proactive civil society engagement and legislative changes successfully changed this situation. As part of initiatives under the IBelong campaign, a local non-governmental organization (NGO) in Kyrgyzstan


25 Getting Every One in the Picture.
worked with the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees to proactively identify individuals without birth certificates and identity documents, and lawyers in the NGO worked with government officials to support granting documentation to these individuals. Services were provided by 68 mobile registration units, and 65,000 unregistered Kyrgyz citizens also obtained valid identity documents. This effort was instrumental in declaring Kyrgyzstan the first country to eliminate all known cases of statelessness, in 2019.26

41. In Sri Lanka, a group of children and youth growing up in care facilities have founded an NGO to advocate easier access to birth certificates for children and youth in their situation. They need a shortened version of the birth certificate that can be completed without the father’s name or the parents’ marital status. Such missing information has limited the ability of children and youth to receive a birth certificate. This practice and several others, which demonstrate the added complexity of obtaining and using birth certificates for marginalized children and youth, were highlighted during the consultation with children and youth on civil registration and vital statistics that took place in the first half of 2021. The consultation also highlighted the important role of civil society in supporting individuals in their quest for documentation and to conduct advocacy and research to improve awareness of the need for registration and the barriers to registration faced by individuals.

42. As reported in the midterm review of the Asia and Pacific Civil Registration and Vital Statistics Decade, few member States have conducted an inequality assessment, despite its being an agreed implementation step. Through an inequality assessment, member States can ensure that they are truly getting everyone in the picture to achieve universal civil registration. The findings of the review showed that only six member States had conducted an inequality assessment of civil registration and vital statistics systems, while six more planned to do so.

43. For example, in Indonesia, the Ministry of National Development Planning/National Development Planning Agency highlighted in its 2016 study that among the 34 per cent of children under 5 years of age that did not have their birth registered, 62 per cent came from the poorest families and 66 per cent lived in rural areas. Further, according to another study in Indonesia related to the Indonesia National Socioeconomic Survey 2016, 34 per cent of respondents said that the cost of registration was prohibitive. In addition, children of parents with disabilities in Indonesia are five times less likely to have a birth certificate than other children.27 As a result, the Government has set a specific target for birth certificate ownership of children from the poorest 40 per cent of households to increase from a baseline of 65 per cent coverage (based on the Indonesia National Socioeconomic Survey 2013) to reach 77.4 per cent coverage of this specific population by 2019.

44. The Regional Support Office of the Bali Process on People Smuggling, Trafficking in Persons and Related Transnational Crime, in consultation with Bali Process members, has developed a toolkit that will allow interested States to evaluate and improve how they register births, deaths and marriages that

occur in their territory among asylum seekers, refugees, people of undetermined nationality and stateless people, as part of the mainstream civil registration system. The toolkit contains an assessment methodology and relevant technical and policy guidance based on international standards, recommendations and case studies of good practice. Thus far, the toolkit has been piloted in Pakistan, Thailand and Viet Nam. The potential expansion of the toolkit to include other marginalized and vulnerable populations is currently being considered.

45. In addition, in Pakistan, a study of the current practices of civil registration and vital statistics systems for marginalized populations was conducted. The populations included poor populations consisting of widows, orphans, people with disabilities, people receiving zakat, homeless people and nomads, internally displaced people, ethnic minorities, religious minorities, transgender people and people living in hard-to-reach areas, and the study was focused on increasing the ability of government officials to assess and improve the civil registration and vital statistics system. A further study on birth registration in Pakistan found that socioeconomic inequalities, language, ethnicity and access to registration services were significant factors contributing to inequalities in the registration of children under 5 years of age. Registration of children under 5 years of age increased from 34 per cent in 2012–2013 to 42 per cent in 2017–2018, but inequalities in birth registration exist nonetheless.

IV. Expert recommendations on inequality assessments for civil registration and vital statistics systems

46. To support countries in moving towards increased implementation and higher quality of inequality assessments, ESCAP, together with partners, organized a series of webinars and expert group meetings. The series of meetings had the following aims:

(a) To assess existing tools to evaluate completeness and coverage of birth and death registration with disaggregation for use in inequality assessments for lower-capacity countries;

(b) To develop targeted guidance for countries on completeness and coverage of birth and death registration with disaggregation by subgroup, building on existing work.

47. Three areas were identified as having the potential for significant progress to support inequality assessments, namely:

(a) Qualitative assessments for civil registration and vital statistics systems;

(b) Secondary sources to assess inequality in civil registration and vital statistics systems;


(c) Indirect demographic methods for measuring completeness and coverage in inequality assessments.

48. A number of recommendations emerged from the series of meetings. At the meeting on qualitative assessments, it was agreed that the wide acceptance and support for the Bali Process toolkit among pilot countries could be largely attributed to four key principles. First, the toolkit is designed to support a country-owned process which is essential to success in implementation. Second, it is based on a comprehensive and cross-sectoral approach. Third, the toolkit is flexible and adaptable, and adaptation of the toolkit to the local context is needed. Lastly, it is a complementary toolkit that broadens civil registration efforts. It was also agreed that the toolkit and other assessment tools could be used for various excluded population groups beyond those specified in the Bali Process. It was emphasized that opportunities for immediate solutions would arise throughout the process for the continual improvement of law and policy to be responsive to the changing context, and qualitative assessments could be used for advocacy in that regard.

49. For quantitative analyses, secondary data sources, namely censuses, household surveys, administrative sources, sample registration sites and health and demographic surveillance sites, can all be exploited to facilitate cost-effective analysis of inequalities in registration. It was highlighted that care should be taken regarding groups who were excluded from secondary data sources, and targeted data collection or the changing of data collection techniques was required to ensure that those groups were included. In addition, issues around clustering, non-response bias, construct validity and ethics all needed to be taken into account when using secondary data sources. The triangulation and integration of different secondary data sources, including with civil registration and vital statistics systems themselves, was highlighted as a means of extracting the maximum benefit from the available data sources and better understanding the issues of those different data sources.

50. For indirect demographic methods, the need for standardization and guidance was highlighted and linked to the availability and quality of secondary data sources. Future work will include developing guidance for countries on using indirect methods and targeted capacity strengthening to facilitate the analysis of secondary data sources for inequality assessments.

V. Issues for consideration

51. 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 highlight the linkages between sustainable development and well-functioning civil registration and vital statistics systems and the importance of ensuring that no one is left behind and that everyone has the right to a legal identity and is included in official statistics.

52. The Ministerial Conference may also wish to advise the secretariat and development partners on how to accelerate the implementation of inequality assessments for civil registration and vital statistics systems in Asia and the Pacific.

53. The Ministerial Conference may further wish to share experiences and discuss areas for continued efforts to address inequalities during the second half of the Asia and Pacific Civil Registration and Vital Statistics Decade.