



Get every **one** in the picture: Why is civil registration so important for statistics?¹



Get
every one
in the picture

Statistics such as “135 million children under the age of five in Asia and the Pacific have not had their births registered”² or “9 out of 10 people in Asia and the Pacific live in countries with unreliable death statistics”³ make us realize that civil registration and vital statistics (CRVS) systems in Asia and the Pacific need to be improved. The

Ministerial Conference on Civil Registration and Vital Statistics in Asia and the Pacific, 24-28 November 2014, aims to increase awareness of the importance of universal civil registration and reliable vital statistics for rights, governance and better statistics, and to generate firm commitment and accountability for results from governments and development partners, through a Ministerial Declaration and a Regional Action Framework.

What are vital statistics?

Vital statistics can be defined as a “collection of statistics on vital events in a lifetime of a person as well as relevant characteristics of the events themselves and of the person and persons concerned”.⁴ Vital events, in general, concern life and death of individuals, their family and their civil status. These not only concern live births, deaths and foetal deaths, but also dual events that occur simultaneously in the lives of two individuals, such as marriage, registered partnership, separation, divorce, legal dissolution of registered partnerships and annulment of marriage, and vertical family events that involve a descendant, such as adoption, legitimation and recognition.

It is important to note that vital statistics are incidence – not prevalence – statistics, which means that they answer the question of how many vital events occurred in a population in a specific period, rather than the proportion of population with a certain condition. They can be used to estimate the size and growth of a population within a country by looking at the births and deaths over a certain period of time. Vital statistics can also help us to understand the economic and social dimensions of a population or produce development indicators. In addition, vital statistics provide the basis for ratios and indices of prevalence statistics, e.g. any statistics expressed as a percentage of the population.

And what do we need them for?

Vital statistics reveal the characteristics of a country’s population, including indicators related to demographics and mortality. Such information can make policies and interventions more effective and responsive to people’s needs by aiding the preparation of population estimates and projections, studies of mortality, fertility and nuptiality, and the construction of life tables. Vital statistics support socioeconomic planning and monitoring, through setting targets and evaluating plans and policies. Specifically they facilitate the measurement of demographic indicators, including progress towards achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), through providing the basic data required for measuring indicators of fertility and mortality; such as the total fertility rate, infant and under-five mortality rates, the maternal mortality ratio, life expectancy at birth and the crude death rate. Vital statistics will also be crucial for the measurement of the prospective Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which will most likely require higher levels of disaggregation, including detailed cause of death information for tracking progress towards mortality targets.

Furthermore, vital statistics allow the planning and evaluation of primary health care, social security, family planning, maternal and child health, nutrition, education, and public housing. The recording of deaths by cause

provides early insights into trends in disease prevalence, thus helping the design of prevention or intervention strategies. Cause of death statistics, in addition, supply policy makers with crucial information needed to understand public-health implications caused by rare diseases.

Where do we get vital statistics?

Vital statistics can be obtained from various sources, such as civil registration of vital events, population censuses and household sample surveys, sample registration areas and health records. However, the preferred source are the administrative data from civil registration records, which allow to derive accurate, complete, timely and continuous information on vital events.⁴ In some countries, where there is no functioning civil registration system, vital statistics can be compiled from a population census or household sample surveys through retrospective questions on fertility, mortality and nuptiality. Other sources of data, such as sample registration areas, may also be applied together with indirect techniques of demographic estimation. But only universal and well-functioning civil registration systems can provide detailed information over regular annual intervals and with universal coverage.

So what is civil registration then?

Civil registration is defined as “the continuous, permanent, compulsory and universal recording of the occurrence and characteristics of vital events pertaining to the population as provided through decree or regulation in accordance with the legal requirements in each country”.⁴ As such, the primary purpose of civil registration is to provide a permanent record of vital events and related legal documentation. By definition, therefore, civil registration offers a complete and timely source of vital statistics on the population in a country.

What are the other benefits of civil registration?

Civil registration systems provide legal documents for people to establish their legal identity, family relationships and civil status, thereby facilitating their participation in society. In addition, civil registration systems provide administrators with the tools and institutional underpinnings needed for efficient delivery of services, such as national identity programmes. Various analyses have identified the positive impacts of universal civil registration systems on health, survival and socio-economic development.^{5,6}

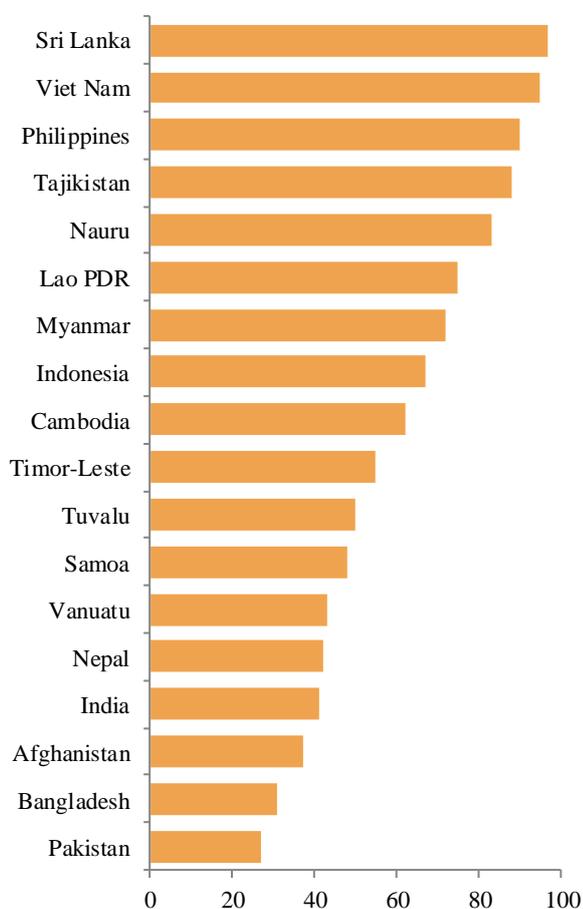
Civil registration systems can be used to construct population databases, from which statistics on wide range of topics such as migration and population distribution can be derived. Civil registration systems also facilitate, but do not in themselves guarantee, access to health care, child protection and benefits, schooling, academic and professional qualification, and employment. Registration empowers individuals, and makes the State more accountable for the provision of health, education, social protection, legal protection and other services.⁷

What is the state of civil registration and vital statistics in Asia and the Pacific?

In Asia and the Pacific there is large variation in the coverage of civil registration. Based on data provided by the United Nations Statistics Division, the coverage of birth and death registration is lowest in Nepal with 24% and 9% and Tuvalu with 26% and 9%, respectively.⁸ Moreover, birth registration coverage from household surveys shows that in Asia and the Pacific (excluding China) only 44% of children under five years of age have had their births registered, with large variation between countries (see Figure 1).² Substantial differences also exist in rates of birth registration between urban and rural areas, and between income level groups of the family. Births occurring in urban areas are more likely to be registered than those occurring in rural areas or remote islands. Birth registration rates also tend to be highest among the richest 20% (quintile) of the population.

The CRVS rapid assessment tool, developed by WHO and the University of Queensland,⁹ can be applied to provide an indication of the functionality and quality of a national civil registration and vital statistics system, classifying the system into four categories (dysfunctional, weak, functional but inadequate, and satisfactory). The self-assessment tool involves a review by country stakeholders, including government agencies responsible for registration, statistics, health and others. In Asia and the Pacific, 47 countries have completed an assessment. Eleven countries categorized their system as satisfactory, while eight reported their system to be dysfunctional, 14 as weak and 14 as functional but inadequate, as shown in Figure 2.¹⁰ Average scores tended to be lower for Pacific island countries than the countries of Asia. The biggest challenges identified by countries during these rapid assessments were in relation to data quality assurance, cause of death certification and coding, as well as data management, analysis, dissemination and use.

Figure 1 Percentage of children under five years of age whose births have been registered, selected countries in the Asia-Pacific region, 2005-2012



Data source: United Nations Children's Fund, Every Child's Birth Right: inequities and trends in birth registration, UNICEF, New York, 2013.

http://www.unicef.org/media/files/Embargoed_11_Dec_Birth_Registration_report_low_res.pdf

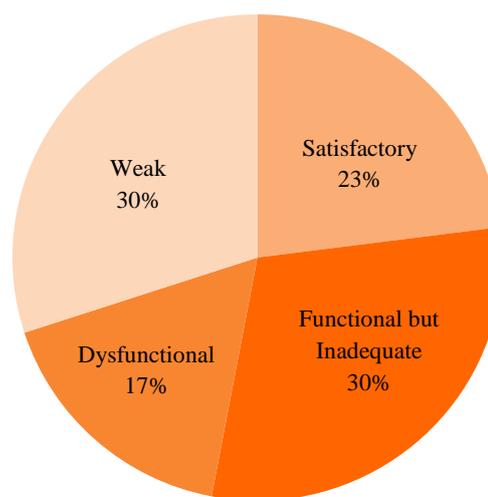
What is being done to improve civil registration and vital statistics?

The increased global demand for more reliable and timely data for the monitoring of global development goals has highlighted the need to build better civil registration systems. The global work resulted, among others, in the Commission on Information and Accountability for Women's and Children's Health calling upon countries to establish a system for registration of births, deaths and causes of death, as the most effective and efficient source of data for monitoring progress in under-five and maternal mortality.¹¹

At the regional level, the ESCAP Committee on Statistics at its first session in 2009, noting that vital statistics needed to be improved in Asia and the Pacific

countries, initiated efforts to improve CRVS systems. In 2012, the High-level Meeting on the Improvement of Civil Registration and Vital Statistics in Asia and the Pacific took place, at the request of member States pursuant to resolution 67/12,¹² and recognized that the improvement of CRVS systems needed to be brought to the ministerial level.¹³ Consequently, during 24-28 November 2014, ministers from across the Asia-Pacific region are meeting with the aim of endorsing a declaration and a regional action framework on CRVS.

Figure 2 Overall rapid assessment scores of 47 ESCAP countries, 2010-2012



Data source: Mikkelsen L (2012) Improving civil registration and vital statistics systems: Lessons learnt from the application of health information tools in Asia and the Pacific. University of Queensland Health Information Systems Knowledge Hub, Working Paper Series No. 24 2012.

The Regional Action Framework sets out a shared vision, namely that all people in Asia and the Pacific benefit from universal and responsive CRVS systems that facilitate their rights and support good governance, health and development. It also enunciates three overarching goals that reflect progress towards achievement of the vision between 2015 and 2024: (1) universal civil registration of births and deaths; (2) all individuals are provided with legal documentation of civil registration of births and deaths as necessary to claim identity, civil status and ensuing rights; and (3) accurate, complete and timely vital statistics (including on causes of death) are produced based on registration records and disseminated.

For information about ESCAP's work on statistics, please visit:

<http://www.unescap.org/our-work/statistics>

To find out more about CRVS, please visit:

<http://www.getinthepicture.org/>

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Woman Votes in Timorese Presidential Election

A woman shows her voter registration card at a polling station in Timor-Leste. Civil registration systems provide legal documents and facilitate people to participate in the society, including by enabling voting and ensuring the integrity of electoral lists.

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Endnotes

¹ Much of the text is adapted from: Abouzahr C., et al. (2014). *A development imperative: civil registration and vital statistics systems in the Asia-Pacific region*. Asia-Pacific Population Journal, vol. 29, no. 1.

² United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) (2013). *Every Child's Birth Right: inequities and trends in birth registration*. New York. Available from: http://www.unicef.org/media/files/Embargoed_11_Dec_Birth_Registration_report_low_res.pdf

³ World Health Organization (WHO) (2012), *World health statistics 2012*. Geneva. Available from: http://www.who.int/gho/publications/world_health_statistics/2012/en/

⁴ United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (2014). *Principles and Recommendations for a Vital Statistics System*, Revision 3. New York. Available from: <http://unstats.un.org/unsd/demographic/standmeth/principles/M19Rev3en.pdf>

⁵ Breckenridge K. and Szreter S., eds. (2012). *Registration and Recognition: Documenting the Person in World History*. Oxford University Press and British Academy.

⁶ Phillips D.E., et al. (forthcoming). *Are well-functioning civil registration and vital statistics systems associated with better health outcomes?* Lancet.

⁷ Harbitz M. and Boekle B. (2009). *Democratic Governance, Citizenship and Legal Identity – Linking Theoretical Discussion and Operational Reality*. Working Paper, Institutional Capacity and Finance Sector, Inter-American Development Bank. Available from:

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⁸ United Nations Statistics Division (2012), *Coverage of birth and death registration*. Available from: http://unstats.un.org/unsd/demographic/CRVS/CR_coverage.htm Accessed 20 April 2014.

⁹ World Health Organization (WHO) and University of Queensland (2010). *Rapid assessment of national civil registration and vital statistics systems*. Geneva, (WHO/IER/HSI/STM/2010.1).

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¹⁰ Mikkelsen L. (2012). *Improving civil registration and vital statistics systems: Lessons learnt from the application of health information tools in Asia and the Pacific*. Working Paper Series No. 24, Herston, Australia: Health Information Systems Knowledge Hub, University of Queensland. Available from: http://www.uq.edu.au/hishub/docs/WP24/HISHUB-WP%2024_7%2012%2012.pdf

¹¹ World Health Organization (WHO). *Accountability for women and children's health : Recommendation 7: National oversight*. Accessed 10 November 2014 at http://www.who.int/woman_child_accountability/progress_oversight/recommendation7/en/index.html

¹² United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) (2011). *The improvement of civil registration and vital statistics in Asia and the Pacific*. E/ESCAP/67/12.

¹³ United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) (2013). *Outcome of the High-level Meeting on the Improvement of Civil Registration and Vital Statistics in Asia and the Pacific*. E/ESCAP/69/15.