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DATA FOR
HEALTH INITIATIVE

STRENGTHENING CRVS SYSTEMS

Why strong CRVS systems
are good for your health

CRVS Roadmaps for Action

September 2017



Introduction

Civil registration is a process whereby major vital events occurring in a population are officially recorded. It is defined by the United Nations as “*the continuous, permanent, compulsory and universal recording of the occurrence and characteristics of vital events in a population*”, in accordance with the legal requirements of the country.

Vital events covered in a civil registration and vital statistics (CRVS) system include:

- Events that occur at the level of individuals – live birth, death and fetal death;
- Events that relate to family and civil status – marriage, registered partnership, separation, divorce, legal dissolution of registered partnership and annulment of marriage;
- Events that relate to descendants – adoption, legitimation and recognition.

Immediate benefits can be experienced by countries that invest in strong CRVS systems. For instance, strong birth and death registration systems allow individuals, families and in fact whole communities’ access rights, entitlements and benefits. These include property, business and inheritance rights, passport and identity documentation, life insurance, compensation, as well as education, health, housing, and other social welfare entitlements.

In addition to acting as a legal record, countries can use information from strengthened CRVS systems to improve population health. Information on when, where, among whom deaths occur, and *cause of death*, allows countries to identify population health (including health equity) issues that they then can prioritise and respond to through evidence-based health (and intersectoral) policy and planning efforts.

Understanding the major causes of death is especially important in countries experiencing economic disadvantage, and where strategic investment of limited resources for health really counts.

Better health outcomes are created in countries with strong CRVS systems:¹⁻³

- Real-time and accurate statistics on mortality and cause of death are essential for the ability of countries to both plan and respond to emerging health threats and epidemics;
- Birth certification enables populations to access public health insurance, medical and other allied health care services, as well as facilitates Universal Health Coverage (UHC).

Although vital statistics information can be produced from other data sources (i.e. the census, household surveys, and demographic surveillance sites), complete civil registration is advantageous over sampled data by providing continuous, timely information that is regionally and nationally representative, allowing informed local-level decision making.

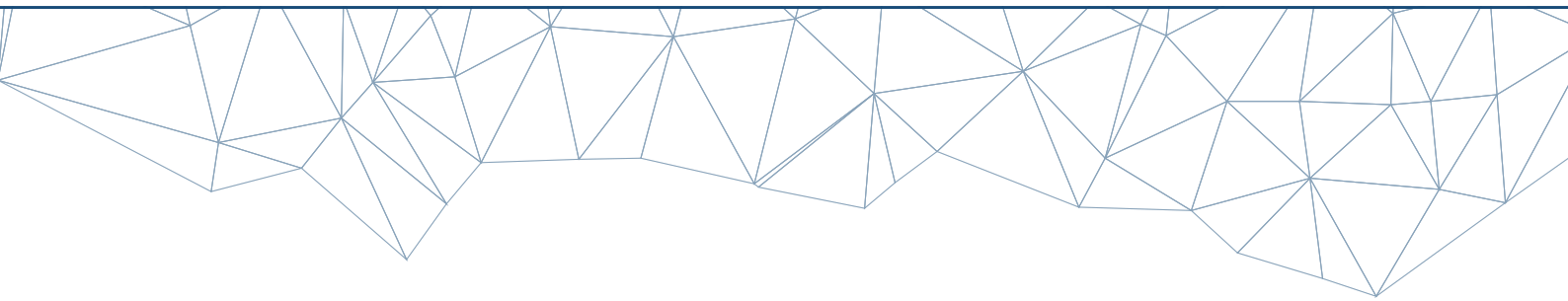
Vital statistics generated from civil registration have a number of advantages compared with other sources of vital statistics, such as the census or household surveys:

- Continually produced, as and when the events occur, thus maximising correctness;
- Available in a consistent and comparable manner over time and across geographies;
- Generated for the whole population of a country at national and lowest administrative levels.

1 Shibuya K, Boerma JT. Measuring progress towards reducing health inequalities. *Bulletin of the World Health Organization*. 2005;83:162.

2 Setel et al, on behalf of the Monitoring of Vital Events (MoVE) Writing Group. A scandal of invisibility: Making everyone count by counting everyone. *The Lancet*. 2007;370:1569-1577.

3 Lopez AD, Setel PW. Better health intelligence: a new era for civil registration and vital statistics? *BMC Medicine*. 2016;13:73.



Common roadblocks

Despite the fundamental importance of country investment in quality CRVS systems, question remains as to whether well-functioning CRVS systems are associated with improved population health outcomes. This question is unsurprising. This is in part because building or strengthening an existing CRVS system is a long-term country investment and public goods commitment. Such longer-term commitments do not meet the traditional, short-term information needs of governments and donors, or the demands of political cycles.⁴ Certainly, use of population outcome data to manage public health organisation and systems performance is far less immediate.⁴

Moving forward

This *CRVS Roadmap for Action* highlights how those countries that invest in improving their CRVS systems *will* see returns in terms of improved population health outcomes. For instance, a study looking at CRVS data in 144 countries over the past 33 years found that healthy life expectancy is high, and maternal mortality ratio are low, among countries with improved CRVS performance.⁵ While the authors of that study acknowledge there are a number of study limitations, they suggest it cannot be coincidental that strong CRVS performance worldwide corresponds with good health, irrespective of a population's wealth, level of urbanisation, contraceptive prevalence, or health system coverage.

Indeed, countries should be motivated to take action to strengthen CRVS systems not merely as a characteristic of national health and development efforts, but rather as a key driver of them. In fact, this has been recognised as crucial in the context of country achievement of the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) agenda. Within the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, CRVS systems – notably for birth and death registration – are defined as SDG goals in and of themselves given they are a key driver to reliable administrative and statistical systems and to the realisation of health and human rights (**Figure 1**).⁶

The robust population data that CRVS systems generate are essential for monitoring progress towards SDG metrics, particularly in, but not limited to, the health sector.⁷ Further still, the detailed data dis-aggregations that data from CRVS systems can produce are critical to the aim of identifying and reducing health inequities across populations and “Leaving No One Behind”, and can contribute to greater health systems strengthening.⁸

Summary

The population health and development benefits that flow from investing in improved CRVS systems will not occur overnight. These benefits will be gradual, complementing the more immediate benefits of a strong CRVS system. Nonetheless, the link between CRVS performance and health outcomes can be scientifically drawn.

Fixation on the performance measurement of investment in CRVS systems implementation, as a hard country planning target, might be somewhat misplaced. The health and wellbeing of populations is more than numbers and targets; it is a matter of public health, sustainable development, sound economic investment, rights and good governance.⁹ Measuring the association between a country's CRVS performance and its national population health outcomes has not, and will not, be a straight-forward task. Not only are there pragmatic constraints, but there are limitations of available data or information, as well as difficulties in identification of valid measurement instruments. Country focus should be on progressively strengthening CRVS systems that are strong and reliable, and ensuring *the quality* of the vital statistics data generated. In turn, the quality of the vital statistics data will determine the overall quality of the CRVS system.

4 Schwartz R, Deber R. The performance measurement-management divide in public health. *Health Policy*. 2016;120:273-280.

5 Phillips et al. Are well functioning civil registration and vital statistics systems associated with better health outcomes? *The Lancet*. 2015;386:1386-1394. Using a composite metric of national CRVS performance known as the vital statistics performance index (VSPI), and comparing it to national estimates of healthy life expectancy, maternal mortality ratio, and child mortality risk, Phillips et al found on the basis of CRVS data and health outcome measurements for 144 countries over the past 33 years, a consistent connection exists between VSPI and health indicators.



6 Transforming our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable development. A/RES/70/1. Available Online: <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/21252030%20Agenda%20for%20Sustainable%20Development%20web.pdf>

7 Sankoh O, Byass P, on behalf of INDEPTH Network and Partners. New INDEPTH strategy for the SDGs using robust population data. *The Lancet*. 2017;5:e647-e648.

8 Akachi Y, Kruk ME. Quality of care: measuring a neglected driver of improved health. *Bulletin of the World Health Organization*. 2017;95:465-472.

9 Brolan et al. Beyond health: five global policy metaphors for civil registration and vital statistics. *The Lancet*. 2017;389:1084-1085.

Figure 1. Strengthening CRVS systems in the SDG agenda

Goal	Target	Indicator
 <p>SDG 16. Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all, and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels</p>	<p>16.9 By 2030, provide legal identity for all, including birth registration</p>	<p>*March 2017</p> <p>16.9.1 Proportion of children under 5 years of age whose births have been registered with a civil authority, by age</p>
 <p>SDG 17. Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalise the global partnership for sustainable development</p>	<p>17.19 By 2030, build on existing initiatives to develop measurements of progress on sustainable development that complement gross domestic product, and support statistical capacity-building in developing countries</p>	<p>17.19.2 Proportion of countries that (a) have conducted at least one population and housing census in the last 10 years; and (b) have achieved 100 per cent birth registration and 80 % death registration</p>

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