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## CONSIDERATIONS IN THE ORGANIZATION OF NATIONAL CIVIL REGISTRATION AND VITAL STATISTICS SYSTEMS

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FOREWORD

The organization of national civil registration and vital statistics systems varies from country to country, but several patterns of organization can be discerned from an examination of the country systems. Knowledge of the evolution of the various country systems would be useful for setting up guidelines for establishing a national network of local registration offices and for establishing a national agency for the compilation of vital statistics. Unfortunately, there is paucity of information on the evolution of CR/VS systems in the different countries.

In the absence of design principles, perhaps the next best thing is to try to consider the factors that might play an important role in the operation of CR/VS systems. The purpose of this paper is to present for discussion some of the factors deemed important in organizing a national registration system and in setting up an agency for the production of statistics from the vital records. Although the structural organization of civil registration and vital statistics systems impinge on the efficiency of administration of these systems, there are other important problems to contend with in developing a complete and continuous flow of vital records and statistics. Some of these are discussed in the paper.

There are probably other considerations that should go into the design of national CR/VS systems. This is an open invitation for any comments, or better yet, an in-depth analysis of this important question.

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## CONSIDERATIONS IN THE ORGANIZATION OF NATIONAL CIVIL REGISTRATION AND VITAL STATISTICS SYSTEMS

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Civil registration systems have been in existence for many years in many, if not most, of the developing countries. For example, in three quarters of the 36 countries on the African continent for which information is available, civil registration dates back more than 50 years. However, little progress has been made over the years in establishing a satisfactory system for the registration of vital events and compiling statistics therefrom.

There are many reasons for this state of affairs. Chief among them is the low priority accorded CR/VS by governments because of the absence of a need for vital records for any governmental function. Another possible reason is the manner in which the CR/VS systems are organized. It is the purpose of this paper to examine the present organizational structures of the national CR/VS systems and determine the factors which seem to deter their growth and development. It is hoped that this will suggest the best organizational structure for a civil registration and vital statistics system.

### Present system of registration

A civil registration system requires a national network of local registration offices where the registration of vital events takes place. The establishment of this system is essential for the compulsory and continuous recording of vital events, the safekeeping and retrieval of vital records to be used for individual legal and administrative purposes and for the compilation of national vital statistics. This system may be organized and operated on a centralized or decentralized basis. A decentralized system is one in which the local registration offices are administered by the state or provincial authorities following state provincial laws and regulations with no national office to direct the activities of the registration offices, except to possibly effect coordination of the subnational offices responsible for registration.

The United Nations Handbook<sup>1</sup> recognizes two types of administrative structures in a centralized system. The first has been termed the principal centralized system which is a system in which the network of local registration offices is directly controlled and mandated exclusively for civil registration administration. The second is referred to as "the other centralized system" which is where the local registration offices are directed by a government agency other than a national civil registry, e.g., the statistical office or the health ministry in which civil registration is a part of its overall administrative program.

The United Nations Handbook provides a number of examples of the principal centralized system, but none of these examples seem to fit the definition of a principal centralized system in that the local registration offices do not deal exclusively with registration of vital events. The local registration offices also had other functions such as registration of legal documents other than vital records, preparation of voters' lists, issuance of personal identity cards, health administration or administration of justice. Actually, there may be systems in a few small countries which fall within the definition of a principal centralized system. However, there are very few big countries, if any, with civil registration offices mandated exclusively for that purpose. A principal centralized registration system, as defined, is an ideal system which one does not find in the real world. This is because of the expense involved in establishing a system exclusively dedicated to civil registration. In almost all instances, the countries have utilized the existing framework of local public services like local government offices, the courts, health centers and local election boards for the registration of vital events.

<sup>1</sup>Handbook of Vital Statistics Systems and Methods. Vol. 11. Review of National Practices. Studies in Methods, Series F No. 35, p 8-10, United Nations, New York 1985.

Responsible central authorities. In those countries with a centralized registration system (see Table 1), the legal responsibility for registration is most frequently lodged in the Ministry of Home or Interior (35 percent), followed by the Ministry of Justice (27 percent) and the Ministry of Health (14 percent). The rest (24 percent) are in various administrations such as the Prime Minister's Office, Ministry of Finance and others.

Table 1. Legal Responsibility for National Civil Registration by Region

	Home or Interior	Justice	Health	Other	No Data
All regions	50(35)	38(27)	20(14)	34(24)	37
Africa	19(48)	9(23)	4(10)	8(13)	11
America, North	3(16)	8(42)	2(11)	6(32)	11
America, South	2(25)	4(50)	1(13)	1(13)	0
Asia	16(47)	5(15)	10(27)	3(9)	5
Europe	8(30)	8(20)	2(3)	14(47)	5
Oceania	1(9)	6(55)	2(18)	2(18)	5

Note: Percent in Parends.

There seems to be some kind of regional pattern in the national organization of a civil registration system. In Africa and Asia, the locus is most frequently in the Ministry of Home or Interior (including territorial administration, local governments and internal affairs). In North America, South America and Oceania, the legal responsibility for civil registration is most frequently that of the Ministry of Justice. In a relatively large number of countries of Asia, the Ministry of Health is responsible for national civil registration. The European countries do not fit into any of the regional patterns.

Supervision of local registration offices. In the countries with a national registration office, the local registration offices may be supervised through the chain of authority in the same Ministry or department, or through some other administrative channel depending upon the organization of the civil registration system. In general, the central registration offices situated in the Ministry of Interior and in the Ministry of Health have a channel of communication through its own Ministry. In most other situations, the national registration office gives technical advice and direction to the local registration personnel under the administrative control of another ministry, usually the Home or Health.

According to available information, in 60 percent of the civil registration systems, the national registration office and the local registration offices are in the same ministry or administration and in 40 percent they are in different administrations (Table 2). In Asia, the ratio is close to 80 percent in the same administration. The percentage of countries with the national registration office and the local registration offices in the same administration is also relatively high on the African continent and in South America. On the other hand, in fewer than half of the countries in North America and Europe are the national and the local registration offices located in the same administration.

Table 2. Location of National and Local Registration Offices by Region

	Same Administration	Different Administration	Insufficient Data	No Data
All regions	80(60)	53(40)	19	38
Africa	25(68)	12(22)	4	11
America, North	9(36)	13(64)	1	11
America, South	6(60)	4(40)	0	0
Asia	23(79)	6(21)	3	6
Europe	13(46)	14(54)	7	5
Oceania	5(50)	4(50)	4	5

Note: Percent in parens.

The actual situation is somewhat more complicated than that indicated by the data presented because the system may not be uniform within a country. For example, in India the responsibility for civil registration at the state level is generally in the hands of the health administration.

However, in 4 of the states, the economics and statistics departments are responsible for registration of vital events. In one State, the Panchayat is responsible for the registration of births and deaths. In the rural areas, the local registration offices may be found in the police station, revenue office, or in the Panchayat (village council), depending on the State. In 2 states, the public health centers serve as local registration offices. This is probably an extreme example of variability in a system, but if all the facts were known about the systems of every country, a lot more variation in the system would undoubtedly come to light.

The national organization of the civil registration systems is such that in about 60 percent of the countries, the line of authority extends from the national office to the local registration offices. In the other countries, the national civil registration agencies have to exercise technical direction of the activities of the local registrars under the administrative supervision of another Ministry or Department. This may not present too much of a problem where the local registrars devote full time to registration of vital records, but questions of priority arise where the person serving as the local registrar has other duties to perform. Because it is essential that the local registrar be always available to give service to the public during the prescribed working hours, much will depend upon the nature of the cooperative arrangement between the two ministries.

The various patterns of organization of the national CR/VS systems come about because of the differing situations within the countries, and the countries are free to seek their own solutions to the various problems. Although the United Nations Statistical Office has issued a document entitled Principles and Recommendations for a Vital Statistics System<sup>2</sup>, the principles and recommendations as they relate to the structure and organization of the CR/VS systems are rather general.

#### Considerations in establishment of CR/VS systems

There are a number of considerations that go into the establishment of national CR/VS systems. First, there is the question of the centralized versus the decentralized system. There is no question as to the desirability of a centralized system be it registration or vital statistics. It is ever so much easier to obtain uniformity of definitions and practices from one geographic area to another in a centralized system, an essential requirement. Therefore, this question is not a matter of choice. It is only in a federated system of government that it is necessary to provide the state or provincial governments with authority for certain civil functions.

From the standpoint of effective administration of any system or operation, it is essential that the responsible agency has the capability of exercising technical as well as administrative control of all its employees. With respect to the national network of local registration offices, the administrative supervision of employees in the local registration offices will not be possible if the local registration offices are located in another ministry or department, especially when the position of local registrars is a part-time function. This means that the jurisdiction of each local registrar should be big enough to provide a work load for a full-time local registrar. At the same time, the jurisdictional boundaries of the local registration office needs to coincide with recognized political subdivisions so that there is no question in the minds of the public as to where a vital event should be registered. Another important consideration is the ready accessibility of the local registration office to the larger part of the residents of the area. Although it may not be possible to meet all these conditions, these are some of the factors that need to be considered.

Because vital records on file are legal records, it would seem that the logical place for the civil registration function would be in the Ministry of Justice. This is the situation in about half of the countries in the Americas and Oceania. On the other hand, the compilation of vital statistics, a statistical function, would be out of place in the Justice Ministry. The best place for vital statistics would be in the Central Bureau of Statistics.

In addition to the appropriateness of the function in a governmental organization, there is the question of where the mandated activity will develop best. In order to examine this question, one might look at the following requirements for vital records and for vital statistics:

1. Current registration
2. Geographic and population coverage

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<sup>2</sup>Principles and Recommendations for a Vital Statistics System. Statistical Papers Series M No. 19 Rev. 1. United Nations; NY 1973

3. Registration completeness
4. Data coverage
5. Quality of data

Current registration relates to the timeliness of registration. This is a problem in the developing countries. A large number of late registrations of births and deaths creates not only an administrative problem in registration but makes it impossible to obtain an accurate count of vital events occurring during the year.

Geographic and population coverage refers to provisions of the registration law which usually specifies that registration of vital events should be compulsory for events occurring in every subdivision of territory of the country and to the entire population residing in the country. There are some exceptions in that the law might specify that only events occurring in the principal cities need be registered, or that certain ethnic or population groups shall be excluded from compulsory registration.

Registration completeness refers to the proportion of vital events occurring in an area that is actually registered. It has been used as an useful index of acceptability of vital records for statistical compilations. The United Nations have published ratings of C for completeness, that is where 90 percent or more of the vital events occurring in an area are registered, and U for areas where registration completeness is less than 90 percent. The category, data coverage, refers to the items of information required for registration and vital statistics purposes. For purposes of registration of live births, fetal deaths and deaths, a limited number of items of information are recorded, e.g., for the identification of the place and time of the event, and the individuals involved. For statistical purposes, many other characteristics of the child, mother and father in the case of live births and fetal deaths, and of the event and the decedent in the case of death are needed.

The quality of data refers to the completeness and accuracy of the data collected.

An assessment of the importance of each of the above factors to the civil registration and the vital statistics offices in the developing countries is given in Table 3. It is assumed that, at present, there is little or no need for individual birth and death records in most of these countries.

Table 3. Factors of Importance to Civil Registration and Vital Statistics Offices in Developing Countries

	Civil Registration	Vital Statistics
Current registration	+	+++
Geographic & population coverage	+	+++
Registration completeness	+	+++
Data coverage	+	+++
Quality of data	-	+++

By law, the registration offices are generally charged with the responsibility for the timely registration of all vital events occurring in the area, and to collect additional statistical items of information for the vital statistics agency. In order to discharge this responsibility fully, all of the factors listed should be of importance. However, if only a small proportion of vital events occurring in the area is actually registered and there is no demand for individual copies of these records, there will be little incentive to mount a significant program to improve registration practices and procedures. This is especially true in the absence of adequate operating funds. With the increasing use of and demand for individual copies of vital records, greater importance will be attached to all facets of registration and its coverage.

The vital statistics offices, on the other hand, are fully cognizant of the importance of these factors in the discharge of their responsibilities in the compilation of national vital statistics. However, they are in a frustrating situation of being completely dependent upon the civil registration system to produce complete and accurate information on a timely basis. If the civil registration system and the vital statistics system are autonomous, and are separated organizationally, the vital statistics office is in a poor position to influence or work with the civil registration office for the improvement of registration of vital events. This is a cogent reason for having the registration and vital statistics functions in the same Ministry or Department,

and on at least equal levels. From the standpoint of stronger incentives, it may be better to have the registration organization subordinated to the statistical office.

#### Ministerial or departmental responsibility for CR/VS

The next question is where in the governmental organization should the civil registration and vital statistics functions be located to maximize the opportunities for growth and development. As noted before, the various countries appear to be utilizing one of 4 different existing networks for the registration of births and deaths, namely, local government under the Ministry of Home or Interior, the courts under the Ministry of Justice, hospitals and health centers under the Ministry of Health, and an organizational unit grouped under the heading of population registries, personal identity system, and election boards.

From the standpoint of possible growth of registration and statistics, the court system seems to be the least desirable. Efforts to improve registration and to develop and maintain a statistical program are so different from the functions of the judicial system that registration and statistics would do better elsewhere. Furthermore, while the local courts may be a satisfactory place for registration of vital events occurring in cities, the courts probably cannot serve the rural population in a satisfactory manner.

In over 60 countries, civil registration is tied in organizationally with governmental functions like population registration, personal identification, and maintenance of national electoral rolls. Here, information about vital events is essential for updating the registers and election lists, and for preventing the fraudulent use of identity cards. Except for question of data coverage, the needs of the population register and the personal identity system are like those of the vital statistics system. Also, the population register, the personal identification program and the election boards are likely to be adequately funded. If so, the registration of vital events will probably develop faster here than in any other locale. On the other hand, the vital statistics function will probably not do so well if associated with an agency whose principal task is to issue personal identity cards or to set up an election registration system. Although the mechanics of population registration are different from those of civil registration and vital statistics, vital statistics will fit in with a population analysis program should there be one in the population registry.

An important public service is the provision of medical care. This involves the establishment of a network of hospitals, clinics and health centers which may be used to house local registration offices. Also, births, deaths and fetal deaths frequently occur in health institutions. Therefore, the Health Ministry is regarded by about 20 countries as a suitable site for a national registration office. In addition, there are countries like Canada and the United States which utilize state and local public health offices for the registration of vital events.

Because the health service is one of the major users of vital statistics for planning and administration of public health programs, a good case can be made for locating the civil registration and vital statistics functions in the Ministry of Health. Unless a strong statistical program already exists in the Ministry of Health, provision must be made for the processing of vital records and the analyses of data.

Of all the government agencies, the Ministry of Interior or the Home Ministry appears best equipped to provide service to the public through its system of local government. Because of this, the central registration offices are most frequently under the jurisdiction of this Ministry. The utilization of the existing network of local governments makes for an economical operation insofar as the registration of vital events is concerned. On the other hand, for the vital statistics component to prosper, the vital statistics office needs to be part of the central bureau of statistics or the census operation, if these functions exist in the same Ministry. However, in the absence of statistical support, the Ministry of Interior would seem to be a less desirable location for the civil registration and vital statistics functions.

Whether the Health Administration or the Central Bureau of Statistics should be the locus of the vital statistics function is a difficult question to answer unequivocally. An important consideration is the authority for the civil registration function. If the health administration is responsible for civil registration, it does not make too much sense to place the vital statistics function in the central bureau of statistics. As a statistical operation, the central bureau of statistics would be a more appropriate place for vital statistics. On the other hand, from the standpoint of use of the data, the health ministry would seem to be a better locale. This statement needs to be qualified because the health administration is generally not interested in the

demographic aspects of vital statistics, especially as they relate to marriage and divorce. In either event, neither the health nor the demographic uses of vital statistics can be neglected. This means that wherever the responsibility for vital statistics is lodged, the health and demographic interests need to participate in the planning and development of national vital statistics.

### Summary

There are a number of factors that influence the growth and development of the CR/VS systems. The most important of these are the stage of economic development of the country and the priority given to the civil registration and vital statistics functions by governments. To date, there has been relatively little recognition given to the importance of vital records and vital statistics in the developing countries. Unfortunately, these are the very countries that have the greatest need for demographic data for social and economic developmental programs.

Although it would be desirable to have a national system mandated exclusively for the registration of vital events, this is a luxury which few countries can afford. The various countries have tried to solve this problem in their own way as may be seen from the large variation in organizational patterns. No strict guidelines are available for the design of a registration and vital statistics system. This paper is an attempt to point out the considerations that need go into the establishment of a CR/VS system.

Virtually all the developing countries have had enabling legislation for the registration of vital events and for the national compilation of vital statistics as well as for an infrastructure for the discharge of these legal functions. However, in recent decades, most developing countries have made very little progress in the development of a useful civil registration and vital statistics system.

There are a number of reasons for this state of affairs. Perhaps the most important of these is the absence of a perceived need for vital records for administrative and legal purposes. As long as this situation exists, there is no incentive for the authorities to register births, deaths, fetal deaths, marriages and divorces. By the same token, as long as there is no demand for vital statistics for national program purposes, there will not be any incentive to produce national vital statistics. On the other hand, even if there is expressed consumer need for vital statistics, the vital statistics services will be unable to produce useful vital statistics without a well developed civil registration system.

The registration of vital events is usually compulsory for the total population with penalty for those individuals who fail to register vital events. However, there is no penalty for the national registration services for its failure to register vital events. Therefore, little progress can be expected until there is outside pressure for complete registration. This can come about from increased use of vital records for various purposes such as birth records for entry of a child into school, birth record as proof of age for employment, birth record as proof of citizenship for the issuance of passports, death record for burial of the remains, birth and death records for inheritance, etc. Another source of pressure might be the need for vital records for updating population registries for various purposes such as the issuance of personal identity cards, or for the compilation of national vital statistics.

At the present time, civil registration and vital statistics are together in one ministry or department in about 60 percent of the countries. In the rest of the countries, civil registration and vital statistics exist as two separated systems. All other things being equal, the two functions, civil registration and vital statistics, should be brought together into one system. This will provide a strong incentive for the improvement of the civil registration function.

An ideal system of civil registration is a national network of local registration offices dedicated exclusively to civil registration. Except for a few small countries, this is a luxury which cannot be afforded. Therefore, rather than establish another set of duplicate offices for public service, most of the countries utilize the existing network of local offices such as local government offices under the Ministry of Interior or Home, the courts under the Ministry of Justice, hospitals and health centers under the Ministry of Health, and other organizations such as population registries, personal identity systems and election boards.

There are several factors to consider in selecting the locus for the civil registration and vital statistics functions. One of these is the extent to which the national network of offices reaches down into the population. In other words, how accessible are the local offices to the public



they are intended to serve? If there are not enough local offices, it is a hardship for some to travel to the local office to discharge their legal obligations. If there are too many local offices, there will not be enough vital events to support full-time local registrars. In the latter case, the post of local registrar will have to be a part-time activity with the attendant problems of such an arrangement.

The other factor to consider is how well the civil registration and vital statistics functions will prosper in a particular ministry or department. Is the program of civil registration and vital statistics consonant with the mission of the ministry and will it receive the support it deserves? The answer to this question must then be balanced against the question of accessibility of local offices to the public. Of the two factors, greater weight should be given to potential governmental support.

Although it is not always apparent, each country presumably considered the various options before drafting legislation on civil registration and vital statistics. It is unfortunate that there are no guiding principles for the optimum design of a civil registration and vital statistics system. It is hoped that this discussion will be helpful in identifying the issues in establishing a civil registration and vital statistics system best suited to the conditions existing in a country.