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STUDY OF A CIVIL REGISTRATION SYSTEM
OF BIRTHS AND DEATHS—
AN EXPERIMENT IN AFGHANISTAN

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FOREWORD

The manuscript of this technical paper was received some time ago. The paper describes an experimental study to see what could be done to improve the existing registration system of births and deaths. The author's perception of problems and his personal observations are of particular interest to those concerned with registration problems in the developing countries.

The later developments of this project are not known, but the preliminary report of the early phase of the experiment should be of interest to those contemplating the testing of new registration procedures in a few pilot areas. The views of the author on the basic question of improving civil registration procedures vs. going to surveys to obtain estimates of fertility and mortality are well worth considering.

If more small studies of this kind could be mounted in various countries, they would contribute greatly to the understanding of registration problems of the developing countries.

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STUDY OF A CIVIL REGISTRATION SYSTEM OF BIRTHS AND DEATHS
--AN EXPERIMENT IN AFGHANISTAN

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Need for a civil registration system

Many countries in the developing part of the world have a national civil registration system of births and deaths which is not of much utility because of the under-coverage of events. While some activity is going on in these countries to upgrade their registration systems to a high level of accuracy and completeness, this has not been recognized to be one of their priority needs so far because of the following reasons:

1. No great need is felt on a mass scale for records of occurrences of vital events like birth and death certificates. In the rural areas of many of the developing countries, where a great majority of their people live, an individual will, generally, never find the need for such records and, if the need be, he can always produce a few witnesses as evidence in support of his identity or age. In fact, verification by police or revenue officials or village headmen always fulfills this need. Even in many urban areas, the schools do not always insist on production of birth certificates and whatever age is recorded at the time of entry into a school is accepted as an authentic age later at the time of entry into service and for all other purposes.
2. The absence of record of occurrence of each birth and death is not very much felt in implementing public health programs or for day-to-day administration. In other words, the utility of these records is not fully realized. Once the records of births and deaths are available to the public health and other administrators, their utility in the implementation of various programs is suddenly realized.
3. With regard to the statistical uses of vital records, there is no doubt that the developing countries need reliable vital statistics and other demographic data for planning their economic development and for planning, implementation and development of their health programs. The need for such data is in fact so urgent that it is generally considered preferable to obtain the estimates of fertility, mortality and growth of population from sample surveys, which take much less time and money than upgrading civil registration to a level that it generates reliable vital statistics.

Despite what has been stated above, there is a strong argument for suggesting that a serious attempt should be made in all the developing countries to improve the civil registration of births and deaths. The development of

such a system should be a part of the program of socio-economic development so that there is no time lag between the demand for vital records/vital statistics and their supply. Since a vital events registration system takes fairly long to reach a level where the records/statistics resulting from it can be considered reliable in terms of coverage and accuracy, it is never too early to plan and execute the program of its improvement.

Priority for registration

A question arises as to what priority a country should attach to the improvement of registration of vital events of births and deaths in its over-all program of development. Naturally, it depends on the need the country feels for such a system. The need is felt either for vital statistics or for vital records or both. It has been stated above that one of the most important uses of vital statistics is in the demographic analysis prerequisite to planning for economic and social development. More precisely, such statistics yield information on the rate and trend of population growth and on the behavior of its components, and, by aggregation over time, on population size, structure and (migration excluded) geographic distribution. Given a base, current estimates of population size can be made and projection of population built up on the basis of the probable trends of natality, nuptiality and mortality as derived from study of these factors and their interaction with economic and social as well as other demographic factors. The usefulness of demographic measures derived from vital statistics has been stressed at the highest levels so much so that three important indicators of measuring change in social conditions, recommended by the World Health Organization Committee of Experts on the "International Definition and Measurement of Standards and Levels of Living" in 1954 include a) expectation of life at birth, b) crude death rate and c) infant mortality rate. The first and third of these were given the status of "priority indicators." These three indicators have long been used as measures of general levels of health. Expectation of life is considered theoretically the best indicator of levels of health. The infant mortality rate has traditionally been regarded as one of the best measures of environmental sanitation and is also closely correlated with the general levels of economic and social development. The crude death rate is also a useful indicator of levels of health despite its dependence on the age structure of the population.

The possibility of obtaining fairly reliable and quick estimates of measures of fertility and mortality from properly designed and executed sample surveys often undermines the force in the argument in support of a high priority for establishment of a national civil registration system. In this connection, it has to be remembered that a sample survey or a sample registration system cannot be a substitute for a comprehensive statutory civil registration system. Besides, there are serious limitations in designing and executing sample surveys in countries where the frame for selection of the sample does not exist.

The high priority for establishing a comprehensive and reliable statutory civil registration system is also, to a large extent, dictated by the demand for records of vital events, particularly births and deaths.

Take the case of Afghanistan, where the legislation for registration of births and deaths has existed for quite some time but the events have rarely

been reported for registration in practice. This provision is a part of the Population Registration Law which, *inter alia*, provides for registration of the population without any compulsion for registration in the case of females. Also, since 1952, an "identification card" called "Tazkira" is issued to each registered person at the time of registration. The issue of cards was earlier restricted to males but these have also been issued to females on request for the last few years. The card was designed to serve various important purposes like entry into school, obtaining a work permit, automobile driver's license or a marriage certificate, exercise of voting rights, entry into military or civil service and as legal proof of age. The insistence for production of the Tazkira for these purposes is reported to be quite rigid. In other words, the Tazkira has been serving the need for the proof of identity and age which normally could be established from the birth record. Unlike the birth record which is prepared at the time of reporting of birth for registration, generally in a period of less than one month of the occurrence of the birth, the card is prepared either at the time of registration of the population, undertaken twice in Afghanistan (1952-54 and 1972-74), or at the time the individual requests the issuance of the card. In such a situation, the identification particulars may not be in dispute in most cases, but the age recorded on the card is generally guess work and, in many cases, does not represent the actual age because of ignorance of the correct age.

Despite the doubts about entries regarding "age" made in the identification card, the mere establishment of an institutional practice like insistence on production of the card as proof of identity or age of the person for various purposes fully justifies a high priority for improvement of birth and death registration in Afghanistan. As a comprehensive civil registration system gets fully established, the Tazkira could be substituted by a more authentic record (birth certificate) of proof of identity and age, or, at least, the entries in the former can be made on the basis of information contained in the latter.

Realizing the need for establishing a comprehensive and reliable system of registration of births and deaths, the Government of Afghanistan has intensified its own efforts and has also requested assistance from the United Nations Fund for Population Activities for implementing this program. This has resulted in a project whereunder support in the shape of experts, equipment, training fellowships, etc. has been provided to the Department of Civil Registration in the Ministry of Interior.

Pilot registration areas

Instead of launching a nationwide program all at one time, it was decided to try out a procedure for registration in a small sample of 3 villages and 2 sub-districts of Kabul city, covering in all a population of 8,975. Under this procedure, the village headman (Malik or Qaryadar) registers births and deaths occurring in his village or jurisdiction by making entries in the registers provided to him for this purpose. The work has been in progress since the beginning of the current Afghan year (1356), corresponding to March-April 1977. In the two urban units of Kabul city, the events are registered by concerned Wakil Guzzars, the counterparts of Maliks in the urban areas.

On the completion of registration activity at the end of each month in respect of events occurring in a month, an independent retrospective survey

is conducted in each unit by the headquarters staff of the Department of Civil Registration who collect information at the beginning of the following month about all occurrences of births and deaths in the previous month by door-to-door visits.

The main aim of establishing pilot areas is to gain experience and test the following assumptions:

1. The village headman/Wakil Guzzar can be entrusted with primary registration.
2. In the absence of village boundaries, the primary registration unit will be the same as the area which the village headman/Wakil Guzzar considers to fall within his jurisdiction.
3. There will be no over-lapping of primary registration areas.
4. The validity of inclusion of various questions on the birth and death forms.
5. Given a fair communication support to the registration activity, the reporting of events will improve.
6. The timely reporting of events by village headman/Wakil Guzzar for statutory registration.
7. The timely dispatch of statistical returns by the registration offices to headquarters for compilation and analysis.
8. The possibilities of building up a system of informants/notifiers for upgrading registration.

Summing up, the above approach will enable evolving methods for motivating individuals to register births and deaths. This will involve making it advantageous to register, making the population aware of the obligation to register and making arrangements to facilitate registration.

Comments on the working of the pilot areas during the last six months (April 1977-September 1977)

Originally, it was envisaged to match the births and deaths reports from the Maliks with the reports of the survey teams and undertake a re-survey in respect of unmatched events. However, due to some administrative problems, the re-survey of unmatched events could be undertaken only in a very limited way. All the same, it was a great satisfaction to see reports from the Maliks more or less properly filled in for the very first month. The Maliks were doing this kind of job for the first time and were further handicapped because of their inability to write themselves except for one Malik of Sairobi. They had to depend on the help of someone in their families or the villages who could fill in the forms on their behalf. During our discussions with the Maliks and other villagers in the pilot areas, we found that the Maliks were fully agreeable to undertake this job without any remuneration and a general appreciation on the part of the villagers for the need to report the occurrences of births and deaths. We, on our part, explained to them the purpose of the pilot reg-

istration and the advantages of reporting the occurrences of births and deaths to them as individuals and for the country. During our discussions, we could get a feel of the common man's reactions to reporting of events for registration. We could realize how useful communication support could be to our activities.

The United Nations Statistical Office advised us that questions like "literacy" and "occupation" on the birth and death forms could be avoided in the experimental phase. The counterparts were, however, insistent on including these questions. We also realized that the question on "name of mother" was more or less redundant because of the reluctance on the part of villagers to disclose the names of females to males. We, therefore, advised the Maliks to record the "name of father" in the last column of the birth form. Eventually, we were confronted with a situation when Maliks were recording the "name of father" and our female investigator, doing the retrospective survey, recorded the "name of mother." We, therefore, had to advise both the Maliks and survey teams to record both the "name of mother" and "name of father," if possible, or, as an alternative, one of the two names the respondent was agreeable to give out.

The above problem is not of any serious consequence since, under the nationwide system, the Maliks can record the "name of father" without any difficulty. For our experimental work, we have been using the household schedules containing the names of all the members of the household for matching the Malik's and survey team's reports wherever necessary.

A major problem so far has been the non-receipt of births and deaths reports from the Maliks on time. In the beginning, the supervisor in charge of the field work from the counterpart side used to collect the reports personally from the Maliks. Subsequently, we advised the Maliks to send the reports through the Woluswal's Office (District Registration Office) to see how this would work. This system, which is likely to be adopted finally under the statutory system, has not worked very satisfactorily so far in the pilot areas. While, in some cases, Maliks have delayed submission of returns to the Woluswalis, there have also been delays in receipt of returns from the Woluswalis. As the work progresses, this problem is likely to ease. There is, however, no doubt that the registration personnel posted in Woluswalis will have to be geared more effectively for reducing the time lag between the submission of returns by the Maliks and their receipt at the headquarters.

Surprisingly, the answers to the questions on age reported by the Maliks and survey teams have not varied greatly. Generally, the variation between the two reports has been in the range of 1 to 5 years. One cannot, however, say how far both the reports are from the actual age.

Regarding some of the other questions included on the birth and death forms, it is proposed to drop the questions concerning institutional occurrences since our major activity is going to be in the villages. We might, however, retain this question for the urban areas. The retention of questions regarding "age" and "occupation" will have to be considered afresh. The question regarding "registration of births" in the case of infant deaths needs to be omitted since it has been hardly relevant to the experimental work. Similarly, "nature of certification" of cause of death on the death form is redundant in the case of rural areas.

The answers to various questions on the birth and death forms for the last six months have been processed and a few tables prepared. Some more tables are proposed to be prepared in the near future. The data given in the tables are being analyzed for drawing meaningful inferences for planning the setting up of two Woluswalis as pilot registration areas from the beginning of the new Afghan year (1357). The emphasis in the larger pilot areas will be on registration by the Maliks and the retrospective surveys will be minimized. The purpose is to gain experience in conditions closely approximating those which are likely to prevail under the nationwide statutory registration system.

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