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## URGENTLY NEEDED REFORMS IN CIVIL REGISTRATION IN ASIAN COUNTRIES

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## FOREWORD

The International Institute for Vital Registration and Statistics has been long concerned about the lack of development of the civil registration system in many countries of the world. One of the reasons for this state of affairs is the lack of appreciation on the part of government officials of the potential uses of vital records and statistics for policy making and for national planning for social and economic development.

As a step towards the promotion of civil registration and vital statistics in the Asian countries, the International Institute for Vital Registration and Statistics, in collaboration with the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, formed a committee of Asia experts to prepare a report directed to officials at the highest ministerial level calling their attention to the importance of vital records and vital statistics, and to recommend how the existing system might be improved. This is the report of the Committee comprised of the following: Mr. P. Padmanabha, former Registrar General, India, present UN Advisor, Civil Registration and Vital Statistics, Nigeria, Chairman; Mr. M. Maqsood Ahmed, Director, Directorate General of Registration, Pakistan; Mr. Syed Rosley bin Syed Abu Bakar, Director General, National Registration Department, Malaysia; Dr. Dai-Young Kim, former Director-General, National Statistics Bureau, present Assistant Minister for Economic Administration Coordination, Office of the Prime Minister, Republic of Korea; Dr. Iwao M. Moriyama, Executive Director, IIVRS, and Dr. M. K. Siddiqui, Statistician, United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific.

By good fortune, a unique opportunity presented itself on the occasion of the Asian Seminar on Civil Registration and Vital Statistics held in Bangkok, 10-16 December 1985 under the auspices of ESCAP to discuss an earlier draft of this report with the responsible national officials in attendance at the Seminar. The valuable comments and suggestions received from the Seminar participants representing both the civil registration and vital statistics interests of the Asian countries have been incorporated in this present report.

It is hoped that this report will be useful to the various countries in realizing the full potentials of their civil registration and vital statistics systems. The IIVRS will be pleased to receive any questions or comments concerning this report.

## SUMMARY

In today's modern society, there is urgent need for a data base for generating statistical information on a continuous basis for national social and economic developmental planning and for the administration of such programs. Also, there is need for documentation on each vital event for legal and administrative purposes. Unfortunately, the existing civil registration and vital statistics systems in many countries of the world have not yet been developed to the point where they can serve adequately the purposes for which they were established. Unless concerted action is taken, little progress can be expected for many years to come.

This report addresses the problem of developing useful vital records and statistics within a relatively short-time frame. After a brief introduction, the report enumerates some of the important uses of vital records and vital statistics to the State. This is followed by the presentation of the structural organization of the civil registration and vital statistics systems and their status in the Asian region. At present, there are at least 16 countries in East Asia which are in need of major improvements. The chief impediments to the improvements of the systems are then identified, and a strategy for instituting needed reforms is presented. Central to this strategy is the appointment of a high level committee to formulate a unified plan for the reform of the civil registration and vital statistics systems and to oversee the implementation of such a plan.

This report was prepared by a small group of Asia experts with the view to seeking improvements in the existing civil registration and vital statistics systems in the Asian region so that it may be possible to have a continuous flow of useful national vital statistics in the next 10 to 15 years.

The effective implementation of the strategy proposed in this report cannot be undertaken alone by the agencies presently responsible for these functions. It will require the collaboration and/or cooperation of all the ministries or departments concerned with the juridical or administrative needs of vital records and vital statistics. There also needs to be a firm commitment on the part of the officials at the highest ministerial level of government to give sustained support to the program of improvement of civil registration and vital statistics. Such support will be an investment which will pay ample dividends in the future.

## URGENTLY NEEDED REFORMS IN CIVIL REGISTRATION IN ASIAN COUNTRIES

### CHAPTER I INTRODUCTION

There has been, for many years, universal recognition of the importance and need for the registration of vital events, namely, births, deaths, marriages and divorces. Virtually every country in the world has promulgated laws for the establishment of a national civil registration system for documenting juridical facts about vital events and to utilize these data for the compilation of vital statistics.

The individual vital records and the statistics derived therefrom play an essential role in various national programs in the industrialized countries. There is need for similar uses of vital records and statistics in the developing countries. Unfortunately, the civil registration and vital statistics functions in many countries have not received the necessary support and attention. As a result, the vital records and statistics are of limited utility in social and economic developmental planning.

The purpose of this document is to outline the value and utility of vital records and statistics and to demonstrate to policy makers in the governance of a number of countries in East Asia of the need for providing the necessary organizational framework, adequate personnel and funding for a modernized national civil registration and vital statistics system. This report seeks to achieve this end by briefly reviewing the systems that exist and by identifying the reasons for deficiencies in the systems. This is followed by suggested possible steps for improving civil registration and vital statistics.

Although births, adoptions, legitimations, deaths, stillbirths, marriages and divorces come within the scope of vital events, only births, (including stillbirths) and deaths will be the subject of this report. As components of population growth, there is the greatest demand for statistical information on births and deaths. Also, the problem of improving birth and death registration is more complex because it involves the motivation of the general public. All the other vital events are resultant of some legal proceeding such as a marriage, divorce, adoption and legitimation conducted by known authorized officials. The problem of establishing a registration system for marriages and divorces is different from those of births and deaths, and, in general, much less complex.

### CHAPTER II

#### UTILITY OF VITAL RECORDS AND VITAL STATISTICS

The essential function of the civil registration system is to provide documentation of all vital events, that is, live births, fetal deaths, deaths, marriages and divorces, and to maintain a permanent file of these records for legal purposes. Thus, the registration process records the civil status of individuals and defines the relationship between individuals in the family organization based on:

- i. The facts of a birth from which a person's civil status and other rights and obligations originate.
- ii. The facts of a death which extinguishes certain rights of the individual, and creates inheritance rights and other obligations.
- iii. The facts of a marriage, divorce, separation, adoption, legitimation, etc., which create, modify or extinguish civil status or other rights and obligations.

The registration of vital events generates a record for the individual and these records also serve as a basis for vital statistics. Both the vital records and vital statistics have many benefits to the individual as well as to the State.

#### Importance of vital records to individuals

The United Nations Bill of Human Rights and the United Nations Declaration of Rights of the Child proclaim the right to citizenship, the right of children to a name and citizenship and to know

of their parentage. A birth record provides proof of citizenship and family relationship. The birth record also provides legal proof of age, dependency status, legitimacy status, etc., on which depend a wide variety of rights, particularly in regard to the exercise of civil functions, entitlement to family allowances, care of children, tax deductions, insurance benefits, education, property ownership and inheritance, etc. The death record provides legal evidence on claims to inheritance of property, to insurance, to rights of surviving spouse to remarry, to claims for family allowances where death creates a financial need. The marriage and divorce records are the basis for claims involving the status of women such as dependency and alimony allowances, tax deductions, provision and allocation of specific types of housing and other facilities which relate to the married man and his wife, including claims to a change in nationality on the basis of the marriage. Divorce records have many legal uses including, in monogamous countries, the establishment of the right to remarry.

For the State, beneficial uses have been made of birth records in public health programs such as those relating to postnatal care of mother and child, premature baby care, the vaccination and immunization of children, and assistance to the physically handicapped. Information on cause of death recorded in the individual death records have been used to spot unusual infections and epidemics in a community and to establish necessary control measures. The individual death records have also been employed to clear files such as disease-case registers, social security records, military service files, electoral rolls, and tax registers. The purging of files of dead individuals will result in savings by increased efficiency in filing operations. In some instances, such as in the case of electoral rolls, the elimination of dead individuals from the rolls will prevent fraudulent voting and other types of fraud.

For countries with population registers, it is essential that additions due to births and immigration, deletions due to deaths and emigration, and changes in personal characteristics such as occupation, marital status, place of residence, of registered individuals be incorporated into the register on a continuous basis. The vital records provide information on important components needed for updating population registers.

In those countries where identity cards are issued, the birth record provides the basis for issuing new identity cards. The marriage and divorce records serve as proof of change in marital status. Finally, the death record flags those cases where the cards that have been issued should be surrendered to prevent their misuse.

#### Usefulness of vital statistics

A civil registration system serves the primary purpose of providing evidentiary records to meet juridical and administrative needs. It serves this purpose uniquely inasmuch as neither census nor statistical surveys can possibly provide the needed legal documents and the type of continuous statistical data available on vital records. With the development of a satisfactory civil registration system, countries presently employing sample surveys for obtaining vital statistics may envisage a continuing reduction in expenditure on sample surveys resulting in considerable savings, while at the same time, enjoying the benefits of having continuous data for every geographic subdivision of the country. However, apart from this primary purpose in relation to both the individual and administrative needs, the civil registration system certainly has the ultimate aim of providing vital statistics based on data from vital records. If the system embraces the entire population of the country, it will be possible to provide data on a continuous basis for the country as a whole as well as for every political subdivision. However, the usefulness of such data depends on the completeness with which the vital events are registered and the accuracy and completeness with which the demographic and other information are recorded.

Historically, the earliest uses of vital statistics have been in the delineation of health problems and in measuring health progress. As components of population change, vital statistics are useful for the measurement of population growth and in the preparation of population estimates between population censuses and for making post censal population projections. They are essential for the planning and evaluation of family planning programs, and for demographic studies.

Population estimates and projections. The planning of almost any kind of governmental services requires the knowledge of the population and its distribution. Planning of public health programs, transportation facilities, agricultural production, the production and distribution of commodities, etc., cannot be done effectively without adequate population base figures. For social and economic planning, it is essential to base such plans on the probable size of the population and its composition at some future date. Plans for public projects requiring large capital outlays such as construction of school facilities, and urban development including water supply, sewage and public utilities need to be based on population projections. Without reasonably good population projections, the facilities may become inadequate before their time.

The all important population figures may be obtained from population censuses. Because of their expense, national population censuses are not usually conducted more than once in every 10 years. During the intercensal years, population figures may be estimated with the use of birth and death statistics. For the post censal years, projections may be made of birth and death rates.

Public health programs. Mortality statistics have long been used to delineate the magnitude and distribution of major disease problems, and for planning and administration of public health programs to combat diseases. More recently, the World Health Organization has mobilized the developing countries of the world to participate in an international program of Health for All by the Year 2000. In this program, specific goals were established for each country expressed in terms of infant mortality rates. The evaluation of national programs to meet these goals requires adequate vital statistics, that is, data on infant deaths and on live births from which the infant deaths arose.

Family planning services. Current birth and death statistics provide measures of the natural population growth which is an important measure in the evaluation of family planning programs. Marriage rates and data on age at first marriage are indicators of future fertility, and current birth statistics by age of mother and parity also provide useful data for the conduct of family planning services.

The value and uses of the civil registration system and the vital records and vital statistics that flow therefrom are evident. Unfortunately, for most developing countries, it must be recognized that serious deficiencies in the civil registration system exist which considerably reduce its utility. Major improvements are necessary if the system has to serve satisfactorily the purpose for which it was established.

### CHAPTER III

#### CIVIL REGISTRATION AND VITAL STATISTICS IN EAST ASIA

A civil registration system was first established in the region in 1868 in Sri Lanka. By the end of the 1800s, births and deaths were also being registered in Japan, Hong Kong, Macau, India, and Bangladesh. Currently, as far as it is known, virtually every country in East Asia has made legal provisions for the registration of vital events, and has designated agencies responsible for civil registration and for the compilation of national vital statistics.

Most countries in the region have had a civil registration system for more than 50 years. However, there has been little progress in the development of the registration system in many of these countries. At the present time, the civil registration systems of more than two-thirds of the countries in the region are still badly in need of major improvement. These are the countries which report that less than 90 percent of the births and deaths were registered, or that information on registration completeness is not available. In the latter instance, it would be fair to assume that the registration completeness is below the acceptable level.

Although a law exists for the production of vital statistics, there is no agency designated to compile national vital statistics in Afghanistan. In Pakistan, the responsibility for the compilation of vital statistics lies in the Ministry of Health, Social Welfare and Education, but summary reports were not being received for national tabulation purposes. In India, national estimates of fertility and mortality are being produced annually from sample registration surveys until such time that civil registration proves to be a satisfactory data source. For many of the other countries in the region, published vital statistics data are necessarily of dubious quality.

The organizational pattern of the civil registration and vital statistics systems in East Asia does not differ greatly from that of other parts of the world. There are a number of countries like Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Hong Kong, Macau, Malaysia, Singapore and Sri Lanka where the local registration offices are under the direct control of the national registration office. On the other hand, in most of the countries, the local registration offices are a part of the local government administrative services not in the direct line of authority of the national registration office. Under this system, the local registrars may perform tasks other than registering vital events. The lack of direct control over local registration services by the national civil registration office, and the number of other civil and legal functions competing for the attention of the local registrar make this organizational structure administratively difficult from the civil registration point of

view. This situation may be further complicated in countries where the administrative organization is not the same in all the States or Provinces, or in all local areas. In such cases, the national registration authority will have to work through more than one ministry or department in communicating with all the local officials.

In some countries such as Bangladesh and People's Republic of China, the responsibility for both civil registration and vital statistics is in the same administration or organization from the national to the local levels. Presumably, this makes for a smoother operation. In other countries, cooperation and collaboration between two national agencies are required. This may be a problem because the legal requirements for information to be included in the registration document is relatively modest whereas the data needed for statistical purposes may be relatively extensive. In order to obtain complete registration and data of good quality on a timely basis for national vital statistics, it is essential that the registration and vital statistics agencies integrate and coordinate their activities.

The various patterns of civil registration and vital statistics that have evolved are of general interest, but they may not be of particular relevance to individual countries. For the individual countries, the concern is whether or not their particular system provides an effective means of registration of vital events, and whether or not vital statistics needed for national social and economic developmental programs can be produced. The current indications are that there are, at least, 16 countries in East Asia with an inadequate system of registration of births and/or deaths. These countries are:

Afghanistan	Laos
Bangladesh	Malaysia (deaths)
Bhutan	Maldives
Burma	Nepal
India	Pakistan
Indonesia	Philippines
Iran	Thailand
Kampuchea	Vietnam

One of the essential requirements of a civil registration system is the provision for permanent storage of vital records with proper safeguards to protect the records from loss or damage. All the 14 countries that responded to this question of permanent repository of records indicated that there were central files of records. Most of these files are located in the local and/or State registration offices. A few countries maintain a national file. On the other hand, more than half (8 out of 14) of the countries did not provide an alphabetic index to these records. This means that it would be difficult, if not impossible, to find a particular vital record on file in these countries without exact knowledge of the place and time of registration as distinct from the time and place of occurrence of the event. An alphabetic index to the vital records on file is essential to facilitate access to individual records for certification purposes.

The problem of storage and retrieval of individual vital records is an important service aspect of a registration office. However, without a reasonably complete registration of vital events, it would not be possible to provide satisfactory service to the public in the certification of vital events even with an efficient record storage and retrieval system.

It seems clear that urgent reforms are needed in about two thirds of the countries in East Asia so that the registration system may adequately serve the purposes for which it exists, that is, the documentation of the occurrence of a vital event for individuals and the production of national vital statistics from these records. Also, for countries with a population register or a personal identity system, the integrity of such a system cannot be guaranteed without an adequate civil registration system for a continuous update by the deletion of deaths and the addition of new population with proof of age.

Without an adequate civil registration system, needed data for national planning for economic and social development are lacking. Most of the countries in the region are not in a position to meet their commitments to monitor infant mortality rates in connection with the WHO Program of Health for All by the Year 2000. Nor will they be able to evaluate the effectiveness of their efforts in achieving their stated goal by the year 2000. This is but an example of the problem facing these countries.



In the modern society of today, there is need for various kinds of data base for the planning and administration of social and economic programs. Vital statistics which provide the essential components of population change will serve important uses in many national social and economic developmental programs. Simply put, the issue now is to identify the obstacles to the improvement of civil registration and to introduce major reforms in the civil registration and vital statistics systems and programs so that usable vital statistics will become available in the near future.

## CHAPTER IV

### OBSTACLES TO THE IMPROVEMENT OF CIVIL REGISTRATION

The impediments and obstacles to complete registration of vital events are considerable. Otherwise, all the countries of the world would have had the benefits of useful national vital statistics long ago. There are many reasons for the lack of development of national civil registration systems and for incompleteness of registration of vital events. The more important of these will be presented but not necessarily in the order of their importance.

#### 1. Inadequate legal basis

While legislation at the national or state level exists in virtually all the countries under consideration, there are deficiencies with respect to specific details such as failure to make registration of vital events compulsory for the entire population, impractical time limitations for compliance with the registration laws, and the lack of provisions for handling delayed registration in the system of documentation. A most important legal deficiency is the failure to provide for a clear central registration authority for the direction of the registration function throughout the country and to monitor and supervise its performance.

#### 2. Lack of adequate budgetary support

One of the main obstacles to the improvement of the civil registration system is the lack of awareness of the utility of vital records and statistics on the part of senior government officials. This lack of appreciation of the importance of civil registration and vital statistics has led to the comparatively low priority status assigned to these functions. As a result, the civil registration and vital statistics systems in most countries of the region do not have sufficient budgetary support. This is reflected by the paucity of technically qualified personnel, the low status of local registration officials in the community, the poor state in which registration offices are maintained, and the inadequate manner in which registration documents are stored and preserved. In some areas, the registration function may suffer because of inadequate supply of registration forms. The improvement of the system would depend upon the recognition of its utility in the day-to-day work of government itself in the key sectors of civil rights, health and associated socio-economic activities.

#### 3. Defects in administrative organization

The position of central authority is determined by the status that the registration law assigns to it. Generally speaking, it would be desirable to have one agency responsible at the national, state, and local levels, but quite often more than one agency is responsible at the field level. The latter is forced by compulsion of availability of staff, and different agencies may have to be brought into the system at the local level to avoid excessive staffing if a single agency were to be performing these duties exclusively.

Under existing conditions in most countries in the region, multiple types of registrars may have to be accepted, at least, in the initial stages. Eventually, it would be desirable to ensure that the position of registrars are held by officials of the same hierarchy in the interest of better control, supervision and management of vital records.

#### 4. Perception and attitudes towards civil registration

One of the major obstacles to the improvement of registration of vital events has to do with the perception and attitude of the public and of the registrar with respect to the importance of registration of births and deaths. In many instances, the citizen may not be aware of his legal responsibility in registering births and deaths. In others, the informant may not appreciate the utility or importance of the registration process. Then there are those who resist registration of

vital events, especially of births, for superstitious reasons or with the notion of avoiding taxation or military consumption.

In most developing countries, there is little to motivate the people to comply with the registration laws. This is the major obstacle to improvement of registration completeness. The lack of motivation of people to comply with registration laws is also largely due to nonrecognition of the utility of the system in their daily lives. The insistence on production of documents relating to vital events for certain purposes such as school admission, if introduced over a reasonable period of time, would enhance the recognition of the system. This, in turn, will result in the improvement of the civil registration process. Another kind of a problem is represented by the local registrar who is the key functionary in the system. Quite often, the registration of vital events may be only a part-time duty of the registrar carried out along with other jobs assigned to him. Unfortunately, in this system of assignment of multiple duties, that relating to registration of vital events often receives low priority. Part of this is due to the low status conferred in the administrative structure to this functionary and partly this may be due to the lack of appreciation of the importance of his role in the civil registration process or of the utility of the system.

#### 5. Inaccessibility of local registration offices

The wide dispersion of the population and the remoteness of the rural population from population centers where the local registration offices are located are problems in many parts of the world. This, coupled with the lack of public transportation, present serious obstacles to registration of vital events. In some countries like Nepal with its mountainous terrain, it may not be feasible to provide local registration services for much of the population in remote areas. In such cases, consideration might be given to mobile registration offices.

### CHAPTER V

#### STRATEGY FOR IMPROVEMENT OF CIVIL REGISTRATION

The essential elements of a strategy for the improvement of civil registration are the formulation of a plan for national reform, the assessment of obstacles to the improvement of civil registration, and the mobilization and utilization of the resources available at various levels of government to carry out the necessary activities according to an integrated plan for reform.

#### Formulation of Plan for National Reform

The existing national civil registration and vital statistics systems present a variety of organizational patterns. In some, the civil registration and vital statistics responsibilities are grouped in a single ministry, in others the functions are distributed in several ministries. There are also differences in the stage of technical and administrative development and in the efficiency of the systems. Adding to the complexity of the situation are variations in the distribution of the population, the difficulty of travel and communication, the level of literacy and awareness of the population of the need for, and benefits of, registration of vital events. Because of the country-to-country variations in conditions, it is not useful to propose a civil registration and vital statistics system as an ideal world-wide model or as a model for a particular region. On the other hand, much can be learned by examining the systems of other countries; much can be learned by the study of general recommendations of international agencies and committees; and much can be gained from multilateral or bilateral technical assistance. However, in the end, each country must develop its own plan for civil registration and vital statistics development and improvement.

Regardless of the organizational structure of the civil registration and vital statistics system in a country, there are a variety of ministries or agencies that have responsibilities or interests in vital records and/or vital statistics. These agencies may be in Ministries such as Home, Interior, Planning, Justice, Health, Finance and Economics, etc., which are concerned with governmental functions dealing with personal identification, population registration, migration control, civil rights, vital statistics, population studies, public health, etc. Therefore, if a country is to develop a sound plan for civil registration and vital statistics improvement, the interests and concerns of a number of agencies must be considered. To accomplish this, it is recommended that plans for reform of the civil registration and vital statistics system be developed by a multi-agency national commission. For such a commission to be effective, there must be support at the highest governmental level. Ideally, this might be some form of "Presidential Commission" or some Cabinet Committee. As a minimum, it should be apparent that the Committee or Commission has

strong high-level backing and that any reasonable proposals for the reform of the national civil registration and vital statistics systems would receive favorable consideration.

As the first step, the Commission should develop a unified over-all plan for the revision of the civil registration and vital statistics systems. This plan<sup>1</sup> should:

1. State the objectives of the civil registration and vital statistics systems, including goals for development and improvement.

2. Designate national agencies responsible for civil registration and vital statistics. It would be preferable to have a single agency to take charge of both civil registration and vital statistics at national, regional, state and local levels. The possibility of identifying a single agency at all levels should be explored. Where no national agency responsible for civil registration exists, such a ministerial responsibility should be established for the nationwide coordination of civil registration.

3. Establish means of coordinating civil registration and vital statistics, possibly through a permanent or ad hoc coordinating committee.

4. Review the authority and responsibility of national, and subnational (regional or district, provincial, and local) registration offices in the administrative chain involved in the flow of registration records, and make necessary organizational and procedural changes.

5. Make a comprehensive review of existing laws on civil registration and update such laws for conformity with international recommendations on registration and statistical procedures, and give legislative authority and responsibility to the various agencies involved. The laws should be as simple and general as possible and yet enable the agencies to function efficiently. One way to accomplish this is to incorporate in the law the immutable provisions of registration and statistical procedures but write into regulations the administrative requirements which may be revised at a later date because of change in conditions. This use of regulations which have the same force as law is advantageous in that revisions may be made simply as an administrative procedure.

6. Create awareness of the utility of the civil registration and vital statistics systems to society and to the individual so as to ensure its early establishment and full coverage in a reasonable time.

7. Start a program of methodological studies to test methods and procedures in one or two experimental areas before nationwide adoption.

8. Provide for a program of training of civil registration and vital statistics personnel, and of upgrading of positions consonant with the increase in responsibilities.

9. Include on the statistical side, the establishment of an expanding national tabulation area for births and deaths. These areas will be comprised of geographic subdivisions of the country where registration coverage is deemed satisfactory, and will form the basis for national statistics on births and deaths for analytical purposes until nationwide completeness of birth and death registration reaches an acceptable level.

10. Formulate a plan and a time table for achieving the goal of producing usable national vital statistics in a 10 to 15 year period. This plan should include all the aforementioned activities for improving civil registration and vital statistics, and should focus on problems that have a realistic possibility of solution.

11. Outline organization, staffing and budget needed for national reform of the civil registration and vital statistics systems, and for the operation and maintenance of the systems.

Although the possibility of technical assistance exists for limited developmental work from

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<sup>1</sup>A list of possible studies and steps that might be taken to improve civil registration and vital statistics may be found in Annex I.

agencies such as the United Nations Fund for Population Activities, the responsibility and initiative for the improvement of the national civil registration and vital statistics system must rest on the country itself. Also, there must be a strong national commitment to push through the urgently needed reforms, and to give high-level support to the development of a national civil registration and vital statistics system. Without such commitment, no significant progress can be expected in the development and improvement of the civil registration and vital statistics systems in the foreseeable future in most developing countries. Every country has an obligation to protect the birth right of its citizens by providing proper documentation of the vital events. Every country needs now adequate national vital statistics for national social and economic planning. The governments are urged to make the policy decision that civil registration and vital statistics are essential for the achievement of national well-being.

#### Assessment of Obstacles to Improvement

There are many obstacles that need to be overcome in order to develop a satisfactory civil registration and vital statistics system. Some of these problems are not very difficult to solve whereas others may be impossible to cope with within the means available at the particular time. One of the reasons for the lack of progress in the development of civil registration in the various developing countries may lay in the attempt to tackle everything at once--the simple, difficult and impossible problems.

In considering the elements of the long range activities for improvement, the plan should focus on problems that have a realistic possibility of a solution. The various obstacles to the improvement of civil registration and vital statistics may be classified according to how resistant or susceptible they are to solution. In such a classification, the obstacles may be considered in three broad groups: 1) relatively intractable problems relating to geography and culture, 2) problems soluble but requiring additional funds and national or outside technical assistance, and 3) immediately solvable problems.

1. Relatively intractable problems. This group of problems consists of a number of obstacles, many of which can be solved within the framework of long-range social and economic development, but can hardly be solved by short-range actions taken within the civil registration system itself. In other words, the solutions lie outside the scope of changes that the registration organization itself can bring about. Some of this group of problems relate to the geography of the country and an uneven distribution of population. Here, problems of transportation and communication vastly complicate the operation of a civil registration system.

Closely related to this, is the nature of the population. A predominantly rural, largely illiterate population may fail to comply with the laws or delay reporting the occurrence of a vital event because it would not have a high degree of motivation for registration. In extreme cases, there may exist a resistance to registration, and falsification of reported information. Also, there will be problems in communication in any educational effort to improve registration.

As stated, the impact of these conditions may be ameliorated as social and economic conditions develop, but their solution is hardly within the domain of the civil registration system alone.

2. Problems solvable but requiring additional funds. There is a long list of problems whose solution is primarily a matter of adequate funds. This list includes adequate staff, proper training, availability and distribution of essential forms and supplies, transport for supervisory or training staff, office space, modern record storage, document reproduction equipment, data processing facilities, printing facilities, etc.

In contrast to the "relatively intractable problems", most obstacles in this category could be eliminated quickly if adequate funds were available. It is difficult to estimate national expenditures for civil registration because the process is so intertwined with other regular governmental operations, but the lack of adequate funds in national budgets for specific registration needs is certainly an almost universal impediment to the improvement of the national civil registration systems.

3. Immediately solvable problems. This group of problems comprises obstacles that can be solved within the national domain with relatively small financial outlays. This group of problems includes inadequate legislation, inefficient organization, lack of coordination between the different elements of the civil registration and vital statistics systems and the question of priority to be given to the whole enterprise by the government. It is not to say that these problems are necessarily easy to

solve. There are conflicting legal interests; there are questions of competing jurisdictional control; and there are other governmental programs claiming higher priority status. However, there is nothing inherent in the problems themselves that makes them insoluble.

As stated above, the overall improvement plan developed by the ad hoc commission for civil registration and vital statistics should focus on the "solvable problems". These can be solved now under existing circumstances and without large financial implications. The "relatively intractable problems" must, to a large extent await general social and economic development. The discussion of the "problems solvable but requiring additional funds" must take cognizance of the fact that national civil registration and vital statistics are national responsibilities and financial support for these continuing and nationwide governmental activities must come from national funds.

Some support can be obtained by countries from technical assistance programs but such support is usually for a limited range of purposes and for a limited time. For years the United Nations Fund for Population Activities (UNFPA) has had a generous program of assistance for the improvement of civil registration and vital statistics. However, even here, there are limitations on the available funds and the purposes for which they may be used.

### Mobilization of Resources

An essential aspect of the strategy for improvement of civil registration is the mobilization and utilization of the resources available at various levels of government, and to carry out the necessary activities according to an integrated plan for reform. In preparing a blue print for reform of the national civil registration and vital statistics systems, recognition should be given to functions that must be carried on centrally by national agencies. In Kenya, for example, central planning was entrusted to two committees, one on registration and the other on problems of public enlightenment. It was felt that the public relations aspects required special attention and involved skills not available among registration executives. There are other things that can be done more efficiently centrally, but could be handled at a subnational level. Then, there are activities that must be conducted subnationally, more particularly at the local level.

Among other things, the drafting of national legislation on civil registration and vital statistics and of the organization plan of the national civil registration and vital statistics systems have to be done centrally, and under the direction of the presidential commission or some other high level committee. In countries where the States or provinces are autonomous of the federal government and have responsibility for civil registration, the national civil registration agency, if there is one, must draft a model State law governing civil registration for adoption by the States. In order to unify registration practices, the national agency must prepare a manual of registration procedures, including definitions of vital events, registration methods and procedures, format of records for collection of statistical data on vital events, coding rules, etc. Most of these activities should involve the collaboration of State and local registrars.

The preparation of training material for local registrars and of promotional material for the enlightenment of the public on the importance of registration of vital events is something that can be done by the State or provincial registration authorities. Because any such material for one area should be generally applicable to all other areas of the country, it might be more efficient to prepare these materials centrally. However, it would be appropriate for one or more State or provincial offices to develop training courses and promotional campaign material which could be shared by other States or provinces.

The reorganization of primary registration units and modifications in registration procedures and flow of records would have to be made in the local area under the direction of the subnational registration authorities. Also, negotiations for the establishment of registration sub-offices in large hospitals and health centers would have to be conducted locally. Other important local activities are training of local registrars and publicity campaigns on the importance and value of registration of vital events.

An important part of the strategy is to make a concerted effort to solve problems which are amenable to solution in a manageable geographic area. The futility of tackling currently insoluble problems has been discussed previously. In general, these are problems of the rural areas, especially in the remote inaccessible places. It would be well to leave these areas until the last and focus attention on geographic areas where there is a reasonable chance of success in obtaining significant reforms. This means that the overhaul and the revision of the registration organization and procedures, plus promotional work should start with the cities. Once satisfied that the

registration system in the urban centers are operating efficiently, attention can then be shifted to the rural areas. Here again, the rural parts of the country with the fewest difficult problems should first be selected. In general, these will be rural parts contiguous to the urban centers.

#### ANNEX I. SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES IN CIVIL REGISTRATION AND VITAL STATISTICS

There are numerous studies and steps that can be taken to improve civil registration and vital statistics. Some of these possibilities are listed according to the area of responsibility.

##### 1. Activities primarily the responsibility of the central government

Appointment of a high level presidential or cabinet interministerial commission to prepare a unified plan for the improvement of civil registration and vital statistics. Among other things, the plan should designate the ministries responsible for the implementation of each aspect of the plan. The commission may be a continuing body to periodically review the progress in implementing the plan and to serve as a coordinating body.

##### 2. Activities primarily the responsibility of civil registration authorities

a. Implement unified plan for national reform of civil registration system.

b. Conduct systematic study of each facet of civil registration such as registration procedure, fee system, penalty for late filing, transcription of records, filing and preservation of records, certification procedures and the whole administrative organization of the system, including the location of primary registration offices, and to identify and correct deficiencies in the system.

c. Experiment with innovative registration procedures and methods, and with office procedures to increase the efficiency of various operations.

d. Make improvements in the flow pattern of registration documents from the local registration offices to the central office.

e. Make improvements in the organization, maintenance and retrieval of records--centrally and in the field.

f. Make improvements in employment standards, incentives and distribution of work load. Develop and conduct training courses for registration personnel.

g. Arrange for utilization of local auxiliary resources for registration, incentives/penalties, uses and value of individual records and issuance of certifications of vital records. Create public awareness of need for registration of vital events.

h. Promote the utilization of birth registration records as proof of age, relationship, citizenship, etc., by other government programs, e.g., requiring birth certificate as proof of age for enrollment in grade school, for social security pensions and for food rationing.

i. Establish national and state field services to maintain uniformity of registration practices in and among the various states or provinces.

j. In collaboration with the vital statistics authority, study quality of information reported on vital records and the ways and means of improving the accuracy of reported information, including more complete and accurate statements on causes of death.

k. Study the relationship between the civil registration system and the population register if one exists or is under consideration. Because vital records are essential for the updating of population registers, an efficient and timely notification method is needed.

l. Develop a system of unique birth registration serial number. This may also serve as a national identity number.

3. Activities primarily the responsibility of vital statistics authorities

a. Implement the unified plan for national reform of the vital statistics system. Institute a "tabulation area" for compilation of national vital statistics starting with the geographic areas that meet the criteria of completeness and quality of data. As more areas qualify, they would be included in the national tabulation area.

b. Establish and exercise tight control of records flowing from the local registration offices to the central statistical office.

c. Collaborate with registration authorities in securing improvement of quality of statistical items on the registration records.

d. Review tabulation plans and make needed revisions to bring them into conformity to the greatest extent possible with national needs and international recommendations.

e. Plan and conduct data processing operations to assure timely production and distribution of monthly and annual vital statistics reports.

f. Develop analytical capabilities to increase the usefulness of the statistical output by providing meaningful interpretation of data for national planning for social and economic development. There is also need to apply statistical techniques for the management of incomplete data.

g. Contribute to the improvement of intercensal and postcensal population estimates so as to provide best denominators for the calculations of vital rates.

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