



# Technical Papers

Number 39  
February, 1990

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## SOME OBSERVATIONS ON CIVIL REGISTRATION IN FRENCH-SPEAKING AFRICA

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## FOREWORD

This paper is an English translation of Chapter 9 of the book *De l'Homme au Chiffre: Réflexions sur l'observation démographique en Afrique* edited by Louis Lohle-Tart and Remy Clairin with the collaboration of Michel François and Francis Gendreau. Les Etudes du CEPED No. 1. Paris, 1988. English translation by Mrs. Ellen Jamison. We are grateful to CEPED (Centre Français sur la Population et le Développement) for permission to publish this translation.

This article traces the history of development of civil registration in the Francophone countries of Africa and gives an account of the major problems facing these countries. There are references to the important efforts of the regional organizations to establish registration systems in these countries. Finally, it is suggested that priority be given to the improvement of civil registration for administrative and demographic purposes. It is suggested that the project be approached with realism, but there is need now to get on with the task of making civil registration a part of the national tradition.

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## SOME OBSERVATIONS ON CIVIL REGISTRATION IN FRENCH-SPEAKING AFRICA

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In this article, we consider vital registration as a unique concept and, above all, as a goal to be achieved, whereas the expression "system of registration and of vital statistics" designates original national solutions enabling the achievement of the goal.

Bearing in mind the vital registration situation in sub-saharan Africa, emphasis is placed primarily on rural areas on the one hand, and on births and deaths on the other.

Very little consideration is given to national statistics and official coverage rates of vital registration due to the very large disparities existing between rural areas and urban areas, and often among regions of the same country. "Vital registration is a tradition" (L. Henry): therefore, it should always be clear that it is a task whose results are so far in the future that we can never verify them--if the goal is achieved.

### 1. Introduction

#### 1.1. Basic principle of vital registration

The countries of black Francophone Africa generally have available three administrative sources of information on their population:

--the administrative census allowing the enumeration of certain population types (taxable persons, subjects, voters,...);

--the register of external migratory movements to enumerate persons who enter and leave the national territory;

--vital registration, which allows the identification and specifies the administrative status of each individual.

If these three procedures functioned normally, every country would be able, at any time  $t$ , to know the actual size of its population in relation to an earlier estimate made at time  $t_0$ :

$$P_t = P_{t_0} + (B - D) + (I - E) \text{ where:}$$

$P_t$  is the population at time  $t$ ;

$P_{t_0}$  is the population at time  $t_0$ ;

B-D is the crude natural increase (births minus deaths) for the period  $t$  to  $t_0$ ;

and

I-E is the migratory balance (immigrants minus emigrants) for the period  $t$  to  $t_0$ .

But, in general, none of the three procedures is able, even today, to furnish the necessary information for the annual calculation of the population size:

$P_{t_0}$ : In most cases, only the results of crude, costly, and rare operations (general population censuses are available to substitute for the administrative census.

B-D: Vital registration, often defective and incomplete, does not furnish the crude natural increase; hence, censuses and demographic surveys are the only sources of information on births and deaths, but without providing current data.

I-E: International migration is, in general, poorly known.

In countries where vital registration functions normally, processing of the data is of interest especially to demographers. Thus, it is the principal source of data concerning natural increase of the population and of the establishment of various parameters measuring, for example, fertility, mortality and nuptiality.

But only the reporting of the event, rendered obligatory by law, and registration, regulated by official codes within the framework of an institution--vital registration--will furnish the necessary elements for data processing.

#### 1.2. Historical roots of vital registration

The registration of births and deaths sinks its roots into the remotest antiquity (Pharaonic Egypt, ancient Greece and Rome, medieval Japan, the Inca Empire).

In western societies, the origin of modern vital registration was mainly religious, by the keeping of parish registers in which the sacraments were recorded in relation to demographic events (baptisms, marriages, burials); the first known registers date back to the 15th century.

It is only since the 17th century, and according to diverse approaches in Europe, that the generalized lay practice of registration of vital events progressively took root. It was still necessary to wait a long time to have

available data appropriate for statistical processing. The origin of vital statistics in Europe concerning mortality, for example, dates back only to 1751 for Sweden, to 1801 for Norway, to 1802 for Denmark, to 1817 for France, to 1838 for England, to 1840 for the Netherlands, to 1866 for Finland, to 1871 for Germany, and to 1876 for Italy and Switzerland.

Public interest in civil and legal rights of individuals and vital registration became solidified with the adoption of the Napoleonic Code in France in 1804. That was to have a great influence on the countries of Western Europe, Latin America, and the Middle East.

However, vital registration was to be particularly lagging in the United States, a country characterized by religious pluralism and a federal political system, and where it was to be truly generalized and unified only around 1930.

Knowledge of the number (and characteristics) of births, marriages and deaths is now satisfactory in the majority of countries of Europe and North America. However, one must be fully aware that this is the result of a long, continuous process--more than a century--and not the "immediate" result of an administrative organization set up by decree.

Vital registration exists today in these countries as a legal instrument that allows the public authority to record the identity of persons with a view to satisfying the practical needs of society. Its aim is the registration of biological or social events, called vital events, pertaining to physical persons (births, deaths, marriages, divorces, and various behaviors that have a direct or indirect effect on the identity of the individuals themselves or on that of another person).

A vital event is defined by legislative code, its reporting is rendered obligatory by law, its registration regulated, in the working of the records, by the official codes within the framework of the law. Thus it is that civil registration records place a person in time and characterize him; they are a means of proof, authentic records set up in special registers by a registrar acting in his official capacity.

Thus, for industrialized countries, it seems that the fundamental objective of vital registration is to permit the government to identify its citizens and individuals to prove their identity and legal status. Registration has first and foremost an administrative goal, but its statistical role remains quite essential in these countries.

Outside the industrialized countries, most countries have promulgated laws rendering obligatory the registration of vital events, at the

very least for live births and deaths. However, a large number of countries still remain where the institution does not function well and where data processing is nonexistent, except for some capitals for which one knows the births fairly well and the deaths less well.

## 2. Vital Registration Situation in the Countries of Black Africa

Historically, in countries of sub-saharan Africa, some systems for the registration of vital events were able to exist at the level of cities or political entities; however, there is practically no written evidence of this.

"Modern" vital registration was introduced by the colonizers most often in the 19th century or early in the 20th century. At first, its objectives were in direct relation to the needs of the colonial government, that is, they hardly concerned the African population, at least outside the urban centers.

In 1959, official vital registration in Francophone Africa yielded a very incomplete registration of births and a totally unusable registration of deaths. This situation prevailed equally in urban and rural areas.

In 1965, the reporting centers were very unequally visited, perhaps satisfactorily in some large agglomerations--mainly for births--but most often sporadically in rural areas.

In 1970, the system improved, but mainly in the large agglomerations (in Senegal, for example, coverage is estimated at 5 percent in rural areas but as almost complete in Dakar). At the national level, coverage in several countries is estimated at 50 percent for births, 30 percent for deaths, and 10 percent for marriages. Beyond the fact that these estimates have practically never been verified, such national "averages" mask very large disparities among areas or regions within countries.

To our knowledge, two countries are exceptions: Mauritius, where the first important regulation establishing vital registration was a royal ordinance of April 1667, and Madagascar, where vital registration was established by royal decree in July 1878. Currently, in Mauritius, formerly Ile de France, coverage is satisfactory for births and deaths; in Madagascar, coverage approaches 80 percent for the country as a whole for births and exceeds 50 percent for deaths.

Concerning Cape Verde, independent since 1975, registers have existed since 1803, but there is no data processing of the records. It is estimated that nearly 100 percent of births are registered.

In 1970, of 16 Francophone countries of West and Central Africa, only 7 published any vital registration statistics in their Bulletin, and these were limited to distributions by age and sex.

With regard to deaths, the United Nations considers as "complete" a registration system in which the rate of underreporting is officially under 10 percent. In spite of the laxity of this criterion, the only African countries having "complete" registration are Egypt and six small island nations or territories (Cape Verde, Mauritius, Reunion, Saint Helena, Sao Tome, and Seychelles), or less than a tenth of the total population of the African continent. Therefore, one might ask whether the necessary conditions for the proper operation of vital registration are present in many countries--and even whether all countries really are concerned about the development of a vital registration system.

The general secretariat of the Organisation Commune Africaine Malgache et Mauricienne published a study on this subject in 1974, entitled, "The Situation of Vital Registration in the Countries of OCAM."<sup>1</sup>

The table presented below is taken from a larger table of the study, to which we have added some countries with available information.

One notes that most of the initial legislative codes have been modified over time with a new feature: a unique and obligatory vital registration for everyone at the national level. These "new" codes regulate vital registration and specify the events that are to be captured. Often, only births, deaths, and marriage must be reported obligatorily and registered.

In a general way, vital registration appears to be an institution with dual features: social and legal. Because of that, the guardianship of vital registration is almost always taken up by the Department of the Interior for administrative management, with legal authority under the responsibility of the Justice Department to confer authenticity on the vital registration records. The Statistical Office is rarely called upon for vital registration, a *fortiori* for processing of the registrations.

The OCAM study underscores the huge disparities that can exist among countries and within countries with regard to the number of vital registration centers--with or without secondary centers--and to the numerical size of the populations served by the centers and the geographic area covered. The placing of the centers generally corresponds to exact administrative subdivisions and is very often insufficient in rural areas and, also very often, is only a

Country	Date of reference of first code	Date of code in effect in 1977
Benin	1939	1950
Burkina Faso	1939	1950
Cameroon	1917	1965
Cape Verde	1803	(?)
Central African Republic	1894	1969
Chad	1939	1961
Congo	1889	1958
Gabon	1912	1963
Ivory Coast	1950	1964
Madagascar	1878	1961
Mauritius	1667	1830
Niger	1939	1950
Rwanda	1963	1969
Senegal	1916	1972
Togo	1909	1962
Zaire	1939	1958

Nevertheless, the fact remains that it is not easy to determine the year of creation of vital registration in each country and that we do not have available information on the codes in effect today, but only on those that prevailed 10 years ago, in 1977.

marginal activity of the rural administrative center.

The "registrar," who has administrative responsibility for the records, is usually the local representative of the central office. Nevertheless, enforcement is the duty of agents

<sup>1</sup>OCAM in 1974: Cameroon, Central African Republic, Chad, Dahomey (now Benin), Gabon, Ivory Coast, Madagascar, Mauritius, Niger, Rwanda, Senegal, Togo, and Upper Volta (now Burkina Faso).

responsible for the tasks of inscription, registration, bookkeeping, maintaining files,..., but they usually are also secretaries or communal agents with other tasks to carry out, often more demanding ones than vital registration.

Training for vital registration usually takes place on the job: there is rarely any specific training, much less any retraining. Two systems of registration are practiced:  
--a sedentary vital registration in most countries;  
--A sedentary/itinerant arrangement for some countries, with or without use of a village record book.

It appears that where the method is adapted to the area, sedentary in urban areas, sedentary and itinerant in rural areas, the results are relatively better.

For all the countries studied by OCAM, five types of principal documents were identified for the inscription and registration of vital events:

- certificates (documents prepared prior to establishing a record);
- records (single-sheet or multiple-entry registers, eventually existing in several copies);
- duplicates, copies, sworn affidavits;
- summary statements of the records drawn up in a center and/or indexes of the records;
- various other documents (burial permits, family records...).

The time limits for reporting set by law attempt to strengthen the obligation to report. They vary by country.

Usually, registration of all vital events is free of charge. However, registration taxes do exist, not always officially, and these may vary in both cases from one region to another within a country.

The OCAM study shows that the development of vital registration encounters four categories of obstacles:

- the administrative system put in place;
- the staff used;
- the network of transmission;
- almost always, an insufficient motivation of the authorities and of the population.

The assessment of OCAM thus is not very optimistic, but it allows one to draw up this inventory of obstacles, which will be elaborated upon in the following section.

### 3. Obstacles and Observation Difficulties

We will distinguish in this section five sources of obstacles:  
--the government: vital registration, why do it?

- the legislation regulating the institution;
- the system for registration;
- the staff to carry it out;
- the population.

After that, we will deal with some particular problems concerning observation difficulties.

#### 3.1. The government

Even today, in many countries, the government considers that there are more important tasks than vital registration; thus, it is not motivated to take the necessary measures concerning the institution. This attitude often provides an easy alibi for putting the responsibility for the mediocrity of the institution back on the informants. If, "tomorrow," all vital events were reported on time, in most cases the vital registration staff would be hard put to register all the events.

In another connection, the government is often compartmentalized in its own routine and does not always understand the appropriate measures in a realistic way. While a network does exist, it is just poorly used.

The question to be asked, then, is this: "Vital registration, why do it?" The African reality points out that there are several possible "necessities" for a vital registration system:

- social necessity (the proof of the existence of an individual;
- purely administrative necessity;
- fiscal necessity;
- planning necessity;
- statistical necessity.

None of these seem to be well understood in most countries, since the government is satisfied with short-term solutions; in addition, the compartmentalization of responsibilities and of ministerial departments generally impedes the existence of a central "place" where all needs are perceived.

The utility of a system of vital registration spread throughout the country is not obvious to the majority of leaders (the statistician and the planner in certain sectors--public health in particular--are the most sensitive to the importance of the system). Administrative censuses--though of very uneven quality--often seem to satisfy the principal need for "rough" estimates of global trends of a population or for a general estimate of the per capita tax base, where it exists.

As for the demand for demographic data by ministries such as Planning, Development, Economy, Urbanism, one notes that this is satisfied by means of various studies, either direct (ad

hoc surveys), indirect (cross-checking, remote sensing), or secondary (more refined processing of a census, for example), because a national system of vital registration is very difficult to establish in terms of both financial and human resources; thus, it is considered outside the needs expressed by the said ministers. Moreover, the achievement of a satisfactory system is well beyond the horizons of those who could "impose" the introduction of an operational institution.

The time factor is often wrongly brought up as the major obstacle, for only time, when resources are lacking, will permit a favorable outcome.

### 3.2 Legislation

Current legislation regulating vital registration in Africa is not, for the most part, adapted to reality, but that is not what impedes a system from functioning: whatever the legislation, the system works if someone who is motivated takes charge of it.

If one acknowledges that the "product"--the vital registration data--has a reason to exist for various users but that the "mode of production" should not necessarily be the same as done elsewhere, in France for example, then one should ponder the alternatives, without preconceived ideas, according to the country that actually poses the problem.

If the principle of an adapted national vital registration is acknowledged, vital registration being a legal instrument adequate for establishing the identity of persons, the political authority should, before any "reform," carry out an in-depth study on the customary law still in effect and its impact on the events pertinent to vital registration: marriages, kinship ties and alliances are good subjects to explore; births, with respect to the time limits for reporting (which, currently, are often too short in traditional circles in relation to local customs) is another.

It is also necessary to convince the legal writers to be less fastidious about form because that weighs down the system and burdens the cost. It is not necessary for the records to be too detailed.

Finally, to reform the codes, it is necessary to set up a real collaboration among the principal departments concerned: Justice, Interior, and Statistics.

### 3.3. The registration system

All the studies undertaken on the subject underscore the weaknesses of the registration system, especially in rural areas. The number of

centers is insufficient, the procedures too complicated, the controls nonexistent. They also underscore the extreme isolation in which each center vegetates and the absence of supervision and the absence of historical information that enclose the center in such isolation in rural areas.

The sedentary nature of the centers, the marginalized activity of vital registration in relation to other administrative activities, a renovation of often deficient registers--and the utilization of up to three copies of the same register--the nonpreservation of files, etc., are so many additional obstacles.

The scale of official fees (and of those that are less so), the need for a client to return several times before receiving an official paper recording his report, are still other obstacles.

In industrialized countries, the only document proving the existence or the death of a person is a medical report. There is no vital registration record without the medical record furnished by the doctor. It is the doctor who makes the decision to identify a stillbirth or a death prior to birth. In Africa, it seems that medical units are the best collectors of information on births and deaths and have the best infrastructure; moreover, they are generally the most esteemed. Their coverage rate, however, is often quite inadequate, especially in rural areas.

### 3.4. Staff

It is certain that many vital registration centers in Africa do not have a qualified staff: --a deficient recruitment standard; --training on the job and without much direction.

If one adds to that the insufficient size of staff (more because of their other activities than of their number), one has the second great alibi vis-a-vis the poor operation of vital registration: the staff.

To agents occupied with other "more engrossing" tasks, often without clear and precise instruction for filling in the records, establishing summary registers, transmitting them to the supervisor, receiving informants,..., it becomes illusory to explain that their work is important and of national usefulness, and even more illusory when the pay and status of the employee--of the commune, of the subprefecture--are absurdly low.

It should not be forgotten that the obstacles of deficient recruitment standard and training would be overcome more easily with "simplified" registration, sufficient only for

the establishment of a proper record and a minimum of data processing.

### 3.5. Population

At the international center for the application of demographic statistics of Bangui, in 1959, the participants were asked to preserve in spirit, when working in Africa, three main traits of traditional societies:

- the existence of a socioeconomic organization that is carefully hierarchical, but often (in central Africa) at the most restricted level, the clan;
- the complete effacement of the individual before the group, the sociolegal form of which does not go below the extended family;
- The importance of religion, which permeates every act, every thought, every organization.

Since 1959, many African traits have been turned upside down by the "modern world." Nevertheless, the fact remains that everyone has a horror of practices that overturn their customs, their traditions, their beliefs, their interests, their taboos.

The Department of Public and Administrative Affairs of Niger wrote in a report about vital registration for the period 1970-73:

"This institution has not yet returned to tradition. The operation of vital registration is in general very defective. The deficiency in rural areas is a result of the lack of adaptation of the institution to the traditional society--one does not prove his paternity or his right to succession by producing a birth record. Reform is imperative."

Actually, many people live without an official record to sanction their birth, or their marriage. Are they then unknown in the society to which they belong? Of course not, for the society knows their kinship and their alliances and customarily takes them into account when it is a matter of choosing a spouse, of paternity, or of distributing the estate of the deceased.

The "modern world" also implies the development of the means of communication, the means of transport, and related public safety. Individuals are pulled by urban and economic poles of attraction; people move--at first alone, and later the family may rejoin the traveler--and for this it is necessary to own a document that vouches for one's identity; but in many countries no campaign of sensitization and of information concerning the value and utility of the institution is undertaken in that regard. It is here that education can play a major role, with the need for knowing one's age.

It is also necessary to free the population,

little by little, from its fear of the system, a fear which arose in part from certain colonial practices.

Universal inscription of persons in the vital registration system is a good thing but carries the risk of losing much of its effectiveness if it is possible to obtain or to borrow another person's identity. The solution of the affidavit has as its goal to alleviate an existing lack, it is not the cause of it. However, certain procedures for acquiring it constitute a large obstacle to the awareness of the population of the value of vital registration, of the duty, for example, of parents to declare the birth of an infant: a sworn affidavit will be established when the child's education begins if it is required. One can acknowledge in certain cases that the sworn affidavit, when it is effectively used, has become one of the major obstacles to the development of vital registration.

### 3.6. Observation difficulties

Certain difficulties in observation can be recalled here; they concern:

- the identification of an individual and the question of names;
- marriage;
- the reporting of deaths and causes of death;
- civil status and migration.

So that an individual can be identified, he should have a well-defined name that he will keep for life and which is known both to the government and to private persons with whom he deals. The rules for passing on the name should be well defined.

This is not always the case in Africa: it occurs that a neighbor or a friend does not give the "official name" of an absent person. There may be an official or public name and other variant names according to the speaker; a name can also vary in time and space, often, moreover, to reflect changes in social status or change of group. This problem of names fortunately is not too frequent, but one must be able to identify it when it exists.

Enough attention will never be drawn to the registration of marriages, renunciations, and divorces: they pose an extremely complex problem in black Africa due to a large conjugal variability in certain population groups and to the diversity and confusion of customs, traditions, and religions. These problems should be approached by a study of customary law in relation to a system of vital registration, especially to clearly define the situations encountered.

One may be interested in reporting a death to remove the person from the tax rolls and cut off the charge to the village of the deceased,



for example. One may also be interested in not reporting--for reasons of pension or retirement--and cases of exceptional longevity are thus found in Africa..., but, also in the United States.

In rural areas in Africa, it is still frequent for deaths to preserve a strictly customary and traditional nature, without any tie to vital registration.

Causes of death are a very important element in Africa, and vital registration could play a role in recording causes of death.

Some countries have put into place a population register with obligatory reporting of changes of residence, which can pose problems in terms of individual and democratic freedom. This is usually not the case in Africa; but a population register is not desirable under certain political regimes.

In a certain way, the administrative census constitutes a rough population register. It could not replace vital registration but could assist the expansion of vital registration and permit a checking of the data.

Measures of standardization are likely to come up against some resistance for some time yet or even to be purely and simply unknown to the population without an information campaign.

One notices the preponderance of knowledge of the habitat and the land in the search for solutions for demographic knowledge of the population of Africa. However, it is not necessary that "knowledge of the habitat" be an excuse for only abstract discussion.

One must identify, then understand, the obstacles and seek solutions, beginning with the way things are, in order to make things as they should be, instead of striving to transpose and copy what is being done elsewhere under different traditions.

The size of the task to be accomplished in the face of all these obstacles can cause discouragement at the start. Certain demands for success in too short a time, and without preliminary study, will lead to failure. It is necessary to develop a dynamic vital registration, progressively, taking one's time and adapting it to the evolution of populations confronted with the penetration of a so-called "modern" system into their traditional societies.

#### 4. General Principles and Characteristics of a System of Registration and Vital Statistics in Africa

From the analysis of studies and research undertaken on the problem of vital registration

in Africa, we draw some conclusions, some general principles and characteristics of a system of registration and vital statistics. We will propose here not an implementation model but a quick synthesis intended for countries to use when considering research on an appropriate national system of registration and statistics on births and deaths, and also marriage.

##### 4.1. Legislation

Life in society is organized according to rules of conduct set by law; and the rules that are enforced have their origin mainly in the law. Law is a bill passed by legislative power that determines, for example, a unique vital registration system for all citizens, but that can also set limits on the temporary methods of enforcement.

Orders and decrees are not laws but regulations that determine the means for enforcement of the law, enforcement matched on principle to a sanction.

The individual is a physical person entitled to rights and obligations within the nation.

The approach to legislation among Anglo-Saxons is very different: it is a customary right based on the declaration of the event and not on a set of laws and rules, very often compelling, especially in terms of the time limits for registration.

##### 4.2. A definition of the frame of reference (food for thought)

A system of registration and vital statistics has two complementary bases: --obligatory, continuous, and permanent reporting of the principal vital events--births, deaths (eventually marriages)--and of their characteristics, allowing the establishment of official documents conforming to current legislation, destined to furnish proof of the event, and called vital registration records. The records are written up in registers devised especially for each type of event; --the establishment, at the time of registration of vital events, of a Statistical Bulletin presenting the basic relevant characteristics of the events themselves and of the persons to whom they pertain; the transmission of these bulletins, their assembly and their processing for the elaboration, analysis, evaluation, presentation and distribution of the vital statistics gathered.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup>The establishment of a Statistical Bulletin may be the objective of a second phase in the establishment of the system, but from the beginning the registration necessary to the establishment of the record should have a double role: legal and statistical.

#### 4.3. The administrative system

Vital registration depends:

- administratively on the tutelage ministry: Ministry of the Interior;
- legally on the Ministry of Justice, which confers authenticity on each record by the numbering and initialing of the registers.

For its part, the National Statistical Office processes and distributes the vital statistics. The creation of a national technical organization seems to be necessary:

- to ensure the required coordination between the tutelage ministry, the Justice Department, and the Statistical Office, beginning with the development phase of the system;
- to ensure the responsibility for all aspects of the organization, administration, and operation of vital registration;
- to satisfy one of the main conditions of the undertaking: the continuity of the operation until the perpetuity of the system is assured and national coverage is satisfactory.

But it is not by creating this organization that the problem of vital registration is resolved, for it is only a tool. In a country that is relatively spread out, there will be a further need, for example, for decentralization at the regional level.

There is no other solution--especially in rural areas--than a very strong decentralization in the distribution of registration offices, depending on a defined, concise, and rather fine administrative subdivision, including the adoption of different solutions by the regions and populations concerned.<sup>3</sup> The time factor remains essential for carrying out a progressive geographic coverage on a par with the available resources: it is advisable to start with only one region or a fraction of a region to achieve, in the long run, a verified national coverage, and in the longer term still, the continuity of a sufficiently effective system.

#### 4.4. Vital registration staff

The registrar is the representative of the public authority. He is trained to guarantee the execution of the law and ensure the transmission of the data. He is assisted in his task by the operational agents who have a particular status and who, like him, have received theoretical and practical training to ensure the continuity and permanence of registration.

<sup>3</sup> One cannot blindly apply the same rules to city dwellers, more or less itinerant farmers (in camps), itinerant grazers, and groups such as Saharan nomads or Pygmies of the forest.

#### 4.5. Registration

The law designates in a precise manner the personnel, administration, and authority required to report a vital event to the qualified authorities, the place where the declaration should take place, and the time limits set for registration; the law likewise designates the form and content of the records and the registers, as well as their number and their use for statistical purposes (summary statements or Statistical Bulletins).

#### 4.6. Controls

The justice authorities oversee the enforcement of the law. The government ensures the management controls (buildings, property, materials, personnel, equipment, documents files,...). The control of transmissions (copies, receipts, time limits) and the editing of statistics (processing stages, coverage) are also essential parts of the system.

#### 4.7. Remarks

One should not surmise that an elaborate decentralization will run into the problem of the qualification of the staff. In fact, the raw data collected in the field are from the start very rudimentary: the existence of the event (birth or death) and a rather limited minimum number of characteristics, the accuracy of which depends little, if at all, on the qualifications of the person who records them.

The "collection" rests essentially on a recognized social structure and the existence within this structure of a respected, permanent, and literate (not necessarily in the official language of national communication) person. "There are no secrets" in a small community (village or group of villages) so there is no statutory pressure on individuals to report the events, as the person in charge of the system records them himself.

The decentralized collection--and this is the main point--operates with an absurdly small material investment and budget. Yet, it has meaning only if the passing on of information is assured and if one gives the people reasons to provide the information (administrative and statistical reasons are rarely convincing to the villagers). From whence comes the interest in integrating the system into another decentralized structure (village committee or village health committee).<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> This type of integrated "collection" in a village health system was tested in a field operation in an area of Lower Zaire in 1976; if the experiment was cut short in the end, it was due precisely to the absence of the flow of information.

One problem still remains, and not the least of them: how to link the reporting posts with the registration center, convert the declaration and registration into a vital record, and get it back to the informant? To link the collection system to the institution, a statistical technique to an administrative obligation--this is the most difficult obstacle to overcome: but, it can be overcome in several steps in rural areas and can be dealt with directly in urban areas.

## 5. The Difficult Vital Registration Experiment in UDEAC

So as not to confine ourselves to generalities, we have chosen to present as an example the approach of five countries of UDEAC<sup>5</sup> to develop a strategy to improve vital registration.

### 5.1. Point of departure

Starting out, the four countries of UDEAC found a more or less comparable situation in the demographic knowledge of their populations, which can be characterized as follows:

- insufficiency of official administrative procedures (administrative census and vital registration);
- too great an expense for a periodic general census;
- lack of continuity in the effort for a better demographic knowledge in spite of some good "classic" or "experimental" surveys, the latter often limited to a single subject.

With this beginning, the Council of the Chiefs of State adopted on 18 December 1970 (in association with Chad) a common program of observation of demographic events to be carried out over a period of 10 years.<sup>6</sup>

Very quickly, the Council realized the need for a more precise aspect of the program, a necessary complement to the censuses and surveys, called system of registration and vital statistics, and the general secretariat of UDEAC proposed a conference on continuous observation and vital registration which was held in Libreville, Gabon in 1974.

### 5.2. Objectives of the project

<sup>5</sup> UDEAC: Union Douaniere et Economique de l'Afrique Centrale. It comprised four countries (Cameroon, Central African Republic, Congo, and Gabon), to which Equatorial Guinea was added later. However, with regard to the demographic projects, Chad was added to the group as a fifth participant (UDEAC-Chad).

<sup>6</sup> In 1970, it was not yet a question of vital registration but of an institution to develop it.

Why continuous observation and Vital registration? After the adoption of the initial program in 1970, two trends were delineated within UDEAC:

- the need to have available as soon as possible data on demographic change (multi-round surveys or continuous observation); vital registration was another field to study and deal with in the long term;
- the need for a rapid improvement in the system of registration and vital statistics, even to the detriment of an immediate knowledge of data on change at the national level.

These positions resulted in different ideas worked out in the countries:

- the improvement of vital registration at the national level would require a long period of time--one or several generations; during this long period of time, could censuses and surveys also be financed?
- the pilot continuous observation operations, initial operations of the program, were more-or-less a failure, depending on the country.<sup>7</sup>

The Libreville conference posed the following question: "How to have both demographic data and the improvement of vital registration?"

The general secretariat of UDEAC proposed a response 4 years later in 1978, at the time of an ad hoc commission on vital registration at Libreville. This proposition was the result of an in-depth study of CREP<sup>8</sup> on all the work carried out in the region and elsewhere.

### 5.3. The CREP Project

Emphasizing the operational aspect, that is, the administrative side of vital registration, the general secretariat of UDEAC proposed a project for the improvement of the system of registration and statistics of vital events as a basis for study, not as a model, in order to plan a national strategy, followed by a national project in each country, adapted to local conditions. The CREP Project comprises four principal studies:

- (a) the requirement for preliminary studies:
  - an exact inventory of existing centers and their personnel; evaluation of the budget of vital registration;
  - detailed cartography for an optimal administrative subdivision;

<sup>7</sup> Incomplete operations, resources insufficient or not respected, evaluations planned but not carried out, experiments with village record-books abandoned or not carried out, insufficient motivation at all levels, lack of support from "outside" organizations.

<sup>8</sup> CREP: Centre Regional d'Etude de la Population.

--study of a consistent, rapid, and realistic network for transmitting the data;  
--sensitization of the local authorities;  
--in-depth analysis of existing legislative codes on vital registration and of customary laws and traditions;  
--evaluation of the quality of the forms used and of their eventual simplification;  
--study of the role and the necessary and sufficient tasks for each agent in the hierarchy.

(b) study of the reporting offices and of the registers to be used:  
--increase in rural offices;  
--register in triplicate: original, copy for the central office, and receipt.

(c) study on the training of operational personnel (theoretical and practical training):  
--training of trainers;  
--manual of basic training (a collaboration of CEA/OCAM/UDEAC);  
--operations guide for vital registration agents (a collaboration of CEA/OCAM/UDEAC);  
--a study of indirect sensitivity training for vital registration: law faculty, national school of administration, school of judges, faculty of medicine, schools for nurses, paramedics, social scientists, teachers, etc.; civic instruction in all institutions of learning, in the army, etc.;  
--periodic retraining of staff.

(d) study of the financial strategy of national projects:  
--how to free up funds and better distribute existing funds;  
--how to restrict outside financial aid;  
--how to relay outside financial aid if it occurs.

This project--the studies carried out in the framework of the project--comes under three principal ideas:

--a political will of the countries expressed by a continuing moral and financial commitment vis-a-vis the national project;  
--the registration of births and deaths satisfies administrative and statistical needs. It is necessary to place at the disposition of the population an easily accessible administrative system, operating properly and served by a competent staff;  
--it is necessary to work in the short term if one desires eventually to find a national solution--in the long term. In other words, the national project should be put into place in one region, even in a part of a region in rural areas, and in just one agglomeration in urban areas. This objective permits a maximum reduction in cost, for obvious reasons of existing resources, but also allows one to "limit the damage" in case of failure.<sup>9</sup>

Thus, the project takes the following position: the improvement of vital registration has priority and has dual objectives, administrative and demographic.

However, there remain three other possible options:

--obtainment of vital statistics data does not have high priority and the existing system should be left as best as possible in the hope that it will improve with time;  
--rapid obtainment of vital statistics data does have high priority and data should be obtained by means other than vital registration;  
--rapid obtainment of vital statistics data and the improvement of vital registration both have high priority; thus, both a demographic survey and actions to improve vital registration are needed.

#### 5.4. Simplified presentation of the "working model"

On the one hand, there is a very important effort to ruralize the system with collection at two levels:

--the reporting office;  
--the vital registration center.

On the other hand, there is a national Department of Vital Registration and a Department of Statistics.

From one end to the other in the chain, there are persons to convince, including the operations staff who must also be trained, checked on, and retrained.

##### 5.4.1. The reporting office

The idea is to set up an office for a village or a group of villages--it is a question of the size of the corresponding population--which has available a medical, social, or rural infrastructure or in which one can create a village committee. In fact, it is doubtless less difficult to attack the problem at the elementary collective level than to think only in terms of individuals.

It is also a problem of density (low density but large distances to travel), of the nature of the settlement (grouped or dispersed) and of accessibility in all seasons.

A part-time vital registration agent with fixed remuneration has available only one reporting register, with triplicate copies: the original, the copy intended for the vital registration center, and the reporting receipt (which is not a record). This agent periodically submits the

<sup>9</sup>In 1975, IDRC (Canada) estimated the cost of 3 years of operation among 600,000 inhabitants, of which 100,000 in urban areas, at 55 million FCFA. This population corresponds to about 45,000 births per year. After the first 3 years, cost of the subsequent phases would be, also according to IDRC, from 30 to 40 percent less.

appropriate copy to the center, retrieves the completed records, and distributes them upon his return. He is under the control of the registrar at the vital registration center.

#### 5.4.2. The vital registration center

The idea is to have a center in all the rural communes and urban divisions, operating full time. However, in regions of low administrative density, one can anticipate a larger number of vital registration centers than the number of rural communes.

It receives the declarations, retrieves them from the local offices, draws up the records, makes up the summary reports--or Statistical Bulletin--and transmits the information; it controls the local offices under its authority. It is under the control of the next higher administrative level and of the procurator of the lower court.

#### 5.4.3. The national vital registration office

The central agency to be created, it is responsible for the organization, administration, and operation of vital registration. It has a department charged with sensitization programs.

#### 5.4.4. The National Statistical Office

It processes the information that it receives and publishes the vital registration statistics. It ensures, together with the National Vital Registration Office, the verification of the quality of the summaries, down to the reporting offices, and conducts periodic sample surveys to evaluate the coverage of the system.

#### 5.5. The village record-book

A particular document prepared by CREP deals with village committees and record-books. It is the result of a thought process carried out during several years in the field and of an understanding of the area. It concerns rural areas.

It is probable that, in time, small rural villages will disappear to the benefit of larger villages having basic management and operational infrastructures: government, agriculture, health, markets,... and vital registration.

These basic infrastructures are possible if one utilizes the least expensive techniques supportable by the local budget, simple techniques that are easily controllable by a motivated local government.

These techniques are thus the basis for the basic administrative infrastructure and a

development approach that was put into place by the countries of UDEAC in the period 1970-1980: the village committee. Of course, active participation of the population is necessary for the creation and effective functioning of these committees, which prepare the eventual permanent administrative structures within the framework of integrated rural development. This willingness for community development was real in 1978 in UDEAC: success of the village health committees in the prefecture of Ouham in Central African Republic, and village committees established since 1974 in the Congo.

Concerning vital registration, one should return to the ideas of reporting offices and of village record-books in the desire to verify or recall that "these have already worked elsewhere."<sup>10</sup>

The village record-book is a memorandum, a written testimony of births and deaths; it can have a pedagogic value. But it is of use only if it is coherent, verified, and processed, and works only if it registers a minimum of information; a simplified reporting form for a birth, for example, might be as follows:

Name _____	Control stamp of vital registration register:
was born _____	
son, daughter of _____	
and of _____	No. (RECORD)
at _____	
_____	

Thus it is a "basic register," but it can be made in triplicate as already discussed.

For the general secretariat of UDEAC, the components of a new system are to be determined according to the particular needs and conditions of each country. It would be interesting for the four countries to make known the situation of their vital registration today in relation to the approach to the problem proposed by the general secretariat between 1970 and 1980.

#### 6. Conditions Inherent to the Development of Vital Registration

- 1) Patience and time.

<sup>10</sup>The existence of a village record-book is not necessarily linked to the existence of a village committee, provided that the village has a capable person motivated to use it.

- 2)(a) Absence of social, religious, or ethnic discrimination.
- (b) Need, from the start, for a strong, centralized authority, for:
  - the definition of concepts;
  - the enforcement of the law and the institutions;
  - the utilization of resources.
- (c) Conviction on the part of managers regarding the utility of vital registration.
- (d) Public safety and adequate means of communication.
- (e) Adequate number of rural centers.
- (f) Staffing adequate in number and competence (training, instructions).
- (g) Definition, quality, and free-of-charge registration (at the outset, basic data).
- (h) Operational and rapid means of transmission of information.
- (i) Ensured data processing in a regular manner, with periodic publications.
- (j) Controls: an appropriate system in place, and a staff responsive to the controls.

3) A program of sensitization and motivation of the population:

- (a) Explain what vital registration is, what the records are used for.
- (b) Present information on the advantages of having records, and the disadvantages of not having them.
- (c) Motivate the reporting of events.
- (d) Familiarize the public with reporting procedures.
- (e) Present information on the government's efforts to improve vital registration.
- (f) Convince the public to cooperate.
- (g) Establish programs targeted by population type.
- (h) Utilize all means of communication.
- (i) Take into account the literacy rate of targeted population.

4) There are five steps for adopting a new idea (vital registration):

- (a) Perception.
- (b) Interest.
- (c) Testing.
- (d) Evaluation.
- (e) Adoption.

7. Conclusions

Is it not paradoxical that some countries, having available today entire sectors of government and the most modern tools (public finance, customs, ... data processing, macro-economic modeling), do not make the effort necessary for the development of vital registration and do not pay more attention to the demographic aspect of economic planning, while in most of them their rate of population growth compromises a little more every day their development efforts? Nevertheless, vital registration is not an

institution apart, on the margin, and the question will not be resolved in isolation.

Everywhere outside of Africa, one has observed a very slow evolution of what exists today, of needs that cannot always be ignored, of a compromise between customs and institutions, of a narrow articulation between the population and the institution.

Therefore, it is not a question of quickly creating a monster, nor of duplicating what exists elsewhere, but of promoting a tradition: the major obstacle, in this situation, is time. How does one engage the politician, who loves what can be seen, and seen rapidly, in an effort whose results he will not see?

One must not impose vital registration but create the conditions of a dynamic, show the population little by little the value of it, until the demand comes from them.

The role of the statistician and the demographer is thus to suggest, to prompt, to push the authorities to find the capability to conceive along with them this long and slow process of official, obligatory, continuous, and permanent registration of births and deaths, and then of other events, such as marriage, when the time comes. The statistician and the demographer must be patient and imaginative, patience and imagination being the principal traits of the organizations in which they work.

They should not attach importance to crude results, but assist in a continuous improvement in the number of declarations of vital events, which represents the rapidity of progression. The statistician, like the demographer, knows that changes in a population are generally very slow. They should think the same way about vital registration, being careful to assist in putting it in place and not utilizing it as if it were already complete--or favoring the spectacular. They should also look into one or more extremely isolated or little-known centers where there has been good registration...perhaps for a number of years, and for which it would be interesting to understand the reasons for their good operation.<sup>11</sup> At the same time, if they have the means, they should also try to furnish demographic data that the "provisionally" deficient system cannot yet provide.

It has been stated that a real effort of thought and search for solutions has been undertaken by varied and numerous organizations,

<sup>11</sup> For example, a group of villages to the northeast of Abidjan have been noted, in a forested area, where a vital registration system instituted by missionaries has functioned satisfactorily among some 8,000 inhabitants since 1952.

such as UDEAC, OCAM, or United Nations,..., at INSEE, ORSTOM, INED, IUSSP, VISTIM,..., in various cooperative agencies, IDRC, (France); has this effort been continued, pursued, amplified? Cooperation among countries can only be beneficial, as opposed to isolation, which is often sterile.

On the other hand, one must discontinue those projects where recurrent expenditures--operation, continuity, growth--will not be carried out in a satisfactory manner.

Let us not be like the parents who do not report a birth and discover happily, at the time their child enters school, the means to establish an affidavit. Let us assist in the creation of the habit of reporting an event in order to create, with time, a tradition: vital registration.

We have lost 25 years; let's make vital registration a part of tradition as soon as possible.

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