Progress report on Africa Programme on Accelerated Improvement of Civil Registration and Vital Statistics System

1. Background

1. The practice of registration of vital events and the compilation of vital statistics dates back to colonial history in most African countries. However, despite the long history of existence, civil registration systems in most African countries do not function properly to date. Most countries on the continent have systems characterized by incompleteness in terms of coverage of the entire population as well as in registration of events themselves. The incompleteness of civil registration and vital statistics systems has resulted in inadequacies in processes of socio-economic planning, measurement of progress of development such as the Millennium Development Goals, in the establishment of proper systems of national identity and in setting up proper systems of governance and above all denying people of their rights and privileges (the ‘scandal of invisibility’).

2. There have been past efforts to revamp and improve civil registration and vital statistics (CRVS) systems on the continent. However, the approaches adopted were largely fragmented and uncoordinated and therefore did not achieve effective or sustainable solutions for CRVS in African countries. In the past, initiatives and efforts aimed at improving CRVS systems were largely dominated by isolated project-based and institution-led ad hoc exercises with no link to national development frameworks or policy issues. This resulted in ineffective and unsustainable trials, which although related to CRVS functions, could not be scaled to national CRVS systems.

3. Moreover, to support the development of national CRVS systems, in most instances, there were no properly developed national plans on CRVS, either at the medium or long term with clear targets and systematic mechanisms for evaluating successes and failures. Likewise, past interventions from regional and international development partners were not guided by systematically developed regional plans, thus contributing to uncoordinated and fragmented resource use and limited impact on the overall outcomes of the interventions.

1.0 The road map towards accelerated improvement of CRVS in Africa
4. The need to re-align efforts at regional and national level and to further assess and address challenges holding back the success of the systems led to the convening of a ‘Regional workshop on strengthening of Civil Registration and Vital Statistics systems in Africa’ in June 2009 in Dar-es-salaam, Tanzania. The regional workshop, addressed some of the fundamental bottlenecks that came in the way of improving CRVS systems on the continent. Among several other recommendations of the workshop was the call made to the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) and the African Development Bank (AfDB) to provide leadership to the regional initiative on improvement of CRVS systems and to prepare a plan that would guide regional and country efforts towards improvement of CRVS systems. The meeting also emphasized the need for political support as a major thrust towards the success of the systems in countries and therefore called on the African Union Commission (AUC), AfDB and the ECA to convene a meeting of African ministers responsible for civil registration as a priority action towards realizing the regional CRVS improvement efforts.

5. As proposed during the Tanzania regional workshop, a regional CRVS Secretariat was established at the African Centre for Statistics of the ECA. The Secretariat with the support of AUC, AfDB and other regional and international organizations organized the first meeting of African ministers responsible for civil registration in Addis Ababa Ethiopia, in August 2010. The ministerial meeting was considered a significant milestone in harnessing the much needed political commitment required in moving the CRVS agenda. The Ministers during this conference pledged support and commitment in taking CRVS to an accelerated growth trajectory and to providing policy and programme directions to regional organizations and other partners and also to the countries. The ministers endorsed a proposed regional CRVS improvement plan presented by the Secretariat and country experts. The ministers further made an urgent call for the conduct of a regional assessment study on the status of CRVS systems, as an initial step to guide the improvement efforts. The ministers also asked the existent regional statistical forums to prioritize CRVS within the thematic areas of discussion.

2.0 Achievements following the first ministerial meeting

6. The following are the achievement realized in the Africa CRVS improvement initiative following the first ministerial meeting.

a) The whole initiative on CRVS improvement in Africa was conceptualized into a programmatic framework called the Africa Programme on Accelerated Improvement of Civil Registration and Vital Statistics (APAI-CRVS). The APAI-CRVS emerged from the necessity of bringing together various CRVS initiatives on
the continent into a common and consolidated policy and advocacy framework. The programme was developed based on international principles and recommendations on CRVS and following the political commitment and policy directives of the ministers in charge of civil registration. The overall objective of APAI-CRVS is to provide management and programmatic guidance to the continental agenda of reforming and improving CRVS systems. Specifically, the programme seeks to provide guidance on the institutional and operational linkages, workflows and results management mechanisms in a more comprehensive and holistic manner encompassing the inter-disciplinary and inter-sectoral interfaces of CRVS systems. APAI-CRVS is implemented through the Medium Term Plan (MTP) which was endorsed by the Ministers.

b) One of the most significant steps after the ministerial was the expansion of partnership beyond the three pan-African institutions, to the formation of a regional CRVS Core Group. The Core group is composed of the United Nations Children’s fund (UNICEF), United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the World Health Organisation (WHO), Health Metrics Network (HMN) and the Secretariat of the African Symposium on Statistical Development, represented by Statistics South Africa. This partnership serves to provide both financial and technical support to the regional CRVS Secretariat in the implementation of APAI-CRVS.

c) Following the recommendations of the ministerial meeting, a regional assessment of the status of CRVS systems covering all countries was conducted using a questionnaire that was developed by the CRVS Secretariat and reviewed by country experts in January 2011. The assessment questionnaire was designed to collect information on the status of CRVS systems in sufficient details. The questionnaire sought to assess the present status of registration of live births, deaths, foetal deaths, marriages and divorces and compilation and dissemination of vital statistics from the registration system. The primary objectives of the assessment study were:

- To assess the current status of CRVS systems in member States;
- To provide baseline information for monitoring the progress in the implementation of the MTP and;
- To assist in preparing evidence-based reports for the second ministerial conference on CRVS and other regional meetings on CRVS.

Responses were received from 45 out of 54 countries to which the questionnaire was sent. The findings of this assessment have been very useful in defining the
strategies for improvement of CRVS systems in Africa and identifying the necessary areas of interventions.

The key challenges in the CRVS systems in Africa identified through the study were:
- Legal barrier
- Poor registration accessibility in rural areas
- Registration services charged for primary service
- No or inadequate regular budget
- Absence of monitoring system
- Absence or inadequate coordination mechanism
- Insufficient human resources – lack of training
- Lack of awareness among public of the importance and need
- Poor utilization of records/certificates and data

d) Specific measures have been taken to advocate for the importance of CRVS in the highest regional platforms and fora. The 6th ASSD that was held in Cairo, Egypt in 2010 adopted a resolution that shifted its focus area from Population and Housing Censuses to CRVS systems for the next five symposia beginning 2012. Accordingly, the 7th and 8th ASSD held in January and November 2012 respectively, were the first in a series of the five symposia to be convened focusing on CRVS. The 7th ASSD was held on the theme of ‘Improving Civil Registration and Vital Statistics Institutional and Human Infrastructure.’ The 8th ASSD focused on the improvement of registration of death and the recording and certification of causes of death which is the worst performing component of the CRVS systems in most countries in the region.

The 7th ASSD was the first time in history that Civil Registration authorities and heads of National statistics offices gathered under one roof at a continental level to discuss issues around Civil Registration and Vital Statistics. A number of recommendations were made in the meeting, some of which related to issues of coordination and roles and responsibilities of the two players in the operational aspects of CRVS at country level. The 8th ASSD similarly them together and went a step further to involve a few Ministers of Health in recognition of the role of the Ministry of Health not only as a producer and user of vital statistics from Civil Registration but also a key role player and potential resource in the registration of births and deaths, and also in the accurate recording and certification of death and causes of death. Moreover, the Statistical Commission for Africa in its third session that was held immediately following the 7th ASSD discussed CRVS as an emerging
topic and also made specific recommendations with regard to the role of National Statistics Offices in improvement of Civil Registration based vital statistics.

e) The Ministerial meeting requested the AUC to consider institutionalizing the Conference of African Ministers Responsible for Civil Registration as a standing regional platform to meet biannually to monitor progress in the implementation of regional commitments in the improvement of CRVS. The proposal for instituting the conference of Ministers as a standing platform was approved by the Ministers of Planning and Finance and endorsed by the heads of States during the 19th Ordinary Session of the Assembly of Heads of State and Government of the African Union, held in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, from 15 to 16 July 2012. This move is a key milestone in ensuring sustained political support for improvement of CRVS systems in countries within the region.

3.0 Policy directives of the second conference of African ministers responsible for civil registration

The second conference of ministers responsible for civil registration was held on 6 and 7 September 2012 in Durban, South Africa, on the theme of ‘Improving Civil Registration and Vital Statistics Institutional and Human Infrastructure’. The conference was jointly organized the regional CRVS Secretariat, the regional CRVS Core Group and the Government of the Republic of South Africa. The conference took note of the progress made by the region in the improvement of CRVS systems. The ministers endorsed the findings of the regional assessment study presented by the Secretariat and further made an urgent call for all countries to undertake a comprehensive assessment of their CRVS systems, followed by the development of a national plan of action. The ministerial meeting called on the regional CRVS core group and other regional and international organizations to provide the required technical and financial support to countries in undertaking the assessment and in the development of national plans of action. Some of the other key recommendations are given below:

a) Formulate laws and policies that ensure timely and compulsory registration of all vital events occurring within the countries, with guarantees of equal access to the system for all persons, regardless of nationality or legal status;

b) Accord high priority to CRVS and ensure allocation of adequate human and financial resources for the day-to-day operations of CRVS in countries, including implementation of the national action plans in order to ensure sustainability and country ownership;

c) Take steps to improve the availability and accessibility of civil registration services by devolving services to local levels through existing structures and service networks, in particular the health sector;
d) Member States and development partners to reinforce the CRVS Secretariat at UNECA with adequate resources and appropriate staff complement to enable it carry out its mandate as recommended by the first Ministerial conference; and
e) The African Union to allocate the necessary financial and technical resources in support of the CRVS development agenda.

8. In accordance to the ministerial directives, the regional CRVS Secretariat embarked on the development of a comprehensive plan to support countries in rolling out the assessments in a systematic and coordinated manner. The proposed modalities for undertaking the assessments were presented and discussed at the 8th ASSD held in Yamoussoukro, Cote d’Ivoire. The meeting agreed on a common strategy suggested by the Secretariat which entailed the development of a regional pool of experts to support countries in undertaking the assessments. As per the strategy, the experts, who will be drawn from all over Africa, will be assigned to countries over the initial period to assist countries through the assessments and preparation of the strategic plan. In addition to the technical support, the expert assigned to a country will work directly with the focal points to guide, train and mentor over the review period.

4.1 Development of a regional pool of experts to support countries in assessment of their CRVS systems and in the development of national plans of action

9. Based on the strong political commitment to strengthening CRVS, and the results of key studies of the assessment of African CRVs systems, the current focus is on coordinating activities and training experts to support comprehensive assessments of African CRVS systems.

10. The regional CRVS Secretariat with the support of the regional CRVS Core Group organized a training workshop for the development of a regional pool of African CRVS experts, held from 20th to 31st May 2013, in Gaborone, Botswana. The purpose of the workshop was to equip experts with the required tools and methodologies, in order to assist countries in undertaking comprehensive assessments of their CRVS systems and in development of national CRVS action plans. The training also aimed at achieving a long-term objective of assisting countries in developing their own team of experts in CRVS who would help the countries in their endeavour in attaining complete and efficient CRVS systems.

11. The training workshop of African experts on CRVS was designed to be highly practical oriented and included:
   a) A rounded understanding of CRVS;
   b) Understanding the APAI-CRVS approach;
   c) Reviewing the tools and methodologies for comprehensive assessment;
   d) Development of plan of action
12. The workshop brought together three categories of trainees namely: Senior Advisors, Advisors, and young African professionals of the ISibalo Young African Statisticians programme. The Senior Advisors and Advisors generally consist of experienced persons (including young retirees) who have worked in senior positions in the field of civil registration and/or vital statistics, public health or public administration. Young African professionals with a proven demonstrated interest in CRVS also participated in the training. The engagement of the young professionals is aimed at mentorship and capacity building, and is aligned to the recommendations of the 8th ASSD and the commitments of African ministers responsible for civil registration; to support their capacity development by engaging them as part of the team that will support countries to conduct CRVS system assessments. Also in attendance will be members of the regional CRVS core group.

13. These experts will now be made available to the countries to support the assessment and plan development processes upon country request. The entire process should be country led and country owned. All countries are therefore expected to take the lead in the entire process and only view the expert team as a support team.

14. Demand for comprehensive assessments in Africa is high. The Core Group will next consider how best to plan and coordinate CRVS comprehensive assessments across Africa, supported by partners. This activity is expected to be progressed across 2013 and 2014.

15. In addition, consideration will need to be given by the Core Group as to
   a) how to best support CRS strengthening based on assessment results over the medium term (3-5 year), noting that many strengthening activities will require a combination of partner support and country commitment; and
   b) how to monitor and achieve sustainable CRVS within countries; conscious that past approaches which have not been well coordinated have not resulted in sustainable outcomes for countries.

**Challenges in the implementation of APAI-CRVS**

16. The major challenge has been the absence of a systematic funding for implementing the activities included in the MTP. The funding support from partners is inadequate and ad-hoc in nature and this unpredictability of funding does affect the smooth implementation of the programme. Maintaining a steady support of human resources at the Secretariat is another challenge that impedes the implementation of the programme.
17. Coordination among various departments and stakeholders remains a major challenge. There is also lack of coordination among on the UN agencies in countries leading to uncoordinated support to the countries.

Way forward

18. The declaration made by the Ministers in their first and second conference sets out clear policy and programme directives which guide the APAI-CRVS. The regional organizations and partners commit to strive harder to ensure that the programme is implemented in its true letter and spirit at the regional and national levels.

19. There is however, a need for a systematic and predictable pool of resources from the partners and from the governments in order to fully achieve the objectives of this continent wide programme. This will require both countries and the regional group to ensure that there is sufficient rigorous planning and business planning to progress the required work and attract funding opportunities.

20. In addition, there is currently a wealth of knowledge available from innovative partner activities in registration, vital statistics and health which should be reviewed for possible application and scale up within countries where applicable within CRVS system plans.

21. There is also a need to advocate for improved coordination in the countries.