The Africa Civil Registration and Vital Statistics Programme

Contribution to the report on ‘Progress in strengthening health information systems in Africa’

Introduction
The records, legal documents and vital statistics derived from a well functioning Civil Registration and Vital Statistics (CRVS) system constitute the basic building blocks and fundamental ingredients for the establishment and optimal operation of the health information system of any country. Civil Registration systems are the most comprehensive and most reliable sources of information on the occurrence and characteristics of birth and deaths, as well as information on causes-of-deaths pertaining to all members of the population. The continuous recoding of the occurrence and characteristics of vital events is crucial in deriving current and universal population based indicators for the monitoring for health, accountability, planning and timely response of incidences of disease epidemics. The CRVS system provides a unique source of population data, which in the main, cannot be met by any other sources of data such as population censuses and surveys.

Unfortunately, despite their immense benefits, CRVS systems are in a poor state of functioning in most African countries. It is against this background that the continent, through the leadership of its lead pan-African institutions namely: the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA), the African Development Bank (AfDB) and the African Union Commission (AUC) is implementing a continental programme for the accelerated improvement of the systems, known as the “Africa Programme on Accelerated Improvement of Civil Registration and Vital Statistics (APAI-CRVS).

Key milestones in implementation of the regional CRVS programme (May 2013-June 2014)
1. Comprehensive assessments of the CRVS systems- The APAI-CRVS follows a phase-based implementation approach. Having concluded the re-orientation phase in 2012; which mainly entailed advocacy and rallying partners to seek their commitments, the programme is now in the operations phase which requires that all countries undertake comprehensive assessments of their CRVS systems, followed by the development of national CRVS action plans, based on the results of the assessment. The assessment aims at guiding countries through a holistic review of the legal, organizational and operational issues and different work processes of the CRVS systems, in order to devise a strategy that effectively revamps the system with all its components, and secondly aligning the existing work processes to international standards, principles and recommendations on CRVS.
The comprehensive assessment is guided by a set of regional CRVS assessment tools and guidelines developed by the regional CRVS Core group. The main thematic areas covered by the assessment are namely:

i) The policy and legal framework for Civil Registration and Vital Statistics;
ii) Operations and practices relating to birth, death, marriage and divorce registration;
iii) Recording and processing of cause-of-death information and
iv) Operations and practices on vital statistics

Progress among countries in initiating CRVS comprehensive assessments has been varied. A summary of the status of countries with regards to the assessment is presented in the table below. It is envisioned that at the end of 2015, all countries will have undertaken a comprehensive review of their systems and developed a national plan of action, therefore transiting into the third phase of the regional programme’s implementation framework i.e. the implementation phase.

Table 1. Status of conducting CRVS system comprehensive assessments

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<tr>
<th>Status of countries</th>
<th>Country</th>
<th>No</th>
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<tr>
<td>1. Countries that have not requested for any support from the Core Group in initiating the assessment</td>
<td>Algeria, Benin, Cameroon, Cape Verde, CAR, Chad, Comoros, Congo Brazzaville, Cote D’ivoire, DRC, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, Gambia, Guinea-Bissau, Lesotho, Libya, Madagascar, Malawi, Mali, Mauritania, Mauritius, Morocco, Niger, Sao-Tome and Principe, Sierra Leone, Seychelles, South Sudan, Somalia, Zimbabwe, Tunisia, Togo,</td>
<td>31</td>
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<td>2. Countries that are preparing for the assessment</td>
<td>Tanzania, Uganda, Rwanda, Angola, Ghana, Burundi, Nigeria, Eritrea, Swaziland, South Africa, Namibia,</td>
<td>11</td>
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<td>3. Countries that are currently conducting the assessment</td>
<td>Botswana, Senegal</td>
<td>2</td>
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<td>4. Countries that have completed the assessment and planning processes</td>
<td>Mozambique, Liberia, Egypt, Ethiopia, Kenya, Zambia, Djibouti, Sudan, Burkina Faso,</td>
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2. **Promoting knowledge and sharing of good practices**: Specific measures have been taken to continually advocate for the importance of CRVS at the highest regional platforms and fora on the continent. In this respect the, the 9th African Symposium on Statistical Development (ASSD) was held in Gaborone, Botswana in February 2014 under the theme “Promoting the Use of Civil Registration and Vital Statistics in Support of Good Governance in Africa. The symposium provided an opportunity for learning and sharing of experiences among countries which is vital to the improvement of the systems. The symposium also laid focus on rallying African countries towards undertaking comprehensive assessments and planning exercises, in accordance to the regional programme’s priority actions.
3. The third conference of African ministers responsible for civil registration.-In a bid to assess the progress made in implementation of the regional programme, the continent will host the third ministerial conference on civil registration in Yamoussoukro, Cote d’Ivoire on 16th to 17th October 2014. The ministerial conference will be held under the theme “promoting the use of Civil Registration and Vital Statistics in support of good governance in Africa”. The Conference will convene all African Ministers responsible for Civil Registration, a few Ministers of Health, Heads/Directors of National Statistics Offices (NSOs), Heads of Civil Registration Authorities (CRAs), representatives of regional and international organizations, representatives of UN agencies, UN Country offices residing in Cote d’Ivoire, and representatives of Non-Governmental Organizations. The conference will take stock of the progress made in implementation of the regional programme; specifically in view of the undertaking of comprehensive CRVS system assessments. The meeting will also hold technical discussions on the contribution of CRVS in supporting good governance in Africa.

4. Promoting collaboration with the health sector as a key actor on CRVS: The regional programme recognizes that CRVS system improvement is a multi-disciplinary and multi-sectoral endeavor, requiring the primary engagement of the health sector as a core actor and lead stakeholder along-with the Ministry responsible for Civil Registration and the National statistics office. Health has an important contribution to make in the facilitating universal registration of births and deaths (both institutional and non-institutional), in the assigning and documentation of causes-of-death and in the production and use of vital statistics from civil registration. The figure below is the operational framework proposed by the regional programme for the CRVS systems at country level.

Figure 1. An ideal CRVS Operational Framework as proposed by APAI-CRVS.
The regional programme recognizes engagement with the health sector as critical to the development of CRVS systems in Africa. It is for this reason that African ministers responsible for civil registration during their last conference held in September 2012, asked for the engagement of Ministers responsible for health in the forthcoming conferences on civil registration. In this respect, the third conference of ministers responsible for civil registration will also convene a few ministers responsible for health. Such collaboration and dialogue is expected to fundamentally contribute to the development of the poorly functioning systems, to the strengthening of health information systems and eventually to human development on the continent as a whole.

5. Building knowledge and capacity of countries in CRVS
The regional CRVS Core Group has developed as set of regional resource materials, generally aimed at building the capacities of countries in the management and operations of CRVS systems. These materials include: Operational guidelines on Civil Registration, Operational guidelines on Vital Statistics as well as a set guidelines and tools for assessment and strategic planning. The core group is also in the process of developing a technical note and/or guidelines for the improvement of death registration and cause-of death operations, whose functioning lags way behind that of birth registration for most African counties. Plans are underway to initiate research on this subject in collaboration with the World Health Organisation (WHO) and the INDEPTH Network who are both members of the regional CRVS Core group.

Conclusion
The Africa CRVS programme holds fundamental promises for the development of well functioning CRVS systems for the continent, the strengthening of health information systems and to Africa’s development as a whole. Collaboration and partnership with the health sector is found pertinent to the success of all efforts in place and cannot be overemphasized.