Report to the independent Expert Review Group (iERG) on Accountability for Women’s and Children’s Health

Theme: Progress in building Civil registration and vital statistics systems in Africa

1.0 Background
Africa is implementing a major continental programme on the improvement of civil registration and vital statistics (CRVS) systems; known as the Africa Programme on accelerated improvement of civil registration and vital statistics (APAI-CRVS). This regional programme holds great promise in the improvement of maternal and child health outcomes in the region, and corresponds in many respects to the priorities of the sustainable development goal agenda; primarily through strengthening country efforts in the development of systems that will provide the much needed mortality data for populations, and hence the basis for monitoring and implementation of maternal and child health programmes in the region.

This report provides the progress made in the past twelve months in the implementation of the Africa regional programme on CRVS, and builds up on similar reports submitted to the IERG secretariat in the past two years.

1.1 Introduction
APAI-CRVS is implemented based on the policy and programmatic guidance provided by African ministers responsible for civil registration through the resolutions made at the biennial Conference of African ministers responsible for Civil Registration. The ministerial conference has to date been convened thrice, with the last conference that was held in February 2015 in Yamoussoukro, Cote d’Ivoire. At the first session of the Conference, held in Addis Ababa in 2010, ministers recognized CRVS as a development imperative for Africa and made clear commitments to improving the systems in their respective countries. At the second session of the Conference, which took place in Durban, South Africa, in...
2012, ministers recommended specific, practical steps for achieving complete and efficient CRVS systems. They tasked the three pan-African institutions to take leadership of the regional initiative, and called upon other development partners to take support implementation of the programme and the regional and country levels. During the third conference, the conference made specific recognition of the health sector as a key stakeholder in the improvement of CVRS systems, and a core beneficiary of well functioning systems. It called upon ‘WHO, in collaboration with Pan African Organizations and other partners, to intensify their efforts in developing real time death registration and causes of death information systems at country level’.

### 1.2 Priorities of the regional programme in the past twelve months

#### i) Building/ strengthening partnerships with the health sector

The regional CRVS initiative has continuously and successfully promoted the collaboration of CRVS actors at the country level (mainly statistics offices and civil registration authorities). The seventh edition of the African Symposium on Statistical Development (ASSD) was the first ever continent-wide meeting between civil registration authorities and heads of national statistics offices. Some of the key recommendations of these gatherings included strengthening coordination, and enhancing the roles and responsibilities of the two players in the operational aspects of CRVS at the country level. The eighth and ninth editions of the Symposium went a step further by involving officials from ministries of health, in recognition of the important role the health sector plays as a producer and user of vital statistics from civil registration, a key player and potential resource in the registration of births and deaths, and as a core actor in the accurate recording and certification of death and the collection of cause-of-death information. The third session of the ministerial Conference held extensive discussions on the contributions of the health sector, particularly drawing lessons from countries hit by the Ebola epidemic in the western part of the
continent. The conference converged on the need to strongly engage the health sector in the building of systems at country level.

ii) ** Consolidating and harmonizing efforts and resources for CRVS through strengthening collaboration of UN agencies and other CRVS actors**—The regional CRVS programme is supported by a group of pan-African institutions, United Nations agencies and non-governmental organizations, which together form the regional CRVS core group. The objective of this partnership is to bring together all of the key CRVS actors on the continent to work within a common framework. Set up in 2011, the core group is intended to harmonize approaches, harness synergies and thus help to avoid duplication of efforts. The group provides technical and financial support to APAI-CRVS. A subregional core group, made up of the same institutions and based in the UNECA’s Subregional Office for West Africa, in Niamey, was created in 2014 to serve the specific needs of French-speaking African countries. The core group arrangement is currently being formalized through a memorandum of understanding, which will be the basis for a more sustainable partnership. In addition, the APAI-CRVS secretariat represented by UNECA is also a member of the global CRVS working group a similar arrangement that coordinates CRVS initiatives and efforts at a global level.

iii) **Capacity building**—The core group has continued to implement its mandate of building the capacities of African countries in the management and operation of CRVS systems. Two sets of guidelines are being developed, namely, “Operational guidelines on civil registration” and “Operational guidelines on vital statistics systems”, the first drafts of which are already available. The guidelines are intended to address knowledge gaps on how to tackle various aspects of CRVS, and are adapted to the African context. It is hoped that the guidelines will help to build the knowledge and capacities of countries in efficient management and operation of CRVS systems. In addition, plans are underway to develop three more guidelines, namely,
“Operational guidelines on advocacy and information, education and communication”, “Guidelines on the digitization of civil registration and vital statistics systems”, and “Guidelines on the management of civil registration backlogs”. These documents are expected to be available for use by countries by the end of 2015.

iv) Comprehensive assessments of CRVS systems-The second session of the Conference of African Ministers responsible for Civil Registration made specific recommendations requesting all African countries to urgently undertake comprehensive assessments of their CRVS systems and to develop national action plans to strengthen the systems, based on the findings of the assessments. African countries have continued to demonstrate their commitment to strengthening their systems through taking leadership in undertaking this exercise. A total of 22 African countries have already conducted CRVS assessments and developed (or are in the process of developing) national plans of action based on the assessments. The core group has contributed immensely to this process by supporting the development of the required resource materials and helping Governments to find funding for the various components of the assessment and planning processes. After many years, African governments are increasingly demonstrating commitment and interest in the improvement of these systems, with a number undertaking a review of their CRVS legislative frameworks; a number undergoing organizational changes; while others increasing their budgetary allocations for CRVS systems.

v) CRVS Knowledge management-The core group has established a regional CRVS web-based knowledge management platform that will provide the basis for knowledge and information-sharing and, just as importantly, monitoring and evaluation of the regional CRVS programme. The platform will also allow for sharing and exchange of CRVS knowledge products and information between countries, development partners, and training and research institutions. The platform is intended to foster partnerships,
networking and collaboration; facilitate resource management; monitor improvement efforts; coordinate the regional CRVS core group and other development partners; and support member States in reporting on their progress and improvement efforts. The platform is in its final stages of development and will be launched in the third quarter of 2015.

vi) In December 2014, the core group, in collaboration with the United Nations Statistics Division, facilitated a workshop for 37 country experts on the newly revised Principles and Recommendations for a Vital Statistics System publication. The plan for the future is to routinely provide similar training sessions and to expand the existing pool of experts over time to cover every African country. In this respect, additional training sessions for French-speaking experts will be held in Abidjan, Côte d’Ivoire, following the Conference. The core group has also initiated plans to develop a sustainable CRVS capacity development programme for African countries.

1.3 Core challenges faced by the regional programme

The core challenge faced by the regional programme is the lack of systematic funding for the implementation of the medium-term plan at the regional and country levels. The funding for the programme, largely sourced from development partners, has been inadequate and ad hoc in nature. The unpredictability of resources has affected the smooth implementation of the programme, including sustaining the human resources required to run the secretariat. With regard to the implementation of the programme at the national level, it is envisaged that by end of 2015, over 20 countries should have comprehensive CRVS investment plans in place. Although the bulk of the funding for the plans will come from Governments, some countries will require catalytic funds to kick-start implementation. The availability of such funding has critical implications for the success of the regional initiative.

Many African Governments and regional economic communities are increasingly focusing on and committing resources towards the establishment of national
identification systems. There are significant risks posed by this, as most of these resource-intensive national identification systems are being developed with no organic link to civil registration systems. The civil registration system should essentially be the primary source of breeder documents on birth, death and marriages for national identification systems. The existing approaches on the continent largely fail to recognize and apply these underlying principles. The risk is that Governments and their development partners may divert resources and attention towards building national identification systems, without giving due attention to building efficient and complete civil registration systems.

Capacity development continues to remain a challenge. Although the country-led process of assessments currently underway is helping to develop capacity across the continent, there is a need to build a more systematic approach in this regard on management, operational and technical aspects. The core group is planning to develop a strategy and action plan in collaboration with other relevant institutions for a more sustainable approach to CRVS capacity-building on the continent.

1.4 Conclusion and way forward
The regional programme is now in its fifth year of implementation and the second phase of the medium term plan 2015-2022. The priorities for the regional programme over this period are primarily capacity building and supporting countries in reviewing their systems and in the development of comprehensive national strategic action plans.