

BRIEFING NOTE AND KEY MESSAGES

Impact of the COVID-19 on the Operations of Civil Registration Systems

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has been spreading at a fast pace around the world. Globally, it has infected approximately 2,934,570 people in 210 countries, resulting in more than 203,676 deaths¹. In Africa, a total of 32,497 people in 52 countries have been infected and 1,419 deaths reported². African governments have implemented various strategies to flatten the disease curve that range from simple restrictions for the containment of the virus, to isolation of cities and regions noted to be the epicentres and, in some countries, total lock-down has been imposed. These measures have impacted activities and programmes in different sectors, both in governmental and private sector institutions. Some of the most affected sectors include the statistical and data management, health, education, food security, industries, public service among others. The civil registration systems have already begun to experience disrupted services at all levels and this is expected to continue, given that estimates suggest that 40-70 per cent of the world's population could be infected.³

Civil registration should be, according to UN standards, the universal, compulsory, continuous, permanent and confidential recording of the occurrence of all vital events. It is a function of government to ensure that every vital event is recorded and therefore known and counted. During national emergencies such as COVID-19, this function is severely affected by the prevention and containment measures that countries around the world have taken to contain or prevent the spread of the virus.

Having noted the impact of the pandemic crisis on normal service delivery, ECA decided to engage Registrar Generals of Civil Registration Offices in Africa to discuss impact of the pandemic and mitigation strategies put in place by different countries. The Purpose of the conference call was to understand how countries in Africa are being affected by the measures being put in place by their governments and the impact of the COVID-19 disease on their civil registration and vital statistics systems' operations. An e-meeting was held on 25 April 2020 and there are plans to hold similar meetings at regular intervals.

IMPACT

1. Alternative Working Arrangements

Most of the civil registration business processes in African countries are manual and rely heavily on face-to-face contact and paper-based tools. In the era of COVID-19, paper transactions are being discouraged given the contagious nature of the disease transmission. Countries are therefore realizing the need for alternative engagement with the clients, including appointments, social distancing,

¹ <https://covidvisualizer.com/> (on 26 April 2020)

² *ibid*

use of shifts, reduced working hours due to curfews and online applications for countries with digitalized systems. Some of the countries where a state of emergency has been declared and citizens are therefore on total lock-down, the registration offices have been closed and alternative telecommuting work arrangement adapted. This comes with increased need for supportive infrastructure such as internet access, which is not readily available in most of the countries. For countries with centralized registration and certification services, containment of some cities has disrupted the services. Countries are therefore realizing the importance of an automated system.

2. Death registration

The declaration of lockdowns, “state of emergency” and the application of measures to minimize the spread of the virus, have led some governments to adopt a policy that deaths occurring during this period should be buried within the shortest time possible (24 hours) and post mortems should not be carried out. This is aimed at minimising contact with deceased, allowing families to bury their dead quickly and avoid congregations. The decisions have affected death registration, medical certification of causes of death and issuance of burial permits and death certificates. Overwhelmed front line workers are also overstretched with mandatory protocols for handling COVID-19 which has a major impact on the recording of vital events when they occur. This will affect the completeness of vital statistics and access to benefits such as insurance claims, inheritance and analysis of causes of death.

3. Reduced demand for institutional health care

Psychosis has been reported in the health care seeking behaviour of the public especially in areas where cases of COVID-19 have been confirmed among health care workers and patients. Birth registration has also been affected with pregnant mothers being faced with multiple dilemmas ranging from change of birth plan from health facility-based delivery to the home delivery due to fear of exposure to COVID-19; to difficulty in accessing health facilities due to curfews, containment and lockdowns, especially in rural areas.

Health care workers also want limited human contact, hence registration may not be a priority when vital events occur in clinics and hospitals. If appropriate measures are not put in place, there is a likelihood that health care providers will begin to take time off work or be placed under self-quarantine following exposure. Civil registration staff based in health facilities or records staff may also exhibit similar concerns. Overall, there is anticipated reduction in the use of civil registration services and this will have an impact on civil registration completeness.

4. Financial impact on the CR budget

The COVID-19 pandemic has generated additional expenditure for compliance with government prescribed measures. They include acquisition of protective equipment for field and office staff, hand washing facilities, use of additional vehicles during field operations - to meet the social distancing requirement and

use of face masks. Additionally, there might be delays in implementation of CRVS workplans hence affecting expenditure for donor-funded activities. The drastic fall in public revenue will also have a huge impact on the financing of civil registration and vital statistics operations. In some cases, funding for the CRVS has been affected as donors have reprogrammed and in some cases repurposed their resources to COVID-19 related interventions or their support remains unpredictable due to the pandemic.

5. Backlog of registration and certification of vital events

It is anticipated that registration of some vital events will be interrupted and there is no guarantee that they will be registered when the situation stabilizes. The lifting of the current restrictions will come with considerable backlog and strain for registrars. Registration of marriages, divorces, nullities, adoptions and legal separations in many countries is currently considered as non-essential services. This has caused anxieties among the clients, backlog of applications and eventually might affect the affected families socially and legally.

6. Use of Vital Statistics

There will be impact on production and use of vital statistics due to incompleteness of data and timeliness of reporting. While the demand, especially for mortality data is very high for monitoring the impact of the disease, the production is curtailed by the prevailing circumstances. In some of the health facilities, records staff are required to join the rapid response teams especially for contact tracing.

MITIGATION MEASURES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1. Protection of staff:** The health and safety of all staff and the public is of paramount importance and will take precedence even as continuity of services is ensured. Drawing lessons from the mode of transmission and spread of COVID-19 and the health risks in African countries, registrars have found it wise not to expose the health and lives of their staff and families.
- 2. Online provision of services:** Pandemics are not the time to introduce new online registration systems. However, for countries such as Uganda, Angola, Rwanda and others that already offer remote services, it is commendable that these services are being utilized and strengthened and that the public is encouraged to use online registration. During the pandemic, face-to-face and in-person contact should be kept to a minimum and hence the use of other methods (e-mail, calls, postal services), as well as electronic and paper certificates, should be accepted.
- 3. Interaction with other government services:** The collaboration of civil registration system with the police, health officials and other authorities is particularly important during this period in order to address issues such as registration services, burial procedures, issuance of documents and verification of

identity. This practice is currently in place in Tanzania, Namibia, Kenya, Niger, Benin and Djibouti.

- 4. Provision of financial grants to vulnerable families:** The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic severely affects the socially and economic fabric of vulnerable families. Some countries are using population registers to identify and verify the identities of the vulnerable populations to provide financial subsidies/grants and this is a good practice to help them address barriers to accessing essential services, including civil registration.
- 5. Verbal Autopsies:** In one country, the government requested that the Civil Registration Office use verbal autopsy to ascertain the cause of death when informants come to register deaths. This information would be used to identify COVID-19 related deaths.

ECA SUPPORT

ECA is gathering data and good practices that will play a crucial role in programming during this period and post COVID-19. It is using its convening role to share information to support countries to maintain operational civil registration systems during the pandemic. The platform will be maintained for regularly exchanging information.