CIVIL REGISTRATION: THE MOVING ELEPHANT IN AFRICA

THE STORY OF THE ELEPHANT AND THE BLINDFOLDED MEN

Here goes the famous story of the Elephant and the six blindfolded men... Each man felt a different part and so described the elephant based on the body part of the elephant he touched.

The first man who "Oh, no it's not a tree! It's a rope," said the second man who touched the tail.

"No! a rope can't be this thick and it also feels alive so this must be a snake" said the third man who touched the trunk of the Elephant.

"It is a big hand fan" said the fourth man who touched the elephant's ear.

"I don't know how you say all those things while it obviously is a wall," said the fifth man who touched the belly of the elephant.

"You are all wrong! This without a doubt is a spear." said the sixth man touching the tusk of the Elephant.

They began to argue about the Elephant and each one of them insisted that he was right. Of course there was no conclusion for not one had thoroughly examined the whole elephant. How can anyone describe the whole until he has learned about all the parts?

The history of CRVS in Africa resembles this story.

The elephant here represents the enormity of the operation and the blindfolded men characterize the various stakeholders, who in past tried to approach the CRVS from their own perspective. However, the story of CRVS could not have ended with mere recognition of the fact that was an elephant but also demanded effort on the part of the stakeholders to make this huge animal move. Different stakeholders in the past were anxious and made efforts to move the Elephant (CRVS) forward but could not succeed due, among others, to limited coordinated and harmonized efforts.

In 2009, when the new regional initiative on CRVS was launched, stakeholders recognized the fact that CRVS is multi-sectoral and multi-disciplinary in nature and that there was a need to adopt an integrated and holistic approach in improving the situation. The First Conference of Ministers responsible for Civil Registration was one big effort to not only move this huge animal but also provide a clear direction for it to tramp.

PHASE I: THE SLEEPING ELEPHANT

- Civil registration was introduced in most African countries during the colonial period.
- The systems were then discriminative, limited to registration of vital events occurring to specified groups mainly the foreigners
- Later on the systems opened up to embrace other population groups and the events occurring to Africans began being registered
- The uses of these records however did not serve their intended purpose as they were greatly misused. In many cases these were used to control movements of the people and a source of information for managing the people under colonial rule.
- During those times in history, the elephant was born in most African countries, but was left to sleep as the important role the systems could serve was never realized.

… 1960s, 1970s, …

PHASE II: THE PARTIALLY AWAKE AND CONFUSED ELEPHANT

- The realization of the potential importance of CRVS systems was evident in this phase
- Multiple actors were seen to work towards improvement of the systems, each pursuing its mandates and individual interests resulting to fractured systems.
- The initiatives undertaken to improve the systems were largely isolated, project-based and individual institution-led ad hoc exercises
- Most of the efforts were largely statistically oriented with a view to obtaining improved vital statistics on a regular basis and promoting birth registration. These were mainly led by international agencies
- The need to have proper systems was quite evident. The limited understanding, systematic and holistic approach on how to drive successful systems was a great impediment
- With all stakeholders pulling from different directions the elephant was awake but quite confused. This was a phase of stagnation, with no real progress realized.
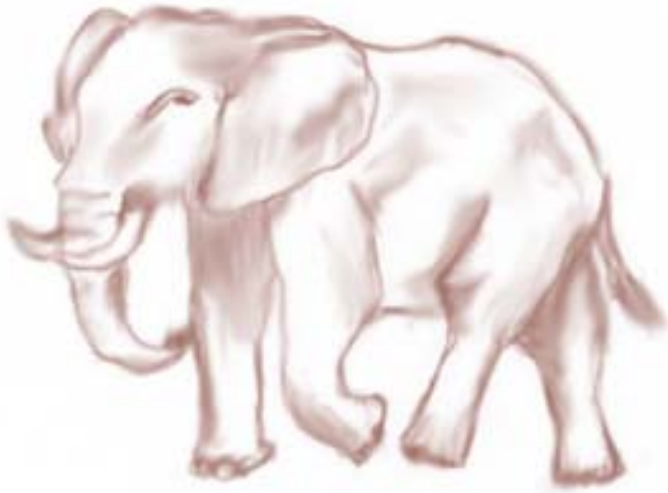
… 1980s, 1990s, …

PHASE III: THE AWAKENING OF THE ELEPHANT

- The need for joint engagement of national civil registration and vital statistics institutions and a holistic approach in addressing the various outputs of CRVS systems such as statistics, health, governance, issuance of national identity cards, passports, electoral lists, etc and in the measurement of progress in development indicators was at the peak of discussions
- In June 2009 a regional workshop organized by ECA and AfDB that brought together civil registration and vital statistics officers under one roof for the first time was convened in Dar-es- salaam, Tanzania.
- The workshop identified and addressed some of the fundamental bottlenecks that hampered the improvement of the systems in the region in the past half a century.
- Among the major challenges identified was the lack of political support towards the systems and secondly the uncoordinated and fragmented interventions by various actors/stakeholders
- The workshop found it important to devise a comprehensive regional roadmap that brings all actors to a common regional operational platform
- The workshop called on the ECA, AfDB, and AUC and other partners to organize a ministerial conference on CRVS.
- The elephant got on its feet!

… 2009, 2010, …

PHASE IV: THE MOVING ELEPHANT

- In August 2010, the Conference of African Ministers Responsible for Civil Registration was held in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia,
- The Conference convened over 40 ministers responsible for civil registration and was considered a great success in winning the much needed political commitment for CRVS
- The Ministers made commitments to improve CRVS in their respective countries and to support the efforts being made in this regard by the regional organizations.
- The Ministers endorsed the Medium Term CRVS Plan (MTP)
- The Ministers requested the AUC to institutionalize the Conference as a permanent platform that would meet once every two years and accordingly, the July 2012 African Heads of States and Government summit convened, endorsed the recommendation.
- The ministers also requested the Africa Symposium on Statistical Development (ASSD) to support and contribute to the regional initiative. Accordingly, the ASSD adopted CRVS as the theme for the next five years beginning with the 7th symposium held in January 2012 in Cape Town, South Africa.
- Ministers responsible for Civil Registration are set to meet for the second time in September 2012.
- Today the elephant is surely moving if not running!
  … 2010, 2011, 2012, …

Why the Ministerial Conference on Civil Registration and Vital Statistics?

IMMEADIATE IMPACT:SAVING LIVES IN AFRICA

Upholding Rights and Privileges, Ensuring Rights Based Provision of Basic Services, Creating Legal and Statistical Official Recording System

Most people in Africa are born and die without leaving a trace in any legal record or official statistic.

In Africa there are close to 70 million children below 5 years of age whose births have not been registered and even a larger number do not have official birth certificates.

According to the United Nations, these children have not gone into any formal government record nor do they have a legal record permanently identifying them. They are unlikely to have a proper legal document in their lifetime identifying their names and those of their parents as well as their nationality.

There is no accurate record of how many children are born each day in most African countries. This means that there are no adequate and secured legal, administrative and statistical systems of knowing the subjects of these nations.

There is no accurate record of how many children die each day in most African countries. No meaningful efforts have been made to find out their identity and number as well as uncover the reasons behind their deaths.

There is no accurate record of how many mothers die each day in child birth and related causes in most African countries.

No meaningful effort has been made to establish proper systems of identifying causes of deaths of citizens in most African countries.

There is no accurate record of the number and identity of children born with defects/disabilities in most African countries; there is also no record of how many of these children stay alive or eventually die.

Upholding Rights Based Legal Social Welfare Systems

Numerous children in Africa are adopted by nationals and expatriates alike. This creates difficulty in following up on their whereabouts and existence as most do not have a proper birth certificate.

There is no record in most African countries on the number of girls/children who are married off early, suffer ill-health and become victims of social crisis.

There is no accurate record of the number of marriages established each day in most countries in Africa which is important in planning and provision of basic needs required by newly established families.

National Security, Modern Public Administration,

Since most African countries do not have complete civil registration systems, they are not able to realize secured and sustainable national identity, passport and similar identification systems that fulfill national, regional and international requirements.

Changing the African Statistical Landscape

No adequate country driven effort was made in most African countries in past 50 years to put in place a system for generating current, continuous and permanent demographic statistics; hence countries do not have up to date continuous and permanent data on the size and dynamics of their populations. The data on causes of deaths are also lacking in most African countries.

Since most countries in Africa do not have current and complete systems of birth and death registration, they do not have dependable health and population statistics for measuring, monitoring and evaluating progress made against the Millennium Development Goals.

These are the major factors pushing African Ministers responsible for Civil Registration to hold continental conference on Civil Registration and Vital Statistics (CRVS) Systems.

In some African countries, CRVS has been operating for over a century. In these past years, the multi-disciplinary and multi-sectoral nature of CRVS was not well understood and could not be properly adapted to the African context. The isolated, project-based and individual institution-led ad-hoc exercises and initiatives could not bring change in the status and situation of CRVS systems in the region.

"… after more than a decade of discussions, demographic statisticians in Africa realized that the civil registration system cannot be simply transplanted from advanced countries to Africa and that innovative ideas were required for creating such an institution in Africa." The Kenya Civil Registration Demonstration Project, 1981-1984; by Benjamin Gil.