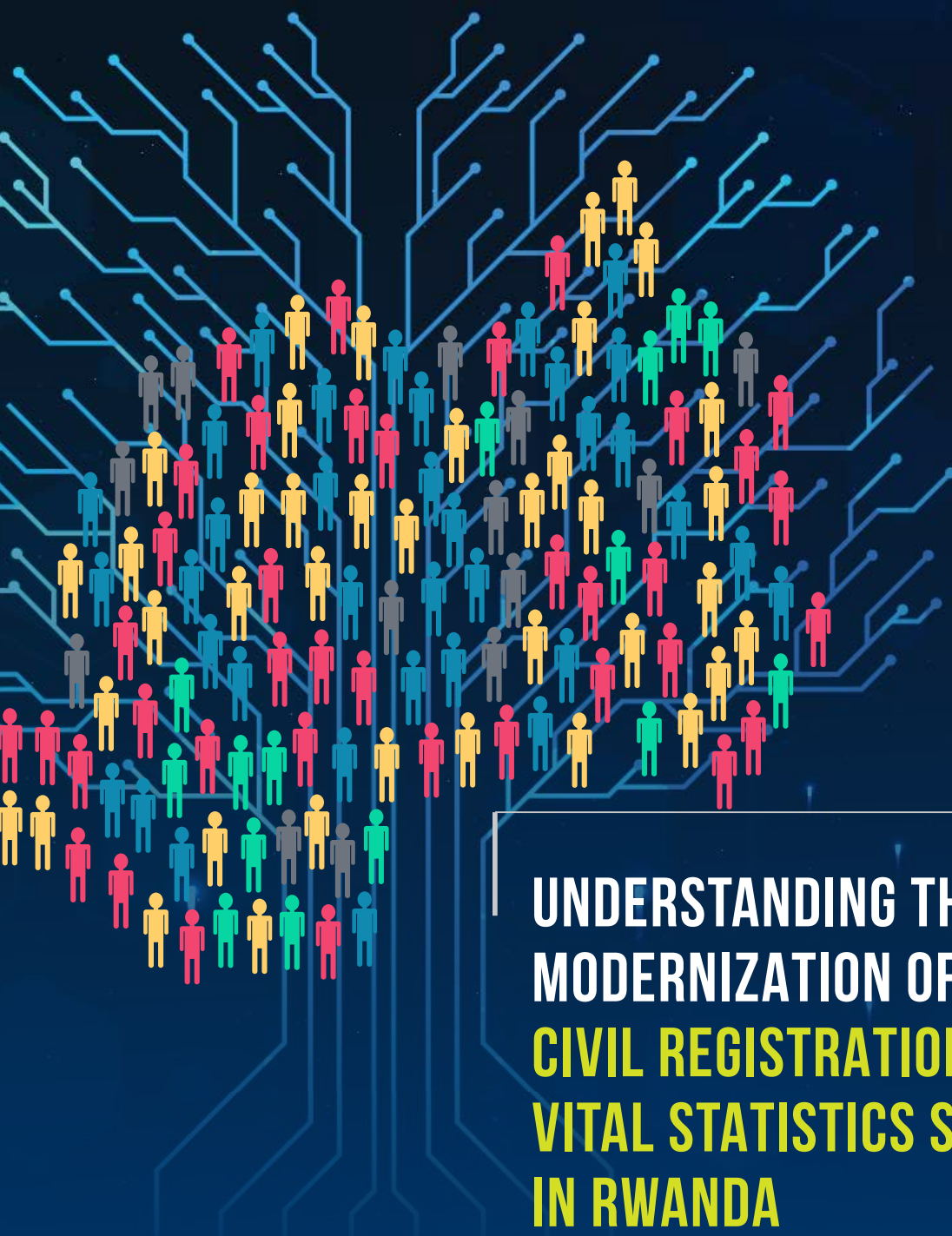




UNDERSTANDING THE MODERNIZATION OF CIVIL REGISTRATION AND VITAL STATISTICS SYSTEMS IN RWANDA

2016–2024

**PARTNERSHIPS, CHALLENGES AND
SOLUTIONS**



United Nations
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The report was prepared by Bugingo Stephen of the National Identification Agency of Rwanda. The work was undertaken in the context of the civil registration and vital statistics applied research training programme with the aim of contributing to the existing body of knowledge on civil registration and vital statistics and documenting and sharing a country's journey and experience."

Abstract

Introduction. In the present study, the process of modernizing the civil registration and vital statistics system of Rwanda from 2016 to 2024 is explored. Critical weaknesses and opportunities for reform were identified through the comprehensive assessment conducted in 2016. Since then, significant milestones have been reached in the modernization process. The legal framework has been reformed, bringing services closer to the population by increasing the number of registration offices from 416 in 2016 to 3,220 in 2020. The civil registration and vital statistics system has been digitalized and integrated with the identification, national population registration, statistics and health systems. In addition, business processes have been reorganized, and an established governance structure has been put in place. Development partners – including Bloomberg Philanthropies, the Economic Commission for Africa, the Global Financing Facility for Women, Children and Adolescents, the United Nations Children’s Fund, Vital Strategies and the World Health Organization – have played a crucial role by providing technical and financial support. Ongoing collaboration among national agencies and ministries – such as the Ministry of Local Government, the National Identification Agency, the National Institute of Statistics of Rwanda and the Rwanda Biomedical Centre – continues to drive im-

provements to the civil registration and vital statistics system.

Methods. For the present study, evidence from three sources was analysed. Original government documentation was the primary source of evidence. For context, semi-structured oral interviews with major stakeholders, from international development partners and from government agencies, were the secondary source of evidence, while articles, reports, information and communications technology systems and books containing analysis of the events and of the primary sources of evidence were the tertiary source. The study was focused primarily on the milestones reached, the challenges faced and the effects of partnerships in relation to the improvement of civil registration and vital statistics processes.

Results. One of the standout findings from the study is that several milestones have been reached in relation to the civil registration and vital statistics system, including its digitalization, the enactment of related legal reforms and the establishment of a multi-tier governance structure. In addition, the integration of the civil registration and vital statistics system with national identity and health management information systems has improved data accuracy and accessibility. Challenges were iden-

tified, however, such as a lack of stakeholder engagement at the very start of the process and systems that operate in silos. Moreover, it has emerged from the results that low death registration completeness (46.1 per cent in 2024) is a persistent challenge that requires immediate action.

Discussion. In the present study, the importance of political will, stakeholder collaboration and functional governance structures to the successful modernization of the civil registration and vital statistics system is underscored. The incorporation of technological systems and the integration of such systems with each other have been pivotal to the sustained improvements made since 2016, as has the ongoing training of personnel.

Conclusion. The process of modernizing the civil registration and vital statistics system in Rwanda serves as a valuable case study for other countries. Continued efforts towards data use, local funding for sustainability and the further digitalization of civil registration processes are recommended to enhance the effectiveness and reach of civil registration and vital statistics systems.

Keywords. Civil registration, civil registration and vital statistics comprehensive assessment, civil registration and vital statistics improvement, civil registration and vital statistics strategic plan, CRVS, digitalization, Rwanda



1. Introduction

Civil registration is the continuous, permanent, compulsory and universal recording of the occurrence and characteristics of vital events pertaining to the whole population, as provided by decree or regulation, in accordance with the legal requirements of a country (Mrkić, 2020). Civil registration benefits individuals and their families by providing legal proof of the occurrence of a vital event, such as a live birth or a death, through the issuance of a certificate. Such proof is of critical importance for individuals to gain access to services. Furthermore, civil registration benefits the Government by providing vital statistics that are crucial to good governance, administrative decision-making, strategy formulation and public health policy and planning (United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), and others, 2023).

In accordance with target 16.9 of the Sustainable Development Goals, all States should, by 2030, provide legal identity for all, including birth registration. Given that Africa has a growing population of more than 1 billion people, 60 per cent of whom are under 18 years of age, systems to ensure the completeness of vital statistics, in particular those linked with birth and death, represent a critical investment. As recently as 2013, only 44 per cent of children under 5 years of age in Africa were registered, and millions more lacked legal identity documents (Economic Commission for Africa, 2013).

In a declaration adopted at the fourth session of the Conference of African Ministers Responsible for Civil Registration, held in Nouakchott in 2017, the Conference reaffirmed the commitment of States members of the African Union to address civil registration and vital statistics issues within the context of Agenda 2063: The Africa We Want, of the African Union, and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, paying particular attention to the demographic dividend. The declaration was made amid significant developments throughout the continent, in particular in East Africa and Southern Africa (UNICEF, 2020), and specifically in Rwanda, where substantial efforts to enhance civil registration and vital statistics were already under way. For example, one year before the adoption of the declaration, a comprehensive assessment of civil registration and vital statistics had been conducted in Rwanda, during which several issues were highlighted, including a cumbersome legal framework that hindered improvements, the absence of a governance structure for civil registration and vital statistics, fragmented and institution-based systems that were operating in silos, a paper-based civil registration system that did not facilitate easy data-sharing and storage, and a highly centralized system that resulted in high costs and complicated access to services for individuals. These challenges underscored the need for comprehensive reforms to establish a more effective and accessible civil registration and vital statis-

tics system in Rwanda (Rwanda, National Institute of Statistics, 2016).

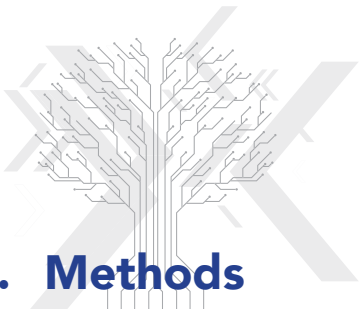
In a review of innovative solutions for civil registration and vital statistics in East and Southern Africa, UNICEF (2020) shows that some States in those subregions – namely Ethiopia, Mozambique, Namibia, South Sudan, Uganda, the United Republic of Tanzania and Zambia – have started to adopt new legislation or have reformed existing laws, as a starting point for civil registration reforms. Those legislative measures have provided a legal basis for the development of a range of institutional and administrative processes defined in the States’ action plans. For example, there has been an increase in the number of registration points as a result of the decentralization of registration responsibilities to local authorities and health facilities. Business processes and the management of existing registration records have also been improved by shifting from paper-based manual business processes to a combination of paper-based and digitalized processes. That report, however, is limited to a review of only seven countries, and information on others, including Rwanda, is missing. Such an absence of information about Rwanda justifies the need to document the improvements made to civil registration and vital statistics systems in the country between 2016 and 2024, with a particular focus on efforts to review the legal framework, decentralize civil registration responsibilities, digitalize operations, integrate civil registration and identity management systems, and redesign civil registration and vital statistics business processes, including a discussion of challenges and solutions and the role of collaboration with development partners.

As a result of the civil registration and vital statistics assessment (Rwanda, National Institute of Statistics, 2016), improvements were recommended, and the suggestion was made to put in place a comprehensive strategic action plan on civil registration and vital statistics, with a view to guiding the improvement process. The strategic plan of Rwanda for civil registration and vital statistics for the period 2017–2022 was jointly developed by the various ministries and agencies responsible for civil registration and vital statistics in the country, with the National Identification Agency serving as the implementing institution. Specific, costed and achievable targets are set out in the plan, along with the intention for the involved State agencies to collaborate on attaining the targets over the course of five years. The targets and strategic measures are grouped into four strategic outcomes: legal identity and rights for all, good governance and accountability, reliable statistics, and enablers.

As part of the above-mentioned collaboration, efforts to modernize civil registration and vital statistics systems were initiated in the 2018/19 budget cycle and completed in the 2021/22 budget cycle, resulting in a fully functional, centralized digital system for civil registration and vital statistics, operating at 3,220 civil registration offices across the country in 2020, compared with only 416 in 2016 (Ngoboka, and others, 2023). Coupled with the urgent need for improvement, the decision to implement a system of e-governance for the improvement of service delivery – which had already been planned in the country’s second economic development and poverty reduction strategy and its first national strategy for transformation – led to the digitalization of civil registration processes.

Very little documentation can be found on the matter, however, including on the challenges encountered, the solutions proposed or the collaboration undertaken among stakeholders. This is a serious knowledge gap that has been identified and that needs to be bridged. The present study is aimed at documenting the efforts made to improve and modernize civil registration and vital statistics in Rwanda between 2016 and 2024, with a focus on the challenges encountered, the solutions

put in place and the collaboration undertaken between development partners and local stakeholders. It also constitutes an exploration of the role that effective partnerships between development partners and local agencies can play in improving civil registration and vital statistics. In addition, it can be used as a resource by any civil registration and vital statistics practitioners or agencies of other countries that may be interested in learning about the experience of Rwanda.



2. Methods

2.1. Research design

The present study is based on a historical research design, involving an examination of the events related to the improvement of civil registration and vital statistics in Rwanda from 2016 to 2024 and their impact on the current situation.

2.2. Data sources

Government materials and documentation were used as the primary source of data, supplemented with data from oral interviews for context, along with additional secondary sources, including articles, reports, information technology systems and books.

2.3. Selection of respondents

Oral interviews were conducted to understand the perspectives of those who have been part of the efforts to improve civil registration and vital statistics, in particular with regard to: the legal review process; the decentralization of civil registration; digitalization; the integration of the civil registration and vital statistics system with other systems, such as the identity management system, the national population register, the health management information system and the statistics system; the redesign of civil registration business processes; and collaboration with devel-

opment partners. Table 1 consists of a list of the major institutions (local and international) that have been part of the process since 2016. Potential respondents from these institutions were identified to provide insight on the subject matter.

Regarding local partners, interviews were requested with the permanent secretaries or directors general of ministries, departments or agencies who, according to the strategic plan for civil registration and vital statistics for the period 2017–2022, were members of the civil registration and vital statistics steering committee and have therefore been involved in the quarterly meetings of the steering committee that were held to guide the improvement process during the period covered by the strategic plan.

Regarding international development partners, all institutions that have been involved in the process since 2016 were included in the list. The respondents were country directors or equivalent, or their representatives, residing in Rwanda or abroad. Interviews were conducted online, or an interview guide was sent for completion and returned online.

Of 13 identified respondents, only 3 (from the Economic Commission for Africa, UNICEF and the United Nations Population Fund) did not respond.

Table 1 - Selected respondents

Institution	Respondent
Local ministries, departments and agencies	
Ministry of Local Government	Director General of Decentralization and Governance
Ministry of Health	Director of Monitoring and Evaluation
Ministry of Justice	Director of Legal Reform
National Identification Agency	Director of Civil Registration and Data Collection
National Institute of Statistics of Rwanda	Director of Demographic and Social Statistics
National Child Development Agency	Acting Head of Child Development, Protection and Promotion Department
Rwanda Biomedical Centre	Manager of the Noncommunicable Diseases Division
Development partners	
Economic Commission for Africa	Country representative or equivalent
Global Financing Facility for Women, Children and Adolescents	Country representative or equivalent
UNICEF	Country representative or equivalent
United Nations Population Fund	Country representative or equivalent
Vital Strategies)	Country representative or equivalent
World Health Organization (WHO	Country representative or equivalent

Source: Unpublished information from the Government of Rwanda.

2.4. Data collection

To supplement data collected from the reviewed government documentation, semi-structured interview guides (one for development partners and another for local partners) were provided to each identified respondent for oral or written responses. Responding to the guide took between 30 and 40 minutes. Some interviews were conducted online, recorded electronically and transcribed verbatim for reference during analysis, while others were sent by email, responded to and returned for analysis.

2.5. Data analysis and credibility

All data collected from the reviewed government documentation and other sources and from the key informant interviews were analysed together using triangulation. Multiple reviews of the transcripts, notes, written responses and audio recordings were conducted to ensure clarity, validity and accuracy. To protect privacy, personal data were kept confidential, in particular when notes were used to quote the perspectives of the respondents.

2.6. Ethical issues

The interview guide was approved by the Director General of the National Institute of Statistics of Rwanda. The Institute is mandated to approve data-collection instruments for studies conducted in the country. Prior to the interviews, the respondents were informed that the aim of the study was to explore the process of modernizing the civil registration and vital statistics system of Rwanda, with par-

ticular emphasis on partnership-related challenges and on the solutions that had been found. Verbal consent to conduct the interview was sought from the respondents. Data collected from respondents were kept confidential while the study was in progress and were subsequently destroyed or deleted.



3. Results

3.1. Critical initiatives

In the present section, a description is provided of initiatives that were critical to the civil registration and vital statistics improvement process, as well as the products and immediate outcomes of such efforts.

3.1.1. Civil registration and vital statistics comprehensive assessment of 2016

In 2016, in partnership with stakeholders, the Government of Rwanda conducted a comprehensive assessment of its civil registration and vital statistics system (Rwanda, National Institute of Statistics, 2016), with the aim of identifying strengths and weaknesses in the system. It drew on lessons learned and provided recommendations on how improvements could be made and sustained. The assessment pointed to:

Issues in the policy and legislative environment

- Weaknesses in the management and organization of civil registration and vital statistics
- Use of a paper-based civil registration system operating alongside other small, web-based systems, with institution-specific roles functioning in silos

- Registration processes that were cumbersome in terms of time and cost

3.1.1.1 Policy and legislative environment

Through the assessment, it was found that the legislative environment constituted outdated laws that did not allow for the desired changes to be made. The existing laws granted civil registrar powers to only 416 officers based in the sector offices across the country. For the registration of births and deaths at health facilities and the recording of causes of death using the International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems, a civil registrar would need to be appointed at each health facility. For the registration of births and deaths in places other than health facilities and for the conducting of a verbal autopsy to determine the probable cause of death in the case of community deaths, civil registrar powers would need to be granted to the cell executive secretary, who holds the lowest position in the Rwandan administrative structure.

Similarly to other States in the region (UNICEF, 2020), Rwanda started the improvement process by reviewing the legal framework for civil registration and vital statistics. Since then, a number of laws and regulations have been enacted to improve civil registration. These legal instruments cover critical areas, such as the redesign

of civil registration and vital statistics business processes (Rwanda, 2016), the decentralization of civil registration to health facilities and administrative cells (Rwanda, 2020), interoperability, data-sharing, and data protection and privacy (Rwanda, 2021).

3.1.1.2 Management and organization of civil registration and vital statistics

As may be seen from the results of the comprehensive assessment, the organization of coordination responsibilities in Rwanda was divided into three levels: national, district and sector. At the national level, the Ministry of Local Government was responsible for supervising civil registration. District authorities were responsible for following up on civil status services provided at the sector level, with the role of principal civil registrar being filled by the mayor of a given district.

In its synthesis report, UNICEF (2020) highlights that effective institutional organization is crucial to improving registration rates and strengthening civil registration and vital statistics systems. The pre-2016 structure in Rwanda, however, showed several weaknesses. For example, policy coordination and civil registration system management were undertaken by a single ministry rather than a body of stakeholders with diverse interests, expectations and levels of influence, including a lead operations institution. In such cases, it often becomes difficult to obtain buy-in on decisions that are taken unilaterally. Moreover, in these situations, a lead operations institution at a more technical level to manage the civil registration operations and system on a daily basis is missing, and the gap between the ministry and civil reg-

istration offices is too large to ensure consistency in civil registration operations.

In the Civil Registration and Vital Statistics Systems Improvement Framework, developed in 2021 by the Africa Programme on Accelerated Improvement of Civil Registration and Vital Statistics Systems and partners, three levels of governance are proposed:

- High-level inter-agency coordination committee, which should involve senior management officials from the Government and other stakeholders, and should be in charge of overseeing the civil registration and vital statistics system, playing a central role in the improvement activities
- Technical working group, which should be a permanent part of a civil registration and vital statistics system, should be composed of technical staff who can act as representatives of important stakeholder institutions, should report to the inter-agency coordination committee and should be responsible for technical oversight of the main improvement activities
- Core team, which should include experts and managers from the various stakeholder institutions, who are assigned specific functions to carry out the civil registration and vital statistics improvement efforts

The central role of coordination was echoed by survey respondents who have been involved in the improvement process. A male respondent, who was a local partner, made the following observation: "We found it very important to engage different stakeholders, ... bringing to-

gether all the concerned stakeholders ... the governance structure was established for coordination. All civil registration and vital statistics activities were channelled through the governance structure.”

3.1.1.3 Registration tools and quality assurance

During the assessment of 2016, it was found that civil registries and forms did not conform to international recommendations. In many sectors, completed records had not been signed by the civil registrar since 2008, thus rendering the records invalid. Worse still, the system was paper-based, with only a handful of web-based subsystems containing civil registration information, all serving institution-specific goals. Under such fragmented systems, the civil registration and vital statistics process is broken up into smaller elements and cannot be reconstituted as a unitary whole, owing to technical obstacles to the exchange and sharing of information (WHO, 2013).

Pursuant to article 74 of Law No. 32/2016 of 28 August 2016 governing persons and family, the paper-based civil registration system, managed by the National Identification Agency, comprised seven civil status registers: the register of birth records; the register of death records; the register of marriage records; the register of guardianship records; the register of recognition of children born out of wedlock; the register of adoption records; and the register of other records. The national population register, established in 2007 by the National Identification Agency, was designed to be extended up to the sector level, enabling its use by all 416 civil registration officers in delivering a range of population registration services related to

the vital events mentioned above. The national population register is a centralized system through which a unique identification number is assigned to all registered individuals (Rwanda, National Institute of Statistics, 2017).

To improve the quality and frequency of the collection and dissemination of vital statistics, the National Institute of Statistics of Rwanda, in partnership with relevant ministries and the National Identification Agency, developed and implemented a web-based application in 2015. The application facilitates the efficient collection, storage and production of civil status event data, such as births, deaths, marriages, divorces and adoptions, through registration sites and health facilities throughout the country. It is intended to increase the accuracy and timeliness of data, support secure storage and enable the monitoring of civil registration activities at both the district and the central levels (Rwanda, National Institute of Statistics, 2017).

The Ministry of Health, in collaboration with stakeholders, developed a web-based health management information system, which provides comprehensive health information across the country. The system was used to collect technical data for epidemiological and health-related purposes, while individual identity data were collected using the web-based application of the National Institute of Statistics of Rwanda. To better align health data reporting with sector needs, the Ministry of Health incorporated various reporting systems into the health management information system of Rwanda, improving the accuracy and timeliness of the dissemination of reports from all health facilities. The integrated systems include health management information system reporting forms, dis-

ease surveillance, tuberculosis and human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) reports, and child mortality reports (Rwanda, National Institute of Statistics, 2017).

Nevertheless, none of the four systems shared information with each other or with the identity management system. The lack of integration among the systems posed a significant risk. It potentially led to inaccuracies in the data, the duplication of records and difficulties with verifying the identities of individuals, with the result that the provision of accurate and timely services became a challenge.

3.1.1.4 Cumbersome registration processes

Limited access to birth and death registration services is more dangerous than the inability to register other vital events, as it immediately affects social and health planning. In the Civil Registration and Vital Statistics Systems Improvement Framework, it is suggested that distance or travel time to the registration point is one of the main indicators of a well-performing civil registration and vital statistics system (Africa Programme on Accelerated Improvement of Civil Registration and Vital Statistics Systems, 2021).

As may be seen from the report on the expert segment of the sixth session of the Conference of African Ministers Responsible for Civil Registration (CRM/6/EXP/2022/22), the experts recommended that African States should adopt a one-stop-shop approach to birth registration and certification that was interoperable with health and immunization systems, including in humanitarian assistance contexts.

Before 2020, all civil registration had to take place at the sector level, something that burdened the public with long trips and piled duties on civil status officials, resulting in delays and inefficiencies (Rwanda, Ministry of Local Government, 2023). For instance, when births and deaths occurred at health facilities, the respondents were required to return home and subsequently plan a separate journey to the sector office to complete the registration (Tuoane-Nkhasi, and others, 2021). Likewise, the sector office was the sole place where births and deaths occurring within the community could be registered. This cumbersome process was both time-consuming and financially burdensome, as it often required individuals to travel long distances at their own expense. The inefficiencies and logistical difficulties associated with the system led to delays and inaccuracies in the registration of vital events, impeding timely access to essential services and vital statistics. The evident need for a more streamlined and accessible registration system was the reason behind efforts to modernize and improve civil registration and vital statistics operations in Rwanda.

3.1.2 Strategic plan of Rwanda for civil registration and vital statistics, 2017–2022

On the basis of the assessment results, the Government of Rwanda ultimately developed strategies aimed at improving the strategic planning of civil registration and vital statistics – a crucial step towards improving the country's civil registration system. As set out in the strategic plan on civil registration and vital statistics for the period 2017–2022, its mission was to build a modern, timely, complete and integrated civil registration and vital statistics system to ensure a legal identity for all,

good governance and evidence-based decision-making for sustainable development (Rwanda, National Institute of Statistics, 2017). Various interventions, outputs and activities that were pursued over the period 2017–2022 were derived from that mission. One male respondent, who was a local partner, said that “the strategic plan provided a strategic direction for improvement, following information provided from the comprehensive assessment”.

3.1.2.1 Milestones in the reform of laws and regulations relating to civil registration and vital statistics

As UNICEF (2023b) points out, through the establishment of a regulatory framework for civil registration and vital statistics, it can be ensured that each entity has a clear mandate, business processes are streamlined, seamless data exchanges are promoted when needed, cooperation is enhanced, and the integration of data from various sources upon authorization pursuant to that framework is enabled.

In Rwanda, the civil registration and vital statistics laws were reformed in stages, with various milestones being reached over the course of many years. Before 1962, civil registration was managed by the colonial powers, and only inhabitants of Rwanda 18 years of age or older were issued identity booklets. After Independence, from 1962 to 1988, duties pertaining to the registration of births, deaths, marriages and divorces were highly centralized and assigned to the ministry responsible for internal security (Rwanda, National Institute of Statistics, 2017).

Between 1988 and 2016, significant legal reforms were undertaken to strengthen the civil registration and vital statistics

system. Institutions were established to manage specific elements of the system. Through Law No. 43/2011 of 31 October 2011 establishing the National Identification Agency and determining its mission, organization and functioning, the Agency was made responsible for civil and population registration and for identity management. Likewise, under Law No. 53 bis/2013 of 28 June 2013 establishing the National Institute of Statistics of Rwanda and determining its mission, organization and functioning, the Institute was entrusted with coordinating statistical activities and conducting national censuses. In the same period, civil registration responsibilities were decentralized further to the sector level, with sector executive secretaries becoming civil registrars. In addition, the national population register was developed and decentralized to the sector level, and the web-based application for civil registration and vital statistics was developed by the National Institute of Statistics of Rwanda and deployed at the sector and health facility levels, for the collection of administrative data (Rwanda, National Institute of Statistics, 2017).

Further changes occurred rapidly between 2016 and 2020. Law No. 32/2016 of 28 August 2016 governing persons and family was amended by Law No. 001/2020 of 2 February 2020 to allow for the further extension of birth and death registration to health facilities and to the cell level. Under Law No. 32/2016, as amended, the number of registrars and registration offices increased from 416 in 2016 to 3,220 in 2020. In the same period, the tenth version of the International Classification of Diseases was adopted for the purpose of collecting cause-of-death data. The Ministry of Local Government was made responsible for civil registration and vital statistics. Regarding legal reform processes, one male respondent, who was a local

partner, noted the following: “The Ministry of Justice has played a key role in legal and policy framework development, monitoring legal compliance in civil registration activities and ensuring law enforcement across decentralized entities. It has also actively contributed to the development of civil registration and vital statistics standard operating procedures and has supported legal-based capacity-building for civil registrars.”

3.1.2.2 Constitution of the civil registration and vital statistics governance structure

Institutional arrangements are an essential element of a system for civil registration and identity management, because they provide a clear structure and accountability, establish efficient business processes, foster collaboration and coordination, enable data-sharing and the interoperability or integration of systems, support capacity-building and contribute to system sus-

tainability (Harbitz, 2018). The comprehensive assessment of the civil registration and vital statistics system conducted in 2016 highlighted the importance of the governance structure in driving the necessary changes (Rwanda, National Institute of Statistics, 2016). To ensure the coordinated implementation of the project on civil registration and vital statistics and sustainable system governance, in 2017 a governance and coordination structure for civil registration and vital statistics was established by the social cluster ministries, which are the specific ministries that deal with social development, human capital and welfare (Vital Strategies, 2019).

In table 2, details are provided of the system put in place to implement the strategic plan for civil registration and vital statistics. The system comprises a hierarchy of bodies established at different administrative levels, each of which has been assigned specific responsibilities.

Table 2 - Governance structure of civil registration and vital statistics

Coordination body	Composition	Major functions
- High-level coordination committee on civil registration and vital statistics - Meets once per year	Chair: Minister of Local Government Members: Minister of Health, Minister of Finance and Economic Planning, Minister of Justice, and Minister of Gender and Family Promotion	To provide oversight of and policy guidance on work pertaining to civil registration and vital statistics
- National steering committee on civil registration and vital statistics - Meets once per quarter	Chair: Permanent Secretary for the Ministry of Local Government Members: Permanent secretaries for the ministries of health, justice, and gender and family promotion; directors general of the National Identification Agency, the National Institute of Statistics of Rwanda and the Rwanda Biomedical Centre; Executive Secretary of the National Child Development Agency; and special invitees, depending on the nature of the meeting	- To mobilize resources - To organize and conduct the annual meeting with development partners - To approve reports from the core technical team on civil registration and vital statistics
- Core technical team on civil registration and vital statistics - Meets monthly and whenever needed	Experts responsible for civil registration and vital statistics, drawn from the ministries of local government, justice, health, and gender and family promotion; and from the National Identification Agency, National Institute of Statistics of Rwanda, Rwanda Biomedical Centre and National Child Development Agency	- To coordinate the implementation of all policies related to civil registration and vital statistics - To advise the steering committee on civil registration and vital statistics
- District task team - Manages civil registration operations on a daily basis	District-level directors of good governance and decentralization, and health; district information technology officer; and district statistician	- To link the central and local governments - To provide day-to-day coordination and support for local government activities related to civil registration and vital statistics

Source: Rwanda, National Institute of Statistics (2021); Rwanda, National Identification Agency (2024).

The structure set out above enables local authorities to closely monitor and coordinate the progress of activities to strengthen civil registration and vital statistics (Vital Strategies, 2019).

3.1.3 Development of the national centralized and integrated civil registration and vital statistics digital system

In 2017 and 2018, the World Bank supported the Government of Rwanda in a project to digitalize civil registration business processes, as part of the initiative to strengthen civil registration that had been started in 2016. The project was to be implemented between 2018 and 2021 but was extended to 2023 because of the disruption caused by the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic. That project formed part of the strategic plan on civil registration and vital statistics for the period 2017-2022.

By the end of the digitalization project, the system for civil registration and vital statistics was fully digitalized and operational at all locations where civil registration services are available, including health facilities and cell offices, with all civil registrars given the relevant training. In addition, national social and behaviour change communication campaigns were conducted, with a view to increasing the completeness of civil registration.

As recommended by the Africa Programme on Accelerated Improvement of Civil Registration and Vital Statistics Systems (2017), a phased approach to the digitalization of such systems was adopted in Rwanda. An important national stakeholder, who was male and a local partner, said the following:

The development of the national civil registration and vital statistics improvement system followed an incremental project approach, ensuring that usable increments of the product were developed, completed and delivered progressively, until the entire system was fully operational. In 2020, the birth and death modules were completed and deployed at all service points. Additional modules were delivered in subsequent years, culminating in the final phase (guardianships and legitimizations registration) in 2022/23.

The World Bank, through the Global Financing Facility, contributed \$3.0 million to cover administrative, capacity-building and other costs. The Government of Rwanda, meanwhile, contributed \$6.5 million to cover system development costs (Global Financing Facility, 2020).

A local company was engaged to develop a scalable and interoperable system for civil registration and vital statistics, designed with a microservices architecture that enables real-time data streaming for the nine vital events provided for by Law No. 71/2024 of 26 June 2024 governing persons and family, which repealed and replaced Law No. 32/2016. One male respondent, who was a local partner, said: "Each event was developed as a module, and the process was subdivided into four phases, each phase per year. Phase 1 births and deaths registration modules, phase 2 marriages, divorces and annulment of marriages registration modules, phase 3 adoptions and recognitions registration modules and phase 4 guardianships and legitimizations registration modules."

3.1.4 Integration with the national population register, identity management system, health management information system and web-based system for civil registration and vital statistics

The approach of building identity systems and, at the same time, strengthening civil registration and vital statistics systems has several benefits. For example, by employing such an approach, it is possible to: promote the integration or interoperability of systems, or both; prevent errors, duplication and fraud; and facilitate the judicious use of financial and human resources for the achievement of user-centred systems (UNICEF, 2023a). As modules of the civil registration and vital statistics system were developed, they were initially integrated with the IremboGov e-government portal, in 2020. The modules have also been integrated with other systems, including the national population register, the identity system and the health management information system, with a view to ensuring seamless interoperability across platforms. One male respondent, who was a local partner, pointed out: “The interoperability between the national centralized and integrated civil registration and vital statistics system with the identity management system and the national population register allows data validation, simplifies the civil registration process and minimizes errors during the process.”

The integration allowed the civil registration web-based system to pull data from the national centralized and integrated civil registration and vital statistics system (Rwanda, National Institute of Statistics, 2024) for compilation, processing, quality control and dissemination. Furthermore, the integration of the national centralized and integrated civil registration and vital

statistics system with the electronic immunization registry has helped to uniquely identify children and automatically record them in the registry, thus improving the completeness of child vaccination data, which can be triangulated with data from the Essential Programme on Immunization to enable the identification of unvaccinated or partially vaccinated children for follow-up (DHIS2, 2022). The infant’s national identification number is used as the unique identifier. The interoperability of the systems has been tested and validated, and end users have completed training on how to retrieve data from birth registrations and use the system to enrol children in immunization programmes (Centre for Research on Health and Social Care Management, 2022).

3.1.5. Production of vital statistics reports

Vital statistics reports are sources of fundamental demographic and epidemiological measures that are needed in education, labour, health and other sectors. Statistics Norway (2020) recommends that all States produce an annual vital statistics report, even if a relatively low number of vital events are registered. Using civil registration data, the National Institute of Statistics of Rwanda has been able to produce annual vital statistics reports since 2019. In Rwanda, the web-based statistics system developed by the National Institute of Statistics of Rwanda is used to compile and analyse data derived from the national centralized and integrated civil registration and vital statistics system for dissemination and use (UNICEF, 2023b). One male respondent, who was a local partner, stated: “Some products and immediate outputs were the production of the vital statistics reports since 2019 and the improvement of registration com-

pleteness of birth and death from 50 per cent in 2017 to 90 per cent in 2024 and from 30 per cent in 2017 to 46 per cent in 2024 respectively.”

In addition, the web-based application for civil registration and vital statistics obtains data from the health management information system and combines them with civil registration data to produce vital statistics, with the ultimate goal of using the data for more effective planning and priority setting (UNICEF, 2023b).

3.1.6 E-learning platform on civil registration and vital statistics

At the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic, in 2020, the first two modules of the civil registration and vital statistics system – birth and death – were deployed at civil registration points. Civil registrars required a great deal of training on the newly deployed digital tools before they could start their work. At the time, however, face-to-face sessions had been restricted, owing to measures to contain the spread of COVID-19. In addition, it had been noticed that, with a growing number of registrars, there were insufficient resources for the training to be carried out all over the country. As noted by one male respondent, who was a local partner: “The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic impacted the scaling up and capacity-building of new civil registrars. Adapting training and capacity-building activities to the constraints imposed by the pandemic was challenging. The solution involved developing online training tools and tutorials for continuous self-improvement.”

To ensure continuity and sustainability, an e-learning course on civil registration and vital statistics was proposed, with 11 modules tailored to the capacity needs

of different registrars (Ngoboka, and others, 2023). Beyond merely addressing the issue of face-to-face meetings amid the COVID-19 pandemic, the course also facilitates the onboarding of newly recruited registrars, which is important given their turnover rate. The course is currently available to all registrars across the country and is accessible on the e-learning platform of the Ministry of Local Government.

3.2 Challenges, solutions, lessons learned and areas for further improvement and system sustainability

3.2.1. Challenges and solutions

The improvement of civil registration and vital statistics is a collaborative effort, involving multiple stakeholders. One of the central challenges faced was aligning the diverse expectations and needs of all parties. To address this challenge, careful consideration was given to the specific needs of stakeholders during their identification and mapping. A male respondent, who was a local partner, made the following observation: “The implementation of the civil registration and vital statistics project faced numerous challenges. One major issue was differing expectations among the many stakeholders involved. To make progress, we first needed to align our expectations. This caused some delays in the process of coming together, agreeing on priorities and determining how the project should be managed.”

Respondents highlighted the challenge of managing multiple subsystems that operated independently and catered to individual data needs, making data-sharing difficult. To overcome this, stakeholders collaborated on designing and implementing a unified system that not only

served their collective needs but also streamlined data-sharing and improved service delivery. A male respondent, who was a local partner, recalled:

We also encountered issues with various subsystems and databases across different institutions and ministries related to civil registration and vital statistics components. These subsystems operated in isolation, lacking integration, which hindered data-sharing and storage. To overcome this challenge, all stakeholders needed to collaborate and reach a consensus on integrating multiple components into a single, robust system that serves everyone's interests. That's how we came up with the national centralized and integrated civil registration and vital statistics system.

Respondents cited delays with the full implementation of the project to improve the civil registration and vital statistics system, caused by the measures taken to contain the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result of the delays, and following consultations with stakeholders, the implementation period was extended. A male respondent, who was a local partner, explained: "We also faced a problem of COVID-19 outbreak when the civil registration and vital statistics project implementation was at its critical period. This affected the project schedule. We discussed with and engaged all concerned stakeholders and agreed upon the extension. The initial planned project execution period was three years, to 2021, but we extended up to 2023."

Another male respondent, who was also a local partner, noted the role that public awareness campaigns had played during the COVID-19 pandemic:

Designing outreach programmes to reach end users and citizens effectively posed another challenge, especially during the COVID-19 outbreak period. It was crucial to create programmes that educated and engaged a wide and diverse audience. The solution involved introducing various methods, such as online training with video tutorials, systems ticketing, television spots, celebrity mentions, billboards and banners, television and radio advertisements, web advertisements and town hall meetings.

Respondents also identified the rigidity of the regulations on civil registration and vital statistics as a critical issue, arguing that such rigidity initially hindered the implementation of improvement measures. A legal review was needed in order to surmount this challenge and make progress. A male respondent, who was a local partner, recalled: "At the onset, we faced challenges due to rigid civil registration and vital statistics laws and regulations. We began by reviewing these laws. Although it took some time, we eventually established a conducive legal environment for civil registration and vital statistics improvements."

Respondents raised concerns about the low levels of death registration completeness, which had increased only modestly from about 30.0 per cent in 2016 (Rwanda, National Institute of Statistics, 2016) to 46.1 per cent in 2024 (Rwanda, National Institute of Statistics, 2024). In the light of such slow progress, it is clear that new strategies and innovative approaches are needed to further enhance death registration rates and ensure comprehensive coverage. A female respondent, who was a development partner, explained: "Currently, the main challenge is a limited

death registration rate and an inadequate quality of cause-of-death data.”

3.2.2. Lessons learned

Enhancing civil registration and vital statistics systems requires strong support from leadership. Without political commitment, driving meaningful change in this area becomes very challenging. A male respondent, who was a local partner, made the following observation:

Political leaders play a crucial role in prioritizing the civil registration and vital statistics system and allocating necessary resources for its enhancement. Their commitment translates into policy frameworks, legal reforms and budgetary allocations, creating a conducive environment for the system’s growth. Leadership support fosters a culture of accountability and ensures that civil registration and vital statistics initiatives are sustained over time. When leaders champion the cause, it galvanizes other stakeholders to actively participate and invest in the improvement process.

Respondents emphasized the value of a phased approach to improving civil registration and vital statistics systems, highlighting this as one of the most important lessons learned. One male respondent, who was a local partner, stated: “Digital transformation should follow a phased, iterative approach, starting small, learning from each stage and continuously improving.”

Functional governance structures are vital for the successful implementation and sustainability of systems for civil registration and vital statistics. A male respondent, who was a local partner from the central

Government, made the following observation:

Establishing functional governance structures is essential for the successful implementation and sustainability of the civil registration and vital statistics system. These structures should span from the central level to subnational levels, ensuring that policies and procedures are uniformly applied across the country. Central governance provides strategic direction, policy formulation and oversight, while subnational governance structures ensure that civil registration and vital statistics activities are implemented effectively at the local level. Clear roles, responsibilities and accountability mechanisms within these structures enhance the system’s resilience and responsiveness to emerging needs.

In addition to the strong governance structure, respondents cited the importance of collaboration and coordination as one of the aspects that should be taken into consideration when improving processes pertaining to civil registration and vital statistics. A male respondent, who was a local partner, observed: “A well-established coordination mechanism is critical, involving various levels, such as the social cluster (ministers), the national civil registration and vital statistics steering committee (comprising permanent secretaries, director generals and executive secretaries), the civil registration and vital statistics technical committee, mortality committees and other local-level subcommittees.”

Respondents identified several additional areas of interest, on the basis of lessons learned throughout the process of improving the civil registration and vital

statistics system, including standard operating procedures and capacity-building. A male respondent, who was a local partner, reflected:

Clear operational guidelines and standard operating procedures are essential for the consistent functioning of the civil registration and vital statistics system, providing a standardized framework for registration processes. Equally important is continuous training of registration teams, covering areas like data entry, customer service, legal requirements and information technology systems. Regular capacity-building ensures high service standards, adaptability to new technologies and effective handling of challenges, enabling staff to manage complex cases while ensuring the accuracy and completeness of vital records.

Robust information technology infrastructure and advancements in digital public infrastructure play a crucial role in enhancing civil registration and vital statistics systems. A male respondent, who was a local partner, noted: “Ensuring the availability of information technology infrastructure and services at all registration levels supports real-time, efficient data capture and processing.”

3.2.3. Areas for further improvement and system sustainability

Respondents, including both local partners and foreign development partners, identified several main areas for advancing the establishment of a sustainable civil

registration and vital statistics system. The purpose of strategically focusing on these areas is to enhance efficiency, accessibility and long-term resilience, thus ensuring the continued improvement of civil registration and vital statistics systems. A male respondent, who was a local partner, observed:

Regarding the envisaged next steps, we are looking at expanding and deepening vital statistics data use. We feel that data use has not reached a level at which we want it to be. We shall also try to improve death registration completeness. There are projects in the pipeline where we are exploring more active death notification methods. We also want to achieve sustainable local funding for sustainability. And, lastly, we are very much looking at full end-to-end civil registration digitalization, where the national centralized and integrated civil registration and vital statistics system will be fully integrated with other systems in the citizen service delivery ecosystem.

In the field of death registration and the recording of causes of death, stakeholders in civil registration and vital statistics systems are actively exploring modern tools to enhance the quality of mortality data reporting. A male respondent, who was a local partner, explained: “We want to transition from International Classification of Diseases 10 to 11 and to integrate the DORIS¹ tool into civil registration and vital statistics for underlying cause-of-death reporting.”

¹ The WHO Digital Open Rule Integrated Cause of Death Selection (DORIS) tool is designed to streamline the selection of underlying causes of death using the eleventh version of the International Classification of Diseases. The tool is an innovative solution that modernizes the processing of death certificates and enhances global management of data on causes of death.

A critical area of focus is the integration of the justice sector with the civil registration and vital statistics system to enable the on-line notification of vital events originating from courts, such as divorces and annulments of marriage. A male respondent, who was a local partner, stated:

One of the immediate priorities is to enhance interoperability between the civil registration and vital statistics system and other sectoral systems, particularly the Integrated Electronic Case Management System used in the justice sector. This will ensure automatic transmission of legally recognized events, such as divorce judgments, to the civil registration and vital statistics system, improving accuracy and timeliness of data.



4. Discussion

As outlined in the snapshot report produced by the Centre of Excellence for Civil Registration and Vital Statistics Systems (2021), the second half of the 2010s saw significant advancements in legal frameworks, governance structures, technological integration and stakeholder collaboration in relation to the civil registration and vital statistics system of Rwanda. The modernization of the system was underpinned by significant legal reforms, notably the 2020 amendment of Law No. 32/2016 of 28 August 2016 governing persons and family, which enabled the decentralization of civil registration services. The amendment significantly increased the number of registrars and registration points, from 416 to 3,220, thereby enhancing accessibility. However, some aspects of the system require further legal review to align them with international best practices. One potential improvement would be the inclusion of stillbirth registration as a legally recognized vital event. The issuance of clear guidelines on such registrations would contribute to the establishment of a comprehensive civil registration system reflecting global standards, which could help to improve public health planning. Despite significant progress, death registration completeness remains a challenge. Addressing this issue will require innovative approaches to make registration processes more accessible and efficient and to increase public awareness of them. The Government of Rwanda should explore digital solutions, community engagement strategies and policy reforms in this con-

nection, all of which could contribute to more comprehensive and inclusive death registration.

Effective governance is a critical component of driving improvements to civil registration and vital statistics. The Government of Rwanda has established a multi-tier governance structure that includes a high-level coordination committee and a national steering committee on civil registration and vital statistics. This structure has enabled oversight and coordination among various stakeholders, ensuring that responsibilities are clearly defined and that collaboration spans several sectors. The governance arrangement has been instrumental in fostering a unified approach to improving civil registration and vital statistics, thereby enhancing accountability and efficiency in service delivery.

In addition, significant technological advancements were made between 2016 and 2024. The development and implementation of the national centralized and integrated civil registration and vital statistics digital system mark a significant milestone in data management and accessibility. The integration of this system with national identity systems, the national population register and health management information systems has streamlined processes, reduced errors and improved data validation. Such technological integration not only facilitates real-time data collection but also enhances the overall functionality of the civil registration and

vital statistics system, ensuring that vital statistics are readily available for planning and decision-making.

Development partners – such as Bloomberg Philanthropies, UNICEF, Vital Strategies, WHO and the World Bank – have played a pivotal role in the modernization of the civil registration and vital statistics system of Rwanda. Their financial and technical support has been crucial for the implementation of the strategic plan on civil registration and vital statistics for the period 2017–2022 and for the achievements that have been made. The structured partnership between local agencies and international partners has enabled the alignment of interventions with national priorities, thereby maximizing the effectiveness of the initiatives undertaken. This collaborative approach has reinforced the importance of stakeholder engagement, ensuring that the diverse needs and expectations of various stakeholders in improving the civil registration and vital statistics system are met throughout the process.

The modernization process has not been without its challenges, however. Structural issues, stakeholder management and the need for change management have presented significant hurdles. Continuous en-

gagement with stakeholders has proven to be essential to overcoming these challenges, the aim being to foster the culture of collaboration that is crucial for the sustainability of the civil registration and vital statistics system. From the lessons learned during the modernization process, it is clear that ongoing training and support for registration teams are needed and that it is important to have clear operational guidelines and standard operating procedures, with a view to maintaining consistency in service delivery.

As shown in table 3, significant advancements have been achieved through rigorous reforms, including the digitalization and decentralization of civil registration and vital statistics services. Birth registration completeness increased dramatically, from 51.0 per cent in 2016 to 90.0 per cent in 2023. Death registration completeness is increasing steadily, rising from 30.0 per cent in 2016 to 41.8 per cent in 2023. Furthermore, cause-of-death registration that included medical certification and verbal autopsy rose from 0.0 per cent in 2016 to 37.6 per cent in 2023. The improvements primarily reflect the immediate outputs of the process to enhance the civil registration and vital statistics system that was implemented between 2016 and 2023.

Table 3 - Rates of birth, death and cause-of-death registration, 2016-2023 (Percentage)

Year	2016	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Birth registrations	51.0	87.0	85.8	84.2	92.9	90.0
Death registrations	30.0	31.4	29.9	26.2	31.1	41.8
Cause-of-death registrations with medical certification and verbal autopsy	0.0	16.5	12.1	10.9	19.0	37.6

Source: Rwanda, National Institute of Statistics (2016); Rwanda, National Identification Agency (2024).

In the future, the Government of Rwanda aims to further enhance the use of vital statistics data for planning and decision-making, while ensuring sustainability through local funding mechanisms. The complete digitalization of the civil registration process remains a priority, and the Government plans to fully integrate the centralized national system for civil registration and vital statistics with the systems through which other public services are provided. In addition, the Government plans to explore more active death notification methods, with a view to improving registration completeness, and to raise public awareness of the importance of civil registration. Furthermore, the Government will strive to move from the tenth to the eleventh version of the International Classification of Diseases, ensuring alignment with the latest international standards for the classification of causes of death. Lastly, the integration of the WHO Digital Open

Rule Integrated Cause of Death Selection (DORIS) tool will increase accuracy and efficiency in the determination of underlying causes of death, thus contributing to improved mortality data quality and more effective public health planning.

The modernization of civil registration and vital statistics in Rwanda is the result of a comprehensive and coordinated effort, supported by strong partnerships and involving legal, governance and technological changes. The insights gained from the modernization process not only contribute to the body of knowledge in this domain but also offer valuable lessons for other States aspiring to enhance their civil registration and vital statistics systems. In Rwanda, commitment to continuous improvement and stakeholder engagement will be vital to sustaining the progress made thus far.



5. Conclusion

In the present report, the modernization of the civil registration and vital statistics system in Rwanda between 2016 and 2024 is discussed. Emphasis is given to significant advancements in legal frameworks, governance structures, technological integration and stakeholder collaboration. The modernization has been underpinned by crucial legal reforms, notably the 2020 amendment of Law No. 32/2016 of 28 August 2016 governing persons and family, which facilitated the decentralization of registration services by significantly increasing the number of registrars and registration points, thereby enhancing accessibility for citizens.

The Government of Rwanda has established a multi-tier governance structure that has enabled oversight and coordination among the various stakeholders, ensuring that responsibilities are clearly defined and that collaboration spans several sectors. The new structure has been instrumental in fostering a unified approach to the improvement of civil registration and vital statistics, thereby enhancing accountability and efficiency in service delivery.

Significant technological advancements have been made during this period, in particular the development and implementation of the national centralized and integrated civil registration and vital statistics digital system. The integration of the system with other systems for managing

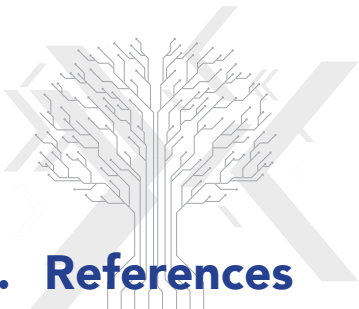
personal and health data has streamlined processes, reduced errors and improved data validation. By facilitating real-time data collection, such technological integration ensures that vital statistics are readily available for planning and decision-making.

Financial and technical support from development partners has been pivotal to the successful modernization of the civil registration and vital statistics system, in particular the implementation of the strategic plan on civil registration and vital statistics for the period 2017-2022. Collaboration between local agencies and international partners has ensured that the diverse needs and expectations of various stakeholders are met. A female respondent, who was a development partner, noted: "The civil registration and vital statistics system achieved several milestones since the first assessment, conducted in 2016. The civil registration and vital statistics strategic plan was developed, the system built and scaled up, and a strong governance mechanism is in place. Vital statistics reports are produced regularly."

To overcome the various challenges that have been faced, continuous engagement with stakeholders has been essential. Ongoing training and support for registration teams are needed, along with clear operational guidelines and standard operating procedures.

In the future, the Government of Rwanda aims to completely digitalize the civil registration process, fully integrate the national centralized and integrated civil registration and vital statistics system with other systems, explore more active death notification methods and raise public awareness of the importance of civil registration.

In conclusion, the insights gained from the modernization of civil registration and vital statistics in Rwanda not only contribute to the body of knowledge in this domain but also offer valuable lessons for other States aspiring to enhance their civil registration and vital statistics systems. In Rwanda, commitment to continuous improvement and stakeholder engagement will be vital to sustaining the progress made thus far.



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