

Vital Statistics

World Statistics Day

Better data, better lives

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“The information stored in our databases and spreadsheets cannot speak for itself. It has important stories to tell, and only we can give it a voice. Once we’ve discovered the stories, telling them in an effective and compelling manner requires skills that most of us have never learned. Statistical narrative—that is, telling the stories that reside within quantitative information—is essentially like storytelling of all types; it boils down to communication. Just as storytelling is communication of a particular type, storytelling that involves numbers is more specialized, but only slightly more complicated.”

Stephen Few (2009)

MANY PEOPLE IN MYANMAR ARE BORN, LIVE, AND DIE WITHOUT LEAVING A TRACE IN ANY OFFICIAL LEGAL RECORDS OR STATISTICS.

The key limiting factor is that Myanmar does not have a department dedicated to civil registration and vital statistics that can adequately account for the births, deaths, and other vital events that happen to people in the country.

Abstract

Vital statistics tell important stories about the socio-economic situation of a population, communities, and the need for development in a country. These statistics capture significant events experienced by the population; births, deaths and social, economic, and administrative events i.e marriage or divorce.

Myanmar has a long history of registering vital events experienced by its population. This registration process has been expanded through the consistent efforts and collaboration, between key departments. However there is still room for improvement in order to achieve completeness of vital statistics. For example, whilst rates of birth registration has reached 79% nationally, the coverage is 93% in urban areas, and only 65% in rural areas. Further, the rate of death registration remains at 30% nationally, with even lower rates in rural areas.

Myanmar has committed to increase these rates and is making efforts to replace the paper-based system with a digital archiving system, install servers, and provide Internet connections at all registration offices.

The **purpose of this paper** is to provide a review of the current registration system and make recommendations for its integration into the new system. It puts forward a plan to improve the registration system which includes recommendations to appoint a civil registrar general with a clear role and the responsibility to oversee the civil registration and vital statistics system in Myanmar.

Introduction

A vital statistics system is defined as the total process of collecting information by civil registration, vital events, and relevant entities concerned within the boundaries of a country¹. The data collected in statistical forms are organized, summarized, analyzed, evaluated, and presented in order to make proper planning and decision-making. The vital events of interest are: live births, adoptions, legitimations, recognitions, deaths, marriages, divorces, and separations.

Vital statistics tell important stories about the socio-economic situation of a population, communities, and the state of development of a country. There is enormous value for every country in the world to know the characteristics of its population and trends.

Studies carried out as part of the ongoing work of the Statistics Division of the United Nations Secretariat, in fulfilment of the United Nations World Programme to Improve Vital Statistics, highlight the fact that both developed and less developed countries need to adopt measures to gather statistical data that effectively track levels and trends in fertility and mortality, while showing the correlations with different demographic, economic, and social conditions. With this depth of information statistical data then become useful inputs for meeting state planning objectives in areas such as public health, population projection, public housing, and demographic studies and research. The end-purpose: to improve people's living conditions.

The civil registration system continues to be the primary source of vital statistics in most countries. A fully functioning civil registration system can indicate patterns in mortality, life expectancy, fertility, and other important issues. Complementary methods of gathering data on vital events include enumeration, sample/ periodic surveys of households, and population censuses. Medical and court records also provide important sources of data for statistical use.

This paper will begin by discussing the concept of civil registration and vital statistics (CRVS). It will highlight the background context of the vital statistics system in Myanmar and then elaborate on the linkage between CRVS and socio-economic development and present some other examples from countries in the region. The paper will also provide recommendations for Myanmar's advancement in the collection of vital statistics that will lead to better data, and to better lives.

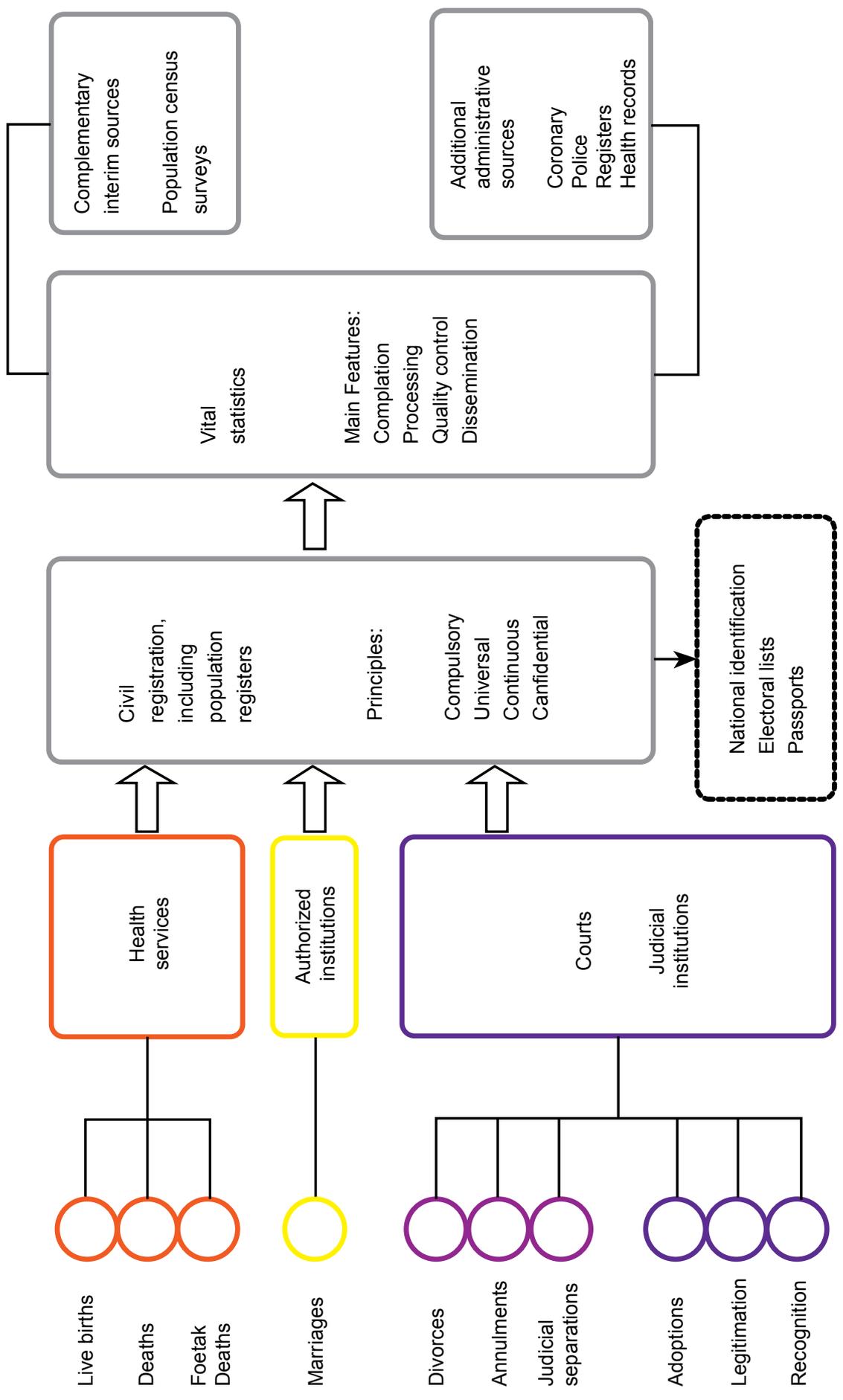
Civil Registration and Vital Statistics System

Vital statistics generated from civil registration significantly contribute to the formulation of effective and efficient evidence-based policy across multiple sectors. Reliable information on births, fertility, and deaths enable the calculation and production of timely and accurate population estimates and other demographic and health statistics. These are basic essentials for effective policymaking that will allow inclusive and sustainable development, and efficient resource allocation, including for social protection programmes such as cash transfers. It is also necessary for accurate evaluation and monitoring for better data, and establishing a better quality of life for the population.

The figure below shows the entire process of a complete civil registration and vital statistics system.

¹ Statistics division of the United Nations

Civil Registration and Vital Statistics



Myanmar Context

Background

Myanmar's registration and vital statistics system was initially implemented in 1886, through the first Myanmar census during the regime of King Mindonmin. Following this, district leaders were historically directed to collect and archive the required data across their areas.



Myanmar's collection of vital registration data in the post-colonial era was required under the Village Act of 1952. Certificates of birth and death were required by law to be provided by the village and ward administrators to the central government. In 1962 under a new structure, the Ministry of Health took the responsibility for vital registration. However, the Ministry of Health had limited capacity to manage as well as implement registration and the collection of vital statistics for the entire country. In 1964, the management of registration and vital statistics was transferred to the Central Statistical Organization: the implementation of the system i.e. collection of data remained with the Ministry of Health.

A comprehensive census was conducted in 1983. With the absence of census data for the 30 years following the 1983 census, the Statistical Year Book published by the Central Statistical Organization was the only source of information on vital statistics in the country. In 2014 another comprehensive census was conducted by the government: preliminary data was released in early 2015.

In the last decade, Myanmar has accomplished important achievements that provide a strong foundation for further improvements to its vital statistics system:

- With the support of UNICEF, Myanmar's vital registration system was modified in 1999 by reducing the number of vital forms from thirteen (13) to eight (8).
- A nationwide "Modified Vital Registration System" was implemented after the revision of the forms.
- An Inter-Agency Working Group on Vital Registration, consisting of technical officials from key government departments, was formed in 2006. The group conducted nationwide monitoring in 2009 using "Triple-A Method: Assess, Analyse and Action". This has helped improve service delivery and increase registration coverage from 65% to nearly 70%.
- One of the 11 agreements reached in the Nay Pyi Taw Accord in January 2013 was to increase the quality of statistics and the statistical system for effective development cooperation. In 2013, with the involvement of development partners, the Central Statistical Organization led the Committee on National Strategy on Development Statistics (NSDS). This committee was crucial for improving the statistical quality and evidence base decision making.
- In 2013–2014, with the support of the European Union and UNICEF, the government of Myanmar focussed on three areas of intervention to address identified registration bottlenecks:

1. **Policy advocacy for building a comprehensive system for civil registration and vital statistics:** In January 2014, a high-level Coordination Committee on Birth and Death Registration was created. The committee is chaired by the Deputy Minister of Immigration and Population. The structure of the committee, mirrored at all government levels, has made it possible for different

departments to reconcile the information they each collect on children's birth registration. This success has attracted attention at high levels of the government. Together with UNICEF's continued advocacy and support for the government to learn from international best practices on building a comprehensive civil registration and vital statistics system, this has laid a solid foundation and ensured that Myanmar will continue to move in the same direction.

- 2. Increasing the number of birth registrations through a campaign mobilizing parents and service providers to register children who do not have birth certificates:** The Coordination Committee for the Birth and Death Registration Committee was instrumental in launching a Birth Registration Week 2014-2015, in Ayeyarwady, Chin, Kayah, Kayin, Magway, and Mon. The campaign was designed to register as many children as possible under five years of age, with a special focus on rural areas. Within one week, more than 300,000 children were registered. This was accomplished, in part, by lifting certain restrictions related to birth registration. Using print and broadcast media to create demand at the community level and raise awareness of the importance of birth registration also facilitated the outcome. The campaign's main target groups were children from ethnic minorities, those living in rural areas, and children of migrants. These five-day campaigns increased the national rate of birth registration for children under five from 72% to an estimated 79%.
- 3. Supporting the permanent recording of vital statistics by establishing an electronic platform as the foundation of a civil registration system:** With UNICEF's technical support, an electronic platform was set up during 2014-2015 to keep permanent records of vital statistics and to make it possible to register a child and retrieve his or her records anywhere in the country. A server at the national level has been installed, and 133 computers and printers were provided to CSO offices in states, regions, and districts, as well as 44 townships in Mon, Chin and Magway. UNICEF and the CSO have trained CSO data-entry operators in all states and regions, and on-the-job training for district CSO offices is currently being provided. To prepare for full implementation of the electronic platform, the need for administrative restructuring and infrastructure improvements remain as key challenges.

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Current Context

The collection, registration, and distribution of vital information in Myanmar is currently carried out by five different departments.

- Births and deaths are registered by the Ministry of Health
- National and household registrations are maintained by the Ministry of Immigration and Population and by the Ministry of Home Affairs
- Marriage, divorce, adoption, and other events are recorded by the Supreme Court
- Vital statistics are published by the Ministry of National Planning and Economic Development

The National Archive Department under the Ministry of National Planning and Economic Development is responsible for the archiving of data. Archives are currently paper-based making it difficult—and in some cases impossible—to retrieve data. In the absence of a mechanism for permanent archiving of older vital documents (and data) that have been either damaged or misplaced, national records remain incomplete.

Myanmar's civil registration is currently carried out by five key departments. Supervision and guidance is provided by the Coordination Committee for the Birth and Death Registration Committee, which is chaired by the Deputy Minister of the Ministry of Immigration and Population. A key policy recommendation that arose from a recent birth registration campaign coordinated by the committee in 2014 was to “authorize a focal department for civil registration and vital statistics” and a “civil registrar general” to extend the coverage of this worthwhile campaign nationwide.

Myanmar has yet to establish a single department dedicated to civil registration and vital statistics, and to appoint a civil registrar general. Without a dedicated department it is difficult for the government to establish a comprehensive law on civil registration, and to coordinate effectively with one point of entry and accountability. The lack of a civil registration law, among other things, has meant budget allocations have not been sufficient to implement meaningful registration activities. The key consequences are serious data limitations and many “invisible” individuals.

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There are identified **risks and opportunities** concerning the current registration system in Myanmar. The risks include:

- Lack of clarity within the government on which department will be responsible for civil registration and vital statistics, which stems from the absence of a legal framework;
- Absence of a civil registrar general, which hinders the advancement of the civil registration agenda; and
- Weak infrastructure, which poses a challenge to the vital registration e-platform becoming fully operational.

Despite the risks listed above, there are many opportunities. For example:

- While Internet connectivity is still limited in Myanmar, the rapid expansion of mobile phone networks is providing new ways of becoming connected.
- Birth registration and citizenship are being recognized as two different processes, clearing the way for registration of all births within the nation's borders. Birth registration coverage of close to 100% is within reach, which makes Myanmar one of few countries that may be able to fulfil this important right of all children.
- Development partners and donors promoting improved registration mechanisms are increasingly interested in Myanmar.
- The establishment of the vital statistics electronic platform is being recognised by all stakeholders as the foundation of a permanent e-recording system. With a fully functional system, more solid statistics will be produced and contribute to the increased efficiency of the registration process. Moreover, the platform will constitute the basis for a national civil registration system in Myanmar.

Linkage between Civil Registration and Vital Statistics and Socio-economic Development Planning

Despite its rich natural resources and a relatively small population, increased effort in development planning will be required for Myanmar to graduate from its current status as a least developed country (LDC) Evidence-based planning and decision-making depends on sound data: having access to vital statistics, as well as demographic, and health statistics is critical for Myanmar's development.

In order for Myanmar to improve the quality of socio-economic data it will be important to establish a single department dedicated to maintaining a civil registration and vital statistics system, a system governed by a civil registrar general that can adequately account for the births, deaths, and other vital events that happen to people in the country. The civil registrar general needs to be empowered with the authority to implement a comprehensive law for civil registration and vital statistics.

Recommendations for Myanmar: Advancing Vital Statistics

The Government of Myanmar

- Revise the Modified Vital Registration Manual to reflect the current situation, and remove obstacles related to registration (e.g., geographic coverage and age limit);
- Use the National Strategy on Development of Statistics as a platform to obtain Appoint a civil registrar general who has the clear responsibility of furthering the civil registration agenda and finalizing its legal framework;
- Data sets for planning and implementation that reflect the actual needs of people in the group.
- Build on the foundation of recent successes, by mobilising resources, both from the national budget and development partners.

Development Partners

- Provide financial support to assist the Government in closing the gaps in birth and death registration coverage;
- Provide technical assistance to develop civil registration and vital statistics as an important component under the new United Nations sustainable development goals.

Other countries' experiences

Philippines



The Philippines has a population of over 100 million. Civil registration and vital statistics is managed by the Civil Registration Department under the Philippine Statistics Authority. Civil registration was instituted and made compulsory by the enactment of the Civil Registry Law in 1930 to ensure that each and every vital event was counted. This has been supplemented by the Philippine Statistical Law of 2013.

In 2000, the computerization of the civil registry system streamlined and enhanced the storage and retrieval of civil registry documents. With increased opportunity for individuals to access the Internet and a phone-based service to apply for civil registry documents, coverage has increased, and has reached close to 100%. The improved civil registration system has brought together beneficiaries and service providers encouraging collaboration for better planning, implementation, and decision-making. The maturity of the system has contributed to socioeconomic improvements as well. For example, it is now easier to establish legal identity and civil status, generate disaster-related statistics and reconstruct identity documents, as well as formulate and implement evidence-based basic health programmes.

Thailand

In Thailand, (population of 67 million), civil registration and vital statistics is managed by the Department of Provincial Administration under the Ministry of the Interior. Civil registration in Thailand was instituted and made compulsory by the enactment of the Civil Registry Law in 2008. With registration recently granted to the migrant population and children born on the Thai border, birth registration coverage has increased to close to 100%. The civil registration system provides reliable data for proper planning and decision-making for health programmes, local administrations, internal security, citizenship, disaster management, land management, issuing of national identity cards, and public works.



Vietnam

In Vietnam, (population of 89 million), civil registration and vital statistics is managed by the Department of Child Protection and Care under the Ministry of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs. Civil registration in Vietnam was instituted by the enactment of National Civil Code in 1956. However, a new Civil Status Law has been finalized and will be implemented in January 2016. Through CRVS, Vietnam promotes and



protects human rights in accordance with the Vietnam Constitution of 2013, and with the development, implementation, and monitoring of social-economic plans and strategies.

India



In India, (population of 1.2 billion), civil registration and vital statistics is managed by the Office of the Registrar General and Census under the Ministry of Home Affairs. Vital registration in the India was instituted with the Act on Registration of Births and Deaths of 1969. India relies on its statistical system to provide numbers in regards to people's movement. They do this by correlating the nutritional programme,

immunization programme, pre-education programme, educational programme, and healthcare programme, in an effort to support the development of an enlightened citizenry who will become an asset for national development.

Cambodia

In Cambodia, with a population of 15 million, civil registration and vital statistics is managed by the Department of Civil Registration under the Ministry of the Interior. CRVS in Cambodia was instituted by the Law on Nationality in 1996 and the Sub-decree on Civil Registration in 2000. Improving CRVS has been vital in creating and strengthening an Identification Management System.



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