EDITORIAL

Implementing civil registration in a challenging environment

Francis C. Notzon

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The universal registration of births and deaths and the production of vital statistics have been recommended by international organizations for many years, yet scant progress has been made. In 1953, the United Nations Statistics Division specified the principles for legal registration of vital events, although their interest was primarily for statistical rather than legal uses of the information.¹ While this initial publication was followed by additional publications and workshops, and despite improvement projects funded by assistance organizations, little progress was made in improving civil registration for the duration of the twentieth century.^{2,3}

In recent years many other organizations have added their support to the call for improved civil registration and vital statistics (CRVS) systems, including international, regional, and bilateral assistance agencies, global financial organizations, foundations, and others.⁴⁻⁶ This groundswell of interest in CRVS arose from two important developments. First, growing support for human rights, including the rights of children, culminated in the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child, which called for registration immediately after birth to ensure a child's right to an identity and citizenship.⁷ Second, there has been growing recognition of the unique advantages of civil registration in satisfying the data needs of governments. Years of experience with surveys and censuses have documented their limitations: data gaps resulting from intermittent surveys or censuses, a lack of small area data, unreliable measures of adult mortality from surveys, insufficient medical information on births and deaths and in particular on causes of death—all issues that can be addressed with vital statistics.⁸ The Millennium Development Goals were particularly useful in highlighting the importance of vital statistics for the measurement of health and demographic objectives.⁹

Despite the increased interest in CRVS systems, progress has been slow in most countries, and especially so in Africa. A litany of challenges stands in the way of improved CRVS systems, many of which appear to be insurmountable. These include divided responsibility for the system, individuals' lack of perceived need for legal identification, an inadequate network of registration offices especially in rural areas, communication barriers, and so on. The article in this issue of the *Journal* by Gadabu et al. focuses on several aspects of the challenge—facilitating the 'collation and analysis of village-level data' through the use of electronic registers in a village without access to electricity.¹⁰ In

addition, in implementing the project the developers had to address the first step in creating a village register, the accurate recording of births and deaths, which required a complete census of the village. In documenting all the steps the project went through, the authors provide some excellent examples of imaginative solutions to common problems, such as adding a single light bulb to the electronic registry system as an incentive to the village headman for the registry installation. Integrating the registry ID system with the Ministry of Health's Health Passport system highlights potential synergies between the health and civil registration systems, and providing a touch-screen system originally designed for retail sales greatly simplified the recording of data for each vital event.

The authors carefully document the costs of setting up and maintaining the electronic village register, but extrapolating those expenses to the 22 000 villages in Malawi produces a total cost that is clearly unaffordable. Nevertheless, the authors' plans to extend the project to a network of villages will be a test of potential economies of scale and of the possibilities for expansion of this approach. The many CRVS challenges present in Africa will require many different solutions; the current project is a useful first step, hopefully to be followed by many others.

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CORRESPONDENCE

Francis C Notzon
Centers for Disease Control
and Prevention
Atlanta GA, USA
e-mail: fcn2@cdc.gov

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