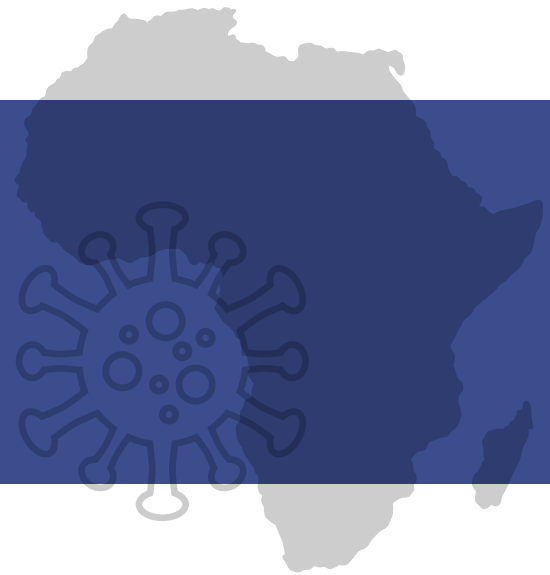# SYNTHESIS BRIEF

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Africa: How civil registration and vital statistics systems supported an emergency response

The COVID-19 pandemic has created an unprecedented global health crisis with far-reaching consequences. It has interrupted day-to-day life and affected the registration of births, marriages, divorces, and deaths. This has the potential to jeopardize the rights of everyone — most notably, the world's most vulnerable populations, like women, children, and persons displaced by conflict and violence.

Developing measures to mitigate the impact of COVID-19 on the registration of vital events is critical. The United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA), with support from the Centre of Excellence for CRVS Systems, is using its convening role to provide technical assistance to African countries. This support is to ensure that their civil registration operations are equipped and can continue to respond to challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic and to develop technical briefs to guide and inspire the building of more resilient CRVS systems. This support has and will play a crucial role in programming now and after the pandemic.

Research conducted by UNECA and the Centre of Excellence has found that countries with digitized notification and registration systems experienced fewer disruptions, ensuring continuous recording of vital events during an emergency. Digital tools make it possible for clients to notify and register vital events as they occur, and reduce the risks related to late registration and non-registration of children.

PURPOSE OF THE BRIEF

The purpose of this brief is to

- highlight the role of the civil registration system during health emergencies;
- describe the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in African countries; and
- feature government efforts and practices in Africa that underscore how civil registration allows governments to govern effectively.

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of Civil Registration and Vital Statistics

ECA

WHY CRVS SYSTEMS MATTER DURING EMERGENCY SITUATIONS

The primary purpose of civil registration is to establish the legal documents required by law. Civil registration ensures access to the most basic human rights. It establishes the individual's right to recognition as a person before the law and is the fundamental source of legally valid identity data used across government services. Data generated by the civil registration system is also the most reliable source of timely data for the generation of demographic and mortality statistics.

Without a legal identity established at birth, millions of children worldwide may not have access to essential services during and post-COVID, such as an education, health care, and social protection services. When marriages are not registered, women lack protections and are less likely to inherit when their spouse dies. And without a death certificate, family members cannot access death benefits or claim an inheritance.

In emergency situations, effective civil registration systems provide an essential link between the government and those who need support to navigate uncertain times. This is essential for a quick response that serves the most vulnerable. Civil registration and identity management systems enable governments to respond to crises like the pandemic efficiently and effectively.

Considered the backbone of government social support systems, civil registration and identity systems also provide critical demographic and mortality data. Mortality data is allowing governments to monitor the numbers of deaths, and calculate excess deaths, gender differentials in mortality, age-specific mortality, and co-morbidities during the pandemic. This data will put COVID-19 mortality into perspective over time. Data about marriage remains important to continue the fight against child marriage, which has been on the rise during the national lockdowns in some countries.

CRVS SYSTEMS ARE ESSENTIAL SERVICES

Civil registration systems continuously, permanently, compulsorily, and universally register vital events within the period prescribed by law. As such, they are essential services. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the need to register vital events and ensure that accurate statistics on births and deaths are produced has become even more pertinent. While civil registration is considered an essential service in many countries in Africa, several countries considered it a non-essential service initially and had no business continuity plans in place.

HOW THE PANDEMIC IMPACTED CRVS SYSTEMS

In March 2020, UNECA sent a five-question survey to all 54 African countries to collect data on the impact of COVID-19 on CRVS systems. The goal was to conduct a rapid assessment of

- the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the registration of civil events and the production of vital statistics;

- the impact of national interventions to contain the virus on civil registration operations and the ability to register vital events in a timely, universal, and continuous manner;

- socio-economic barriers to accessing civil registration services during COVID-19; and

- innovative approaches to registering vital events during COVID-19.

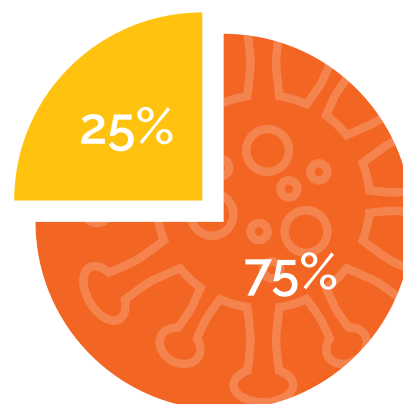In total, 34 country-based civil registration services responded to the survey.

- Based on the results, the pandemic affected almost 75 percent of civil registration offices in Africa. Services were disrupted or discontinued, which meant both short-term and long-term effects on the rights of individuals to access services.

Research has later revealed that some countries saw steep declines in registration as the effects of the national lockdown caused a backlog. Unfortunately, there is no guarantee that these events will be registered when the situation stabilizes.

25%

75%

75% of all civil registration services in Africa were either disrupted or discontinued (among countries surveyed).

Access to services

A number of civil registration authorities reported some disruptions and changes caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

- Some offices were closed, while other countries only offered services by appointment;

- Some governments adopted a policy that people who die during the COVID-19 pandemic should be buried as quickly as possible (in 24 hours), with no post-mortems completed;

- Women are opting for a homebirth rather than giving birth in a health facility; and

- Women would not attend antenatal or post-natal services, decreasing the demand for registration services housed at health facilities.

Service delivery

To mitigate the pandemic's impact on CRVS operations, some countries have devised special working arrangements for their civil registration staff. These include

- working in shifts;
- working from home;
- designating fewer staff as essential;
- reducing working hours;
- working by appointment; and
- using mobile office trucks to register children that could not be registered during the initial lockdowns.

Many civil registration offices have returned to normal operating hours, while observing health protocols.

Managing COVID-19

Some countries did not have business continuity plans in place at the pandemic's outbreak; *ad hoc* plans were developed in the first week after the first outbreak, and different steps were taken to deal with the pandemic.

On the operational side, these solutions included

- protecting staff;
- providing services to the public online; and
- connecting government services for ease of delivery.

Initiatives aimed at managing the pandemic included

- providing grants for vulnerable families;
- doing verbal autopsies for deaths;
- setting limits on gatherings; and
- creating public awareness campaigns.

A business continuity plan (BCP) is the process of creating a system for maintaining business during times of a potential threat or global health crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. The plan involves

- defining risks that can impact operations;
- mitigating risks by implementing safeguards and procedures; and
- testing and reviewing procedures to make sure that people and assets are protected and can function quickly in the event of an emergency.

CASE STUDY 1: GHANA
How Ghana adopted a business continuity plan for civil registration

In Ghana, the implementation of a business continuity plan (BCP) was instrumental to ensuring the Births and Death Registry and the Ghana Statistical Service continued to operate efficiently during the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting lockdown period. Ghana enhanced its death registration system during the emergency response and created a plan to keep the national census moving forward. The BCP is still being consulted and has been only partly implemented.

Why Ghana needed a business continuity plan

As of mid-November 2020, Ghana had recorded 49,302 confirmed cases of COVID-19, with 320 deaths. Given that civil registration is an essential service in Ghana, a business continuity plan was critical to ensuring there were fewer disruptions to the effective functioning of the country's CRVS system during the crisis.

The BCP includes epidemiological prevention measures to ensure that registration facilities do not become places where the disease is spread. Equally important, the BCP addresses disruptions in the supply and demand of registration services as result of containment measures implemented. To that effect, the BCP envisaged shifting to the digital registration of vital events and the use of online services to schedule visits to registration centres.

The switch to digital registration under the BCP was implemented only in the busiest registration centres. In rural parts of the country, the lack of supply and demand was mitigated by deploying mobile registration teams. In cooperation with local community leaders, special registration events are occasionally organized in local communities; by doing so, this eliminates large gatherings at district registration centres. Local registration assistants are hired to canvas designated areas of responsibility to identify births and deaths and to arrange for their registration.

Newly introduced registration business processes as per the BCP had been already been piloted successfully prior to the COVID-19 outbreak. The emergency situation put the BCP into operation and allowed for speeding up the implementation of newly developed vital events registration business processes, reflected in the *Births and Deaths Registration Act* that was approved by Parliament on 26 August 2020.[1]

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1   graphic.com.gh/news/general-news/new-births-and-deaths-registration-act-to-help-improve-collation-of-vital-information-for-ghana-s-development.html

Steps Ghana took to ensure business continuity during the pandemic

Key staffing decisions were made to maintain service and CRVS systems. The staffing plan was approved by the head of the Ghanaian public service under the Office of Presidential Affairs.

- **Civil registration offices:** Remained open to critical staff. Contact details for civil registration officers were posted at the office entrances for any important needs.
- **Head office and national level:** Critical staff were permitted to work at head office, including the Registrar of births and deaths, accounts officers, statistics officers, and a few others.
- **Health facility level:** Standard operating procedures under COVID-19 are being enforced, which has reduced birth registration rates in the otherwise overcrowded postnatal weighing clinics.

Lessons learned

During an emergency such as a global pandemic, Ghana's experience shows how the civil registration system can be enhanced for emergency response:

- Test the BCP and the continuity team to identify weaknesses and to ensure that the plan can be applied to many different risk scenarios;
- Make sure all employees are aware of the plan and how it should be implemented;
- Provide both virtual and face-to-face training that includes a mix of skills and experience;
- Consult with stakeholders internally and externally;
- Create awareness about the plan; and
- Strengthen the corporation with key stakeholders.

CASE STUDY 2: NAMIBIA
How civil registration and identity systems enabled an effective emergency response

What Namibia did

In the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Namibian government swiftly distributed an emergency income grant (N$750) to 749,000 eligible citizens (out of a total population of 2.4 million). This initiative was hailed nationally and regionally.

What the relief package included and why

Namibia created a three-part economic stimulus and relief package:

- **Part 1:** Support the Ministry of Health in buying medication and equipment.
- **Part 2:** Support companies by offering affordable lines of credit and financial support to employees who lost their jobs because of the economic slowdown.
- **Part 3:** Provide interim relief through the Emergency Income Grant for the most vulnerable adults — the unemployed and those working in the informal economy who lost their source of income during COVID-19.

Who was helped

Only those aged 18 to 59 who were unemployed were eligible to participate in the scheme. Vulnerable people under age 18 or aged 60 and over already receive income through a government scheme, such as a pension.

To be eligible, individuals had to show that they were unemployed before the COVID-19 outbreak. If they lost their job because of COVID-19 mitigation measures, they received financial support from a different grant scheme. Students could receive the grant if they did not receive other government financial student aid.

There were 970,720 applications for the Emergency Income Grant. The latest data published by Deloitte indicated that a total of 747,281 Namibians have benefited from the grant, at a cost of N$561.7 million (US$32.5 million).

How it worked

Eligible individuals were asked to send a text message to a dedicated short code. This prompted them to answer a series of questions (one per text message): first name, surname, region of residence, and ID number. Finally, the applicant had to respond to a validation text message asking for the name of the bank where funds should be sent.

The information was then sent to MobiPay, a service provider in Namibia for mobile wallets. MobiPay did a range of checks in government databases to ensure that the applicant met the eligibility criteria. Each automated query was completed in minutes. If all queries returned satisfactory responses, MobiPay sent the funds to the wallet/account in the applicant's name at the bank of their choice. The applicant was then notified that funds were available.

The key information used in the validation process was the applicant's national ID number. ID cards with a unique ID number are issued to all citizens and permanent residents aged 16 and over. This number was used to query the National Population Registration System (NPRS) to verify the person's identity.

Why it was effective

The implementation of this grant scheme was highly efficient. Individuals could apply by text message, even if the phone was not theirs. Grants to eligible recipients who completed the application were sent to the account/wallet at the bank of their choice. The entire process took no more than 72 hours.

The ability to design and implement such an elaborate payment scheme within a short period and during an emergency is a result of strategic thinking, planning, and investing in the development and interoperability of digitized databases that process and store personal information.

Why Namibia's investment in CRVS systems matters

The Government of Namibia has made significant investments to build a robust digital NPRS to manage individuals' information. It is now the sole source of legal identity information for Namibian citizens. The NPRS is electronically linked to a vital events notification system. All events are recorded in real time. The e-birth and e-death notification systems are installed in all hospitals, clinics, and mortuaries across the country and can also be used through a mobile app. The country has nearly universal registration of live births, stillbirths, and basic identity and health information.

Lessons learned

The distribution of the Emergency Income Grant in Namibia shows the importance of possessing a unique legal identity recognized by the State whose characteristics (such as date of birth, name, surname, and place of birth) carry value in legal transactions:

- The national ID became a key enabler for accessing the grant.

- The staff responsible for ID production were classified as essential workers and were therefore recalled from lockdown to the office. This enabled them to process ID applications and print ID cards to respond to increased demand. In one month, 17,343 cards were printed in the capital, Windhoek. These were sent daily to Namibia's 14 regions so people could collect their ID and apply for the grant by the deadline.

- An integrated civil registration and identity management systems can support an effective emergency response and limit fraud.

- Partnering across ministries and agencies is essential for a successful response to emergencies.

CONCLUSION

As essential services, civil registration systems must continue to function during emergencies. Many countries experienced disruptions. The case studies here show how this could be done and overcome in the future. Countries in Africa need to develop emergency-resilient civil registration systems that can continue to function in precarious circumstances; this includes robust business continuity plans that can guide operations during emergencies. Civil registration systems enable a targeted emergency response. It is therefore imperative to strengthen CRVS systems in Africa to be better prepared to respond to the needs of vulnerable people now and in the future.

Other research conducted by UNECA and the Centre of Excellence has found that countries with digital registration systems experienced fewer disruptions. Digital tools make it possible for clients to notify and register vital events as they occur; they also allow for continuity.

The development and use of digital civil registration systems is needed in Africa for the benefit of both governments and individuals alike.

To learn more about this research, consult the following technical briefs:

- **Rapid assessment of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on civil registration and vital statistics systems in Africa**
- **Civil registration system as enablers of emergency response to the COVID-19 crisis: Namibia's Emergency Income Grant**

ABOUT THIS SERIES

This synthesis brief is one of a series of briefs summarizing the key findings of nine technical papers about CRVS systems and COVID-19 in Africa.

The United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, the APAI-CRVS Secretariat, and the Centre of Excellence for CRVS Systems have partnered to support the development of this technical brief series on innovative, good practices facilitating the continuous and universal registration of vital events in Africa. This includes the generation of data for health surveillance during a health crisis, which has consequently mitigated the impact of COVID-19 on the performance of the civil registration systems. The overarching purpose of this technical paper series is to provide inspiration and policy guidance for CRVS programming in the African region in the midst of a global health crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic.
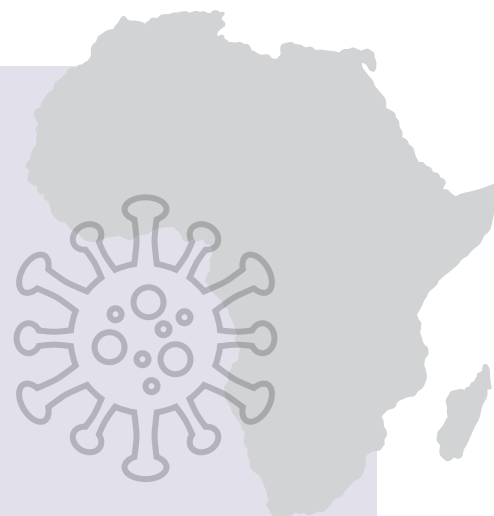
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