

Civil registration systems as enablers of emergency response to the COVID-19 crisis: Namibian emergency income grant

In the midst of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) health crisis, the Namibian government managed to distribute an emergency income grant (N\$ 750) swiftly to 749,000 eligible citizens (out of a total population of 2.4 million). This initiative has been hailed nationally and regionally. The present article looks at the role of the Namibian civil registration system and identity (ID) system in this endeavour. An integrated system that the government systemically designed, built and implemented over the past 10 years has proved its value in supporting the government as it efficiently manages a large social protection scheme.

As COVID-19 continues to spread across the globe, countries have devised elaborate plans to limit its impact through mitigation and containment measures, while making every effort to maintain health services capable of providing an adequate response. The measures taken to control the spread of the virus have had an overwhelmingly negative effect on the economy, and the resulting dramatic slowdown in economic activity has led to a rise in unemployment. To mitigate the risks of economic recession, many governments have introduced grants and credit schemes aimed at all sectors of the economy. Offering emergency social grants is one scheme through which emergency financial support can be distributed to imperilled sectors of the

population that would otherwise not be able to meet their basic economic needs.¹

With this same goal in mind, Namibia has put together a three-part economic stimulus and relief package for COVID-19.

- The first part of the package was intended to support the Ministry of Health in procuring medication and medical equipment.
- The second part was intended to support companies by offering affordable credit lines and providing financial support to employees who lost their jobs because of the economic slowdown.
- The third part, designated the emergency income grant, was intended to provide interim relief for the most vulnerable members of the adult population: the unemployed and those employed in the informal economy who lost their source of income because of the restrictions introduced to limit the transmission of COVID-19.

1 A snapshot of responses that consisted in providing grants to various recipients to address the fallout from the crisis may be found at pioneerspost.com/business-school/20200506/social-enterprises-and-covid-19-grants-loans-and-other-funding.

The emergency income grant was a one-off payment of N\$ 750 (US\$ 40.60) in cash for each person who qualifies. It was expected to benefit 749,000 people at a total cost of N\$ 562 million (US\$ 36.8 million). With the specific target population in mind, the eligibility criteria for participating in the grant scheme were specific and narrow:

- As a ground rule, any individual who was employed or received other types of income from the government was not eligible. Following that rule, only persons between the ages of 18 and 59 could participate in the scheme: vulnerable people under the age of 18 or aged 60 and over already participate in a social protection scheme that provides them with a source of income. In the case of people over the age of 60, this income is from their guaranteed pension.
- To become eligible, individuals must demonstrate that they were unemployed before the COVID-19 outbreak. If they have lost their job as a result of COVID-19 mitigation measures, they will still receive financial support, but from a different grant scheme.
- Lastly, students are allowed to receive the grant as long as they do not receive any other student-related types of government financial aid. Namibia has a range of social grant schemes that provide various sources of income.²

The application process opened on 14 April 2020 and closed on 8 May 2020. The Ministry of Finance transmitted the latest figures (as of

² Under the National Pensions Act 10 of 1992, aged, blind and disabled persons are paid national pensions. The Child Care and Protection Act 3 of 2015 covers the payment of child maintenance and child disability grants. The Veterans Act 2 of 2008 caters to the registration of veterans of the liberation struggle and their dependants. Where maternity benefits, sick leave and death benefits are concerned, the Social Security Act 34 of 1994 provides for the registration of employers and employees and for the voluntary registration of individuals classified as self-employed. The Act also provides for the payment of benefits relating to maternity leave, sick leave, a death benefit fund and the operation of a national pension fund and medical aid fund.

10 May 2020) to the Ministry of Home Affairs, Immigration, Safety and Security. The figures indicate that 970,720 applications for the emergency income grant had been received, much higher than the initially forecast 739,000 applications. The latest data published by Deloitte indicate that a total of 747,281 Namibians have benefited from the grant, at a cost of N\$ 561.7 million (US\$ 32.5 million).³ A further 120,000 people are expected to benefit after they complete the verification process.⁴

An important characteristic of this grant scheme is the efficiency with which it has been implemented. Individuals can apply for the grant by text message from a mobile phone, even if the phone does not belong to them. If individuals meet the eligibility criteria for the grant and their application is validated, the grant is transferred to the account or wallet at the bank of their choice. The entire process from submission of the application to transfer of the grant to the bank takes no more than 72 hours.

In validating the eligibility criteria, the identities of all 970,200 applicants were verified against identity information stored in the national population registration system operated by the Ministry of Home Affairs, Immigration, Safety and Security. According to the Ministry, an even higher number of verifications was carried out: 2,286,947 as of 15 May 2020. This high number of applications is the result of individuals submitting the same identity information multiple times and also due to the repeated entry of the same applications in the process of compiling the dataset for verification.

The administrative capacity that has enabled the government to distribute large-scale grants to hundreds of thousands of individuals within such a short time frame is the result of strategic investment in the civil registration

³ These figures are not final and reflect the situation at the time when this brief was being developed. Final figures are likely to be higher and will be the subject of an official announcement by the Ministry of Finance of Namibia.

⁴ Deloitte, "Namibian Budget 2020/21: Together thriving again", 2020. Available at deloitte.com/na/en/pages/tax/articles/Deloitte-Namibia-Namibian-Budget-Guide-2020.html.

and vital statistics and ID system over the past decade. This is coupled with the digitization of these and other government systems that process personal data and recent investments to enable interoperability between these systems.

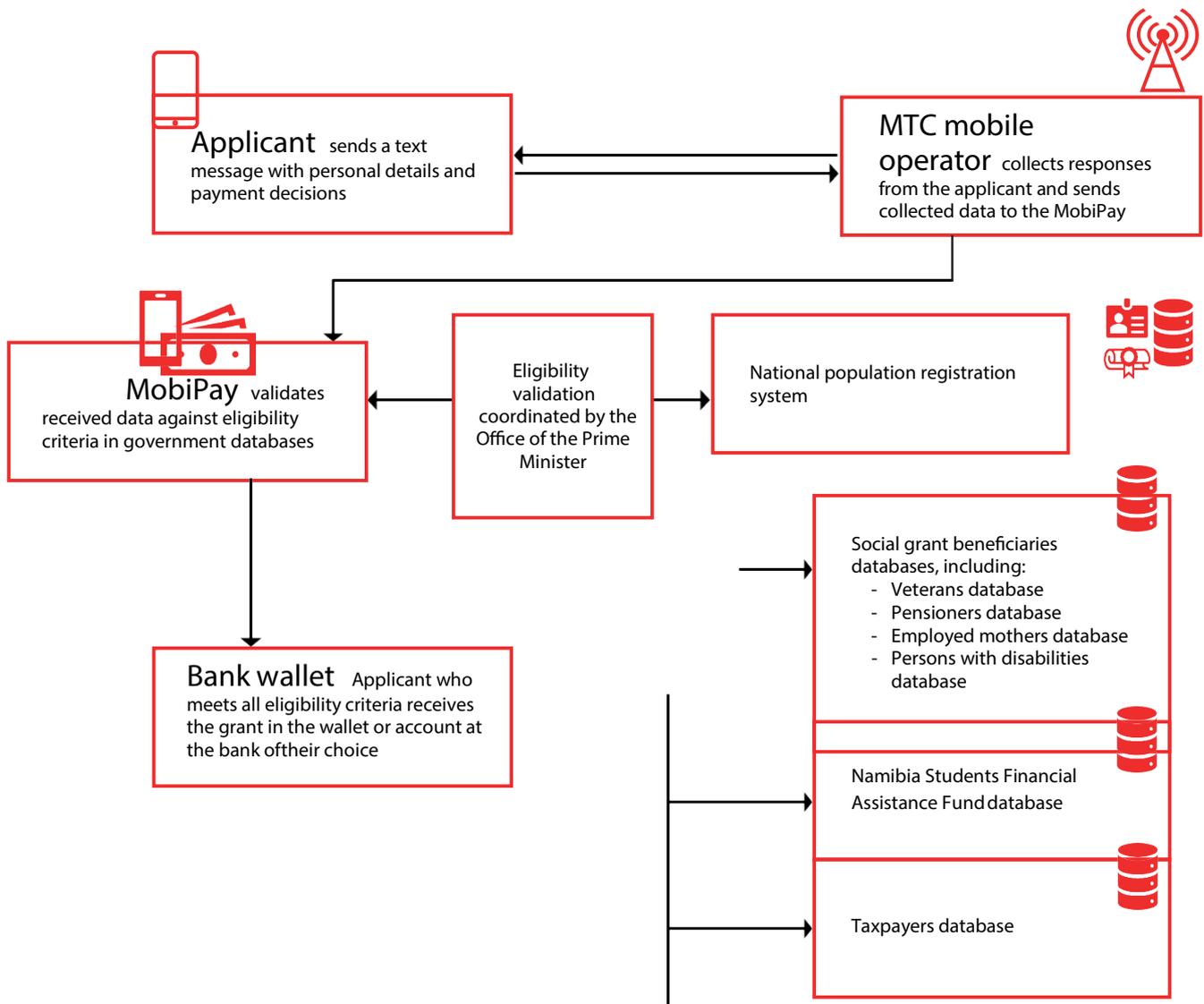
Integrated civil registration and vital statistics and ID systems as critical components of service delivery

The application process for the grant was designed to be simple and intuitive for the applicant. Eligible individuals are asked to send a text message to a dedicated short

code,⁵ which prompts the applicant to respond to a series of text messages asking a specific question in each message: given name, surname, region of residence and ID number. Lastly, the applicant needs to respond to a validation text message asking for the name of the bank to which the grant should be transferred.

Once all requested information linked to a specific individual has been collected, the company Mobile Telecommunications Limited (MTC) transmits it to MobiPay, a service provider in Namibia for mobile wallets. Before the transfer of the grant is authorized, MobiPay carries out a range of checks in

Figure 1: Processing of emergency income grant applications



5 This service is operated by MTC.

government-operated databases to ensure that the applicant meets the eligibility criteria.⁶ Both MTC and MobiPay offered to provide this service free of charge in fulfilment of their social corporate responsibility.

Verification process

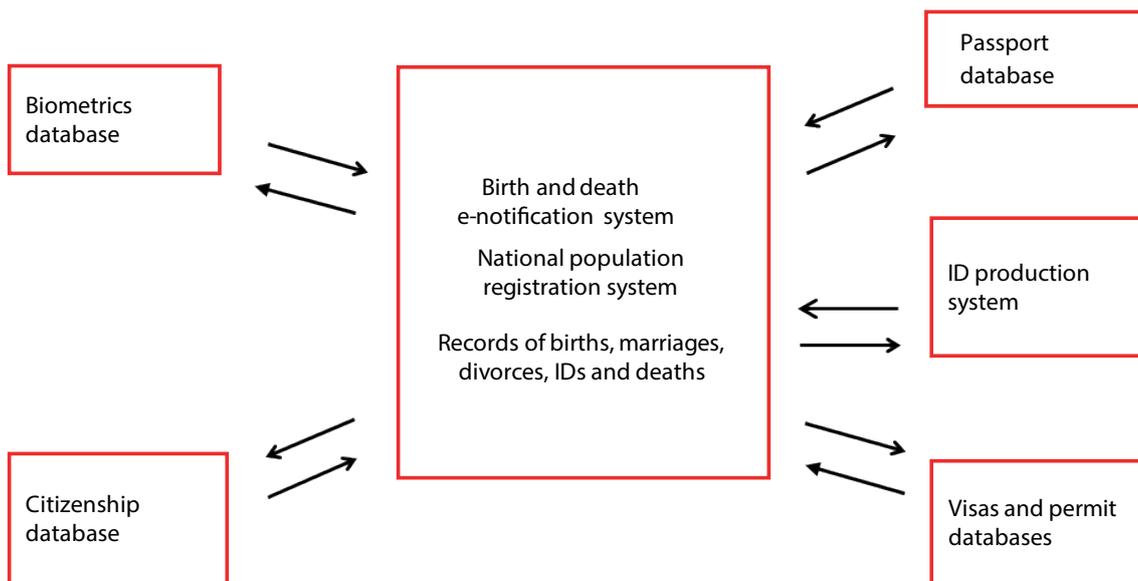
The key information used in the validation process is the applicant’s national ID number. ID cards with a unique ID number are issued to all citizens and permanent residents aged 16 and over. This number is used to query the national population registration system to verify that:

- The person is a citizen of Namibia.
- The supplied ID is a valid ID number and corresponds to the given name and surname provided during the application process.
- The person with that ID is not deceased.
- The person meets the age criteria.

If the identity and age criteria are met, the validation process continues by querying other government databases to determine if a person with the supplied ID number is registered as a recipient of social grants. For that purpose, the relevant electronic databases of each social grant operated by the government are queried (such as the veterans database, the pensioners database, the employed mothers database and the persons with disabilities database). To confirm that applicants are not employed or have recently lost their job, the taxpayers database (Integrated Tax Administration System) is queried.⁷ Lastly, the Namibia Students Financial Assistance Fund database is queried to confirm that the person is not enrolled in a student financial aid scheme.

Each of these queries is automated and is completed within minutes. If all queries return satisfactory responses, the MobiPay system initiates a transaction to the wallet or account opened in the applicant’s name at the bank of their choice. The applicant is then notified that the grant is ready for collection.

Figure 2: Ministry of Home Affairs, Immigration, Safety and Security database architecture



⁶ Republic of Namibia and Ministry of Finance, 2020. Frequently Asked Questions about the Emergency Income Grant of the Economic Stimulus and Relief Package. mof.gov.na/documents/35641/89902/FQA+Emergency+Income+Grant.pdf/cd1b50d2-ef25-d3c6-e4e8-d6e2297ec9a4.

⁷ Database available at <https://www.itas.mof.na/>.

The ability to design and implement such an elaborate payment scheme within a short period and in an emergency setting has been made possible by strategic thinking, planning and investing in the development of digitized databases that process and store personal information. These include the taxpayer database, databases of beneficiaries of different types of social support, or very narrow types of beneficiary databases, such as the Namibia Students Financial Assistance Fund database.

Given that each of these databases operates by using personal data, the government has made significant investments to build a digital and robust national population registration system to manage legal identity information for individuals, including births, marriages, and deaths. The foundation of this system is a civil registration method that records events defining the legal identity of individuals. Digitized civil registration records provide evidence of legal identity; national identity cards are produced and distributed based on this information.

Over the past decade, working strategically to build and integrate civil registration and national identity card systems, the Namibian authorities have designed, developed and implemented the national population registration system. The system is now being used as the sole source of legal identity information for Namibian citizens. With this in mind, other government databases that process and store personal information are designed so that the legal identity information of their beneficiaries always matches the legal identity information in the national population registration system. This approach will be fully operationalized once the regulatory framework for data-sharing has been adopted and the X-Road data interoperability layer fully implemented.

The national population registration system is electronically linked to a vital events notification system, designed to communicate the evidence and details of time-recorded births or deaths to the national population

registration system as they occur in health facilities. The notification system is linked with the national population registration system online and all events are recorded in real time. The birth and death e-notification systems have been installed in all hospitals, clinics and mortuaries across the country. They can also be used via a mobile app.

Today, Namibia has achieved almost universal registration of live births and stillbirths in the country, along with basic identity and health information.^{8,9}

The national population registration system is strategically designed so that it can connect to other government information and communication technology (ICT) platforms. In this way, individuals' legal identity information is the same across all government platforms. Namibia is actively working to implement the so-called National Data Exchange Service Bus, an interoperability data layer model developed in line with the Estonian X-Road approach. It enables government ICT systems to query other government databases and share data as defined by law.

Results of the process

At the time of writing this brief (May 2020), final figures had not yet been released. Some trend indicators are available, however. For instance, as the Ministry of Finance reported to the Ministry of Home Affairs, Immigration, Safety and Security, as at 15 April 2020:

⁸ Anette Bayer Forsingdal and Tulimeke Munyika, "The synergy between civil registration and social protection: a case study of Namibia", in *The Nexus between Civil Registration and Social Protection Systems: Five Country Practices* (Centre of Excellence for Civil Registration and Vital Statistics Systems, International Development Research Centre; Ottawa, ON, 2020). Available at crvssystems.ca/sites/default/files/assets/files/SocialProtection_3_Namibia_e_WEB.pdf.

⁹ Neo Corneliah Sebolao, "Namibia: case study 4", in *The Compendium of Good Practices in Linking Civil Registration and Vital Statistics (CRVS) and Identity Management Systems* (Centre of Excellence for Civil Registration and Vital Statistics Systems, International Development Research Centre; Ottawa, ON, 2019). Available at crvssystems.ca/sites/default/files/assets/files/CRVS_Namibia_e_WEB.pdf.

- 242 applications had been rejected, as the submitted ID was found to belong to a deceased person.
- 57 applications had been rejected because the applicants were under 18 or over 59 years old.
- 31,846 applications had been rejected because the ID numbers supplied were identified in the taxpayer database and therefore did not meet the unemployment criterion, despite having been verified in the national population registration system.

Media reports indicate that some 127,000 applications were rejected because the information that applicants provided did not match the information in the national population registration system. This represents some 13 per cent of the total of 970,720 applications submitted. This step alone prevented the payout of over N\$ 95 million (US\$ 5.5 million) in response to fraudulent applications.¹⁰

Regulatory framework

Although the distribution of the emergency income grant demonstrated that digitized and interoperable government ICT systems are fully capable of verifying or sharing data across all government systems, in practice this service is not operational. It is waiting for the regulatory framework that will define the duties and responsibilities of all stakeholders in sharing identity information to be adopted. Current regulations allow the Ministry of Home Affairs, Immigration, Safety and Security to approve requests for access to the national population registration system one at a time, as long as the purpose of access can be justified. There is a provision on data secrecy in the Identification Act 21 of 1996 that prohibits the sharing of identity data from the national population registration system with the private sector.

¹⁰ Edgar Brandt, "Namibia: EIG applicants besiege finance ministry", *All Africa*, 7 May 2020. Available at allafrica.com/stories/202005080363.html.

Given the emergency nature of the COVID-19 pandemic and the need to act swiftly, the government temporarily suspended the secrecy provision in the Identification Act 21 of 1996, section 14(2), while ensuring lawful implementation of the service with the private sector. This decision followed extensive consultations. This temporary suspension of the secrecy provision was formalized by a proclamation by the Head of State under the state of emergency regulations.¹¹

Notwithstanding suspension of the secrecy regulation, the Ministry of Home Affairs, Immigration, Safety and Security arranged the verification in a way that follows internationally recognized good practices. Before deciding to submit their applications, all applicants had to consent to allowing the institutions involved in delivering the service to process their personal data. The Ministry did not allow MobiPay direct access to the national population registration system. Instead, MobiPay supplied digital lists of personal data that were then processed by the Ministry, which then determined whether the applications were valid or invalid.

In view of the emergency nature of the situation, the service was a result of consultations between the Ministry of Finance and the Ministry of Home Affairs, Immigration, Safety and Security. The ministries determined that the technical preconditions for this service delivery were in place. Before the service was implemented, consultations were held between the Ministry of Home Affairs, Immigration, Safety and Security, the Office of the Prime Minister, and the Office of the Attorney General. The Office of the Prime Minister has a central role as the host and implementer of the X-Road interoperability ICT platform. The national population registration system was also designed and developed by the Office of the Prime Minister, together with the Ministry of Home Affairs, Immigration, Safety and Security. For delivery of the emergency income grant, the Office of the Prime Minister served as the main interface in the data-sharing process with

¹¹ Republic of Namibia, Government Gazette, Notice 7194 of 28 April 2020 and Notice 7204 of 4 May 2020.

MobiPay and other State institutions involved in the verification procedure.

Lessons learned from the project

The distribution of the emergency income grant in Namibia demonstrates why it is important for citizens to have a unique legal identity that is recognized by the State and whose characteristics (such as date of birth, given name, surname and place of birth) have validity in legal transactions. As shown in the present brief, the national ID became a key enabler for the purpose of gaining access to the grant. Staff of the Ministry of Home Affairs, Immigration, Safety and Security responsible for ID production were classified as essential workers and were therefore recalled from lockdown to the office; they had to work overtime for this purpose. This enabled them to process pending ID applications and print ID cards in response to increased demand for ID issuance. Over the period 30 March–30 April 2020, 17,343 cards were printed at the production area in Windhoek. These were dispatched daily to the 14 regions, so that people could collect their ID and apply for the grant within the deadline stipulated by the Ministry of Finance.¹²

Implementing a large-scale grant scheme requires significant financial resources. Ensuring that only those beneficiaries who meet the criteria receive a grant is of utmost importance. Measures to eliminate human involvement and automate the verification process provide additional assurances against corruption or fraud. Built-in automated validations prevent individuals from using fabricated ID data or ID data of deceased persons to access funds. In addition, financial transfers made as part of the emergency income grant were further audited by Deloitte.

This grant and the existing social grants create incentives for citizens and residents to apply for documents such as birth certificates, death certificates and ID in a timely manner.

Namibia has one of the highest birth, death and ID registration rates in Africa. As noted in the Namibia Inter-censal Demographic Survey 2016 Report:

- A significant proportion of the population (87.8 per cent) had a Namibian birth certificate, while around 1.5 per cent had a birth certificate from another country. In contrast, close to 10.4 per cent of the population have no birth certificate.
- Most deaths (93.5 per cent) in Namibia were registered. The death registration rate was over 90 per cent in both urban and rural areas.
- A significant proportion (82.9 per cent) of the population had Namibian IDs. The proportion was higher in urban areas, at 88.9 per cent, compared to 76.2 per cent in rural areas.¹³

The distribution of the emergency income grant demonstrates the benefits of long-term and strategic investments in building digitized, robust civil registration and identity systems and enabling interoperability among government digitized databases. The availability of identity data in a digital format and the ability to verify identity data across a range of functional databases mean that the authorities are able to verify within a short time frame that all eligibility criteria have been met.

Given that this grant scheme was implemented during an unprecedented emergency such as COVID-19, the system has additional value. Without the ability to put together and deliver a service such as the emergency income grant swiftly, the cost in human lives, economic hardship and economic slowdown would have been much higher. With paper-based records and manual verification of eligibility, the entire process would take a long time, nullifying the purpose of an emergency response. Where there is no interoperability among public

12 Ministry of Home Affairs, Immigration, Safety and Security, Operational Report from the National Population Registration System, 2020.

13 Namibia Statistics Agency, Namibia Inter-censal Demographic Survey 2016 Report, 2017. Available at cms.my.na/assets/documents/NIDS_2016.pdf.

administration entities, each individual would be expected to visit each authority to prove that they meet the eligibility criteria. Namibia, however, built a system where communication between citizens and the administration comes down to exchanging a limited series of text messages. During COVID-19, the ability to communicate electronically with the administration and eliminate physical contact in the application process was one of the most significant benefits of the system.

It is also worth mentioning that the poverty rate in Namibia has dropped from 60 to 20 per cent since independence in 1990. This is linked to the continued strengthening of the civil registration system. Namibia has

one of the highest coverages of birth and death registration and IDs in the sub-Saharan region.¹⁴

Interoperable public administration that prospers through a robust civil registration and identity management system provides many opportunities for the development of other services that benefit citizens. In the Namibian administrative setting, the COVID-19 emergency income grant demonstrates how service can be built and implemented within a short time while also reducing the time required to complete extensive and complex administrative processing before services are delivered.

14 Bayer Forsingdal and Munyika, "The synergy between civil registration and social protection: a case study of Namibia".

Note

The Economic Commission for Africa (ECA), the secretariat of the Africa Programme on Accelerated Improvement of Civil Registration and Vital Statistics Systems (APAI-CRVS) and the Centre of Excellence for CRVS Systems are supporting the development of technical briefs on innovative approaches and good practices that have facilitated the continuous and universal registration of vital events in Africa and consequently mitigated the impact of COVID-19 on the performance of the civil registration systems, including the generation of data for health surveillance during a health crisis. The overarching purpose of the briefs is to provide inspiration and policy guidance for the programming of civil registration and vital statistics systems in the Africa region in the midst of a global health crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

The technical brief “Civil registration systems as enablers of emergency response to the COVID-19 crisis: Namibian emergency income grant” is the second in a series of such briefs focusing on good and innovative country practices in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The themes of the briefs include:

- of the COVID-19 pandemic on civil registration and vital statistics systems
- in national and ministerial continuity plans, including civil registration and vital statistics systems
- Good practices in terms of collecting data on death registration, including causes of death for COVID-19 surveillance

The present article was developed by Zoran Đoković, Tulimeke Munyika, Colin Muleke, William Muhwava, Hosea Mitala and Anette Bayer Forsingdal. It is based on reports on the emergency income grant published in Namibian media outlets. It is supplemented by information that officials of the Ministry of Home Affairs, Immigration, Safety and Security provided in an online meeting facilitated by ECA, and further exchanges via e-mail. Background information on the development, characteristics and operation of the Namibian legal identity ecosystem is drawn from case study 4: Namibia, in the Compendium of Good Practices in Linking Civil Registration and Vital Statistics and Identity Management Systems, published by the Centre of Excellence for Civil Registration and Vital Statistics Systems, International Development Research Centre; Ottawa, 2019.

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