

Rapid assessment of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on civil registration and vital statistics systems in Africa

Background

The world is facing an unprecedented global health crisis due to the corona virus disease (COVID-19) pandemic. The pandemic has had an impact on civil registration services, including birth, marriage and death registration. This will jeopardize the right of children to have an identity from birth and to have access to essential services after the COVID pandemic. The civil registration system is also an important source of demographic data; civil registration services across Africa have all been affected by the pandemic.

In some countries, offices have been closed as part of the government's measures to contain the virus. It is imperative that measures be developed to mitigate the impact of COVID-19 on the registration of vital events. To this end, the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) is exercising its convening role to provide assistance to countries to ensure that their civil registration operations can be maintained and adjusted to respond to challenges during the pandemic. This support will play a crucial role in programming during this period and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

With this goal in mind, ECA circulated a five-question survey to all 54 African countries, to collect data on the impact of COVID-19 on civil registration and vital statistics systems. The objective was to conduct a rapid assessment of the following issues:

- The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the registration of civil events and the production of vital statistics in Africa
- How national interventions to contain the virus have affected civil registration operations and the ability to register vital events in a timely, universal and continuous manner
- The socioeconomic barriers related to COVID-19 that are impeding access to civil registration services
- How to develop innovative approaches to the registration of vital events during the COVID-19 pandemic

The questionnaire was sent out on 31 March 2020 to all 54 countries; 34 civil registration offices responded. The last completed questionnaire was received on 4 May 2020. The survey therefore reflects the situation as of that date. The results are presented here along with specific examples from the various countries.

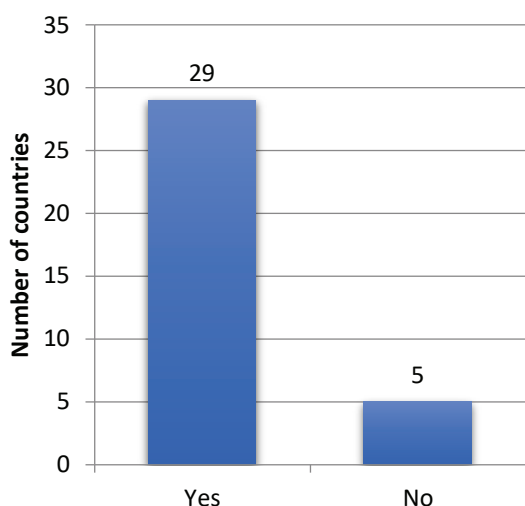
Key findings

Is civil registration considered an essential service?

Civil registration services are meant to be classified as essential services based on the need for continuous, permanent, compulsory

and universal registration of vital events within the period prescribed by law. Survey recipients were asked whether civil registration is considered an essential service in their country. In the COVID-19 pandemic, the need to continue the registration of births, deaths (including causes of death) and other vital events – and also to ensure the production of accurate statistics on births and deaths – has become more pertinent. Keeping civil registration operational in emergency situations is determined by whether the government classifies these services as essential.

Figure 1: Civil registration as essential services



In 29 countries, civil registration is considered an essential service (figure 1), with the registration of events restricted to birth and death registration, except in Angola, where only death registration is considered essential.

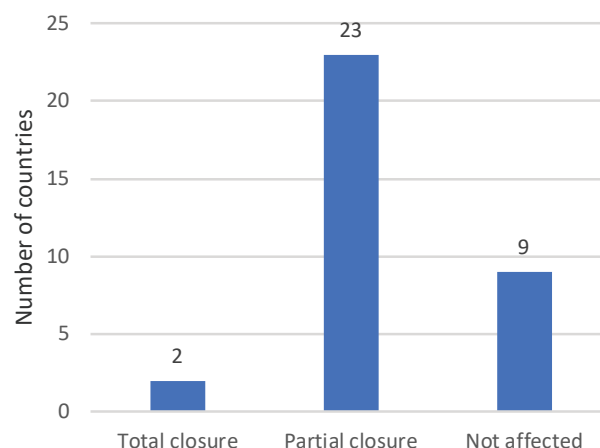
In five countries (Eswatini, Guinea-Bissau, Malawi, Nigeria and Uganda), civil registration is not considered an essential service. However, in some of these countries (Eswatini, Malawi and Uganda), operations were partially maintained.

In Somalia, civil registration is deemed essential, but the country has not had a functional civil registration system and authority in place since the civil war in 1991. Somalia is currently drafting a civil registration and vital statistics act to facilitate the establishment of the civil registration authority.

Impact of COVID-19 on the functionality of the civil registration authority

The survey assessed whether civil registration offices were remaining operational during the COVID-19 pandemic. The response to COVID-19 by the civil registration authorities in the countries surveyed was based primarily on the need to maintain safety for workers and clients (figure 2). They established their level of operations based on whether civil registration is accorded the status of an essential service.

Figure 2 : Impact of COVID-19 on civil registration authorities



Two countries, Guinea-Bissau and Uganda, reported that all their civil registration offices were closed. Twenty-three countries reported partial closure or said that services were continuing by the use of alternative means. In those countries, civil registration business processes are manual; they rely heavily on face-to-face contact and paper-based tools. In the era of COVID-19, paper transactions are being discouraged, given the contagious nature of the disease's transmission. Nine countries

(Cabo Verde, Comoros, Madagascar, Mali, Mauritius, Sao Tome and Principe, Senegal, Somalia and Tunisia) reported, however, that their operations were not affected.

A number of civil registration offices reported some disruptions and changes caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Some of those noted by the registrars general include:

- Some governments have adopted a policy pursuant to which people who die during this period should be buried within the shortest time possible (24 hours), and no post-mortems should be carried out. This policy has greatly affected death registration and the issuance of death certificates.
- There has been reduced demand for institutional maternal and child health services, with fewer births taking place in health facilities because of the fear of exposure to COVID-19. Many pregnant women are changing their delivery plans, opting for a home birth rather than birth in a health facility.
- Registrations of marriages have been adversely affected in some countries. For example, in Seychelles, clients are advised to postpone marriage until further notice. In Angola, marriage registration has been suspended, but for those who had registered before the lockdown, up to six people are allowed to attend the marriage ceremony.
- Civil registration budgets are at risk of being reduced because of lower public revenues and the redirecting of existing funds to ensure compliance with government measures relating to COVID-19. This is likely to cause delays in implementing existing civil registration and vital statistics workplans.
- Registration of some vital events has been interrupted, causing a backlog, and there is no guarantee that these events will be registered when the situation stabilizes.

In Zambia, the pandemic has led to a reduction in the number of vital events being registered, as the country is dealing only with urgent cases.

- Certification of vital events and the use of vital statistics have been adversely affected by the incomplete state of data and the failure to report in a timely fashion. Vital events are meant to be reported within a defined period, but, because of the pandemic, informants are avoiding visits to registration centres. For example, in Cameroon, a decline in the number of visits to civil registration centres was noted; the result was a decrease in the number of declarations of vital events.

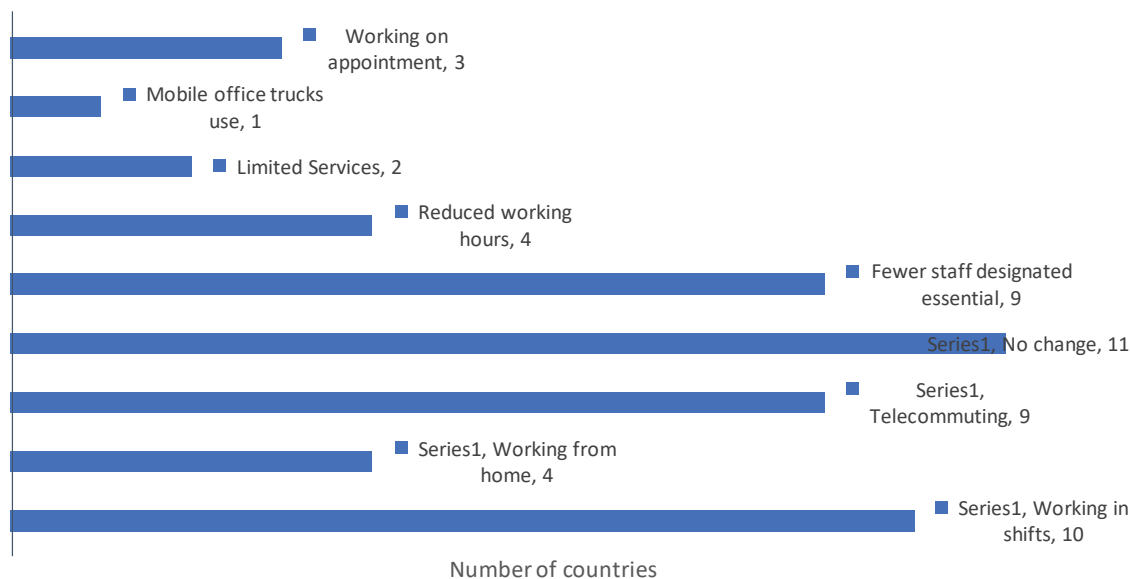
Working arrangements during the COVID-19 pandemic

To mitigate the impact of the pandemic on civil registration and vital statistics operations, a number of working arrangements have been implemented in various countries to ensure continuity. Some countries introduced a range of measures (figure 3).

Countries have implemented alternative arrangements to accommodate the registration of vital events. Three countries – Ghana, Mauritius and Zambia – report that an appointment system has been set up.

- In Ghana, officers who cannot be present at all times at the civil registration office have posted their contact details at the office entrance so that they can be contacted when the need arises.
- In Mauritius, staff of the Civil Status Division are working on an on-call basis to register death declarations.
- In Zambia, registration at civil registration offices is by appointment to reduce overcrowding.

Figure 3: New work arrangements during the COVID-19 pandemic



- In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, mobile registration offices are being considered.

Four countries (Niger, Sao Tome and Principe, Senegal and Sierra Leone) report that they have reduced the hours of operation for their civil registration offices. Seychelles and the United Republic of Tanzania are registering births and deaths only. Telecommuting has been introduced in Cabo Verde, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Djibouti, Mauritius, Namibia, Rwanda, Senegal, Sierra Leone and Uganda.

In nine countries (Democratic Republic of the Congo, Eswatini, Ghana, Kenya, Lesotho, Namibia, Nigeria, Rwanda and Uganda), only the staff designated as critical and needed to keep the offices running are allowed to operate from the offices. Ten countries (Benin, Burkina Faso, Cabo Verde, Comoros, Côte d'Ivoire, Kenya, Malawi, Mozambique, Seychelles and Zambia) have introduced working on rotation.

Mitigating the impacts

Countries have put in place a range of measures to deal with the situation, some of which are shown in figure 4 below.

Protection of staff

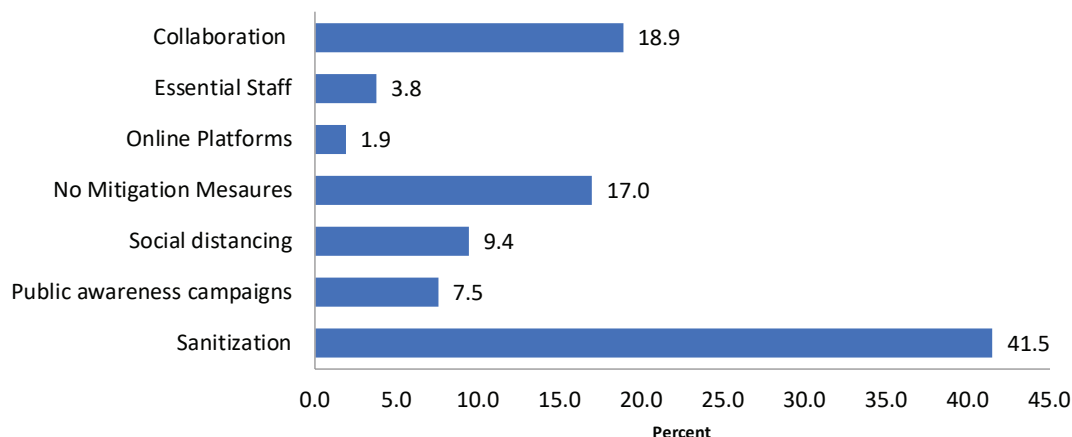
The health and safety of all staff and of the public is of paramount importance; this will take precedence even as continuity of services is ensured. The results indicate that the following measures are being applied:

- Enforcement of proper sanitization and hygiene (thorough hand washing and use of protective apparel, such as masks, gloves and suits)
- Supplying of sanitizers and hygiene kits
- Provision of protective apparel
- Imposition of physical distancing measures and erection of barriers
- Reducing staff to those deemed critical or essential

Online provision of services

In countries such as Angola, Rwanda and Uganda, and others that already offer remote services, it is commendable that these services are being used and strengthened and that the public is encouraged to use online registration. During the pandemic, face-to-face and in-person contact should be kept to a minimum; the use of other methods (email, phone

Figure 4 : Mitigation measures employed by civil registration offices



calls, postal services), and also electronic and paper certificates, should be accepted. The example set by Rwanda in the use of online tools shows how the investment in technology has been harnessed to ensure continuity during the pandemic. In Uganda, the Civil Registration Office has set up a mobile vital records system, which provides online notification and registration of civil registration events to ensure continuity. Minimum levels of information technology staff have been maintained to ensure that systems are up and running so that all births and deaths are notified during this time.

Interaction with other government services

The collaboration between the civil registration system and the police, health officials, and other authorities is of particular importance during this period to deal with issues such as registration services, burial procedures, issuance of documents and verification of identity. This practice is currently in place in Benin, Djibouti, Kenya, Namibia, the Niger and the United Republic of Tanzania. Collaboration between the civil registration system and other government authorities and partners for technical, financial, and moral support has ensured continuity.

Provision of financial grants to vulnerable families

Some countries are using population registers to identify and verify the identities

In **Rwanda**, registering information in the National Population Registry is done online. The Civil Registration Office has online access and can update events using applications received via the online portal Irembo. When applying for a vital certificate, such as a birth certificate, the declarants upload the documents in their possession, such as the medical certificate (birth or death notification) for births and deaths at health facilities. The civil registration officer can issue these certificates using Irembo. This process is performed entirely online – from application to issuance of the certificate – and does not require physical contact. Where the applicant has no smartphone, nearby agents can assist with the application process.

of vulnerable populations to provide financial subsidies and grants. This is a good practice, which helps them to surmount barriers to essential services, including civil registration.¹

Verbal autopsies

In Lesotho and Uganda, the governments are using a verbal autopsy method to ascertain the cause of death when informants come to register deaths. This information will be used to identify deaths related to COVID-19.

¹ See ECA technical brief No. 2: “Civil registration system as an enabler of emergency response to the COVID-19 crisis: Namibia Emergency Income Grant” on the role of civil registration in the distribution of an emergency grant.

Limits on gatherings

In Angola, Mozambique and Uganda, a limit is imposed on the number of people attending wedding ceremonies. To reduce mass gatherings, most of the country's civil registries are not handling marriage registrations.

Public awareness campaigns

Burkina Faso, Cameroon, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Namibia have carried out public awareness campaigns during the COVID-19 pandemic, principally to notify the population about preventive measures and changes in operating procedures.

Conclusion

The evidence shows that the pandemic has affected almost 75 per cent of all civil

registration offices in Africa. Services have been disrupted or discontinued, with both short-term and long-term effects on the rights of individuals to receive services.

It is imperative that civil registration systems continue to function during emergencies, as they are classified as essential services. Countries in Africa need to develop disaster-resilient civil registration systems that can continue to function in precarious circumstances. Countries with automated registration systems have experienced minimal disruptions; online tools make it possible for clients to notify and register vital events as they occur and allow for continuity. In Africa, there is a need to drive the development and use of digital civil registration systems.

Note

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 Civil Registration and Vital Statistics 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, thereby mitigating 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 in the Africa region in the midst of a global health crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

The present document forms part of a series of briefs on the rapid assessment of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on civil registration and vital statistics systems, which focus on good and innovative country practices in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. The themes of the briefs include:

- Documenting the role of civil registration systems in the delivery of emergency cash grants: a good practice example from Namibia
- Documenting the role of notification systems in capturing vital data about births and deaths for health surveillance in the midst of a health crisis
- Documenting good practices relating to national and ministerial continuity plans, including civil registration and vital statistics systems
- Documenting good practices in terms of collecting death registration data, including causes of deaths, for COVID-19 surveillance

The present brief was prepared by Hosea Mitala and William Muhwava and is based on a five-question survey sent to all 54 African countries to collect data on the impact of COVID-19 on civil registration and vital statistics systems by the APAI-CRVS secretariat at ECA. For more information, please send an email to: muhawava@un.org.

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