A strategic framework for improving civil registration and vital statistics systems in the Arab region for the period 2021-2025

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United Nations
Beirut

Acknowledgements

Key messages

- *Strategic framework to improve civil registration and vital statistics systems in the Arab region for the period 2021-2025.*

- *Joint Arab action and regional work with international and regional organizations have led to the adoption of the general framework of a regional strategy on civil registration systems. The framework in question is used as a guide in developing national action plans aimed at improving civil registry systems for the period 2021-2025.*

- *The strategy focuses on inviting countries and international organizations to work on developing civil registries and lending attention to digitalization — while maintaining the data confidentiality and privacy of individuals — to produce quality vital statistics that can be later capitalized on in devising development plans.*

- *The strategy calls on countries to effectively coordinate between the overlapping civil registry actors, and to provide a legal identity and a unified identification number (or national number) for all individuals, including refugees, in line with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).*

- *Arab countries and international organizations are called upon to work to improve civil registration systems and complete registries for the purpose of producing vital statistics, as well as to rebuild civil registration systems in countries going through hardships or conflict.*

- *The strategy recommends that ESCWA take on coordinating regional efforts, promoting the strategy in regional forums and translating the content of the strategic framework into an action plan through a regional project for the period 2021-2025.*

Concepts

The concept of civil registration is defined as "the continuous, permanent, compulsory and comprehensive recording of the occurrence and characteristics of vital events pertaining to the population, as provided through decree or regulation in accordance with the legal requirements."[1]

Vital events or occurrences are incidents related to life or death (for each individual). These events also include occurrences related to family establishment and disintegration, such as marriage, divorce and separation, in accordance with United Nations definitions of these concepts.[2]

Vital events or occurrences

Live birth

A live birth refers to the complete expulsion or extraction of a product of conception from its mother, irrespective of the duration of pregnancy. A live baby is one who "after such separation, breathes or shows any other evidence of life, such as beating of the heart, pulsation of the umbilical cord or definite movement of voluntary muscles, whether or not the umbilical cord has been cut or the placenta is attached. Each product of such a birth is considered live born. All live-born infants should be registered and counted as such, irrespective of gestational age, or whether alive or dead at the time of registration, and if they die at any time following birth, they should also be registered and counted as deaths".

Death

Death refers to "the permanent disappearance of all evidence of life at any time after live birth has taken place (postnatal cessation of vital functions without capability of resuscitation)". This definition excludes fœtal deaths, which are defined separately below.

Fœtal death

Fœtal death refers to a product of conception's "death prior to the complete expulsion or extraction from its mother, irrespective of the duration of pregnancy; the death is indicated by the fact that after such separation the foetus does not breathe or show any other evidence of life, such as beating of the heart, pulsation of the umbilical cord or definite movement of voluntary muscles". This definition broadly includes all terminations of pregnancy other than live births, as defined above.

Marriage

Marriage is the "act, ceremony or process by which the legal relationship of spouses is constituted. The legality of the union may be established by civil, religious or other means as recognized by the laws of each country. Countries may wish to expand this definition to cover civil unions if they are registered; in that case, registered

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1   UNSD, 2019.
2   UNSD, 2014.

partnership usually refers to a legal construct, registered with the public authorities according to the laws of each country that leads to legal conjugal obligations between two persons".

Divorce

Divorce refers to "the final legal dissolution of a marriage. That is the separation of spouses that confers on the parties the right to remarriage under civil, religious and/or other provisions, according to the laws of each country. In case a country recognizes registered partnerships, a legal dissolution of a registered partnership refers to the legal final dissolution of such a partnership, according to national laws, conferring on the parties the right to re-enter into another partnership or marriage".

Annulment

Annulment refers to the "invalidation or voiding of a marriage by a competent authority, according to the laws of each country, which confers on the parties the status of never having been married to each other."

Separation

Separation refers to "the disunion of married persons, according to the laws of each country, without conferring on the parties the right to remarry".

Legitimation

Legitimation is "the formal investing of a person with the status and rights of a person born in wedlock, according to the laws of each country."

Recognition

Recognition is the "legal acknowledgement, either voluntarily or compulsorily, of the paternity of a child born out of wedlock," according to the laws of each country.

Source: https://unstats.un.org/unsd/demographic-social/Standards-and-Methods/files/Principles_and_Recommendations/CRVS/M19Rev3-A.pdf.

The 'civil registry' consists of three components: (1) legal registration, (2) statistics on vital events, (3) and the process of collecting, processing and disseminating civil registry data.

Civil registration is primarily done for the purpose of devising legal documents provided for by law in each country. These registries are the main source of vital statistics.

Registration system functions include:

- Recording vital events.
- Storing, retaining and retrieving vital records.
- Protecting confidentiality.
- Issuing certificates and providing other civil registration services.
- Recording and reporting information on vital events for statistical purposes.
- Providing reliable and timely information and data to other government agencies, such as the Ministry of Health, population registry utilities, pension fund systems, electoral bodies, personal identification services, and research institutions.

The well-functioning of CRVS systems depends on the following factors:

- Strong legal frameworks.
- Effective institutional arrangements.
- Interoperability.
- Extensive access to services.
- Community participation.

Without doubt, these factors pose significant challenges in countries going through political and humanitarian crises.

The following figure illustrates the structure of identity management systems and shows the interdependence of the civil registry components.
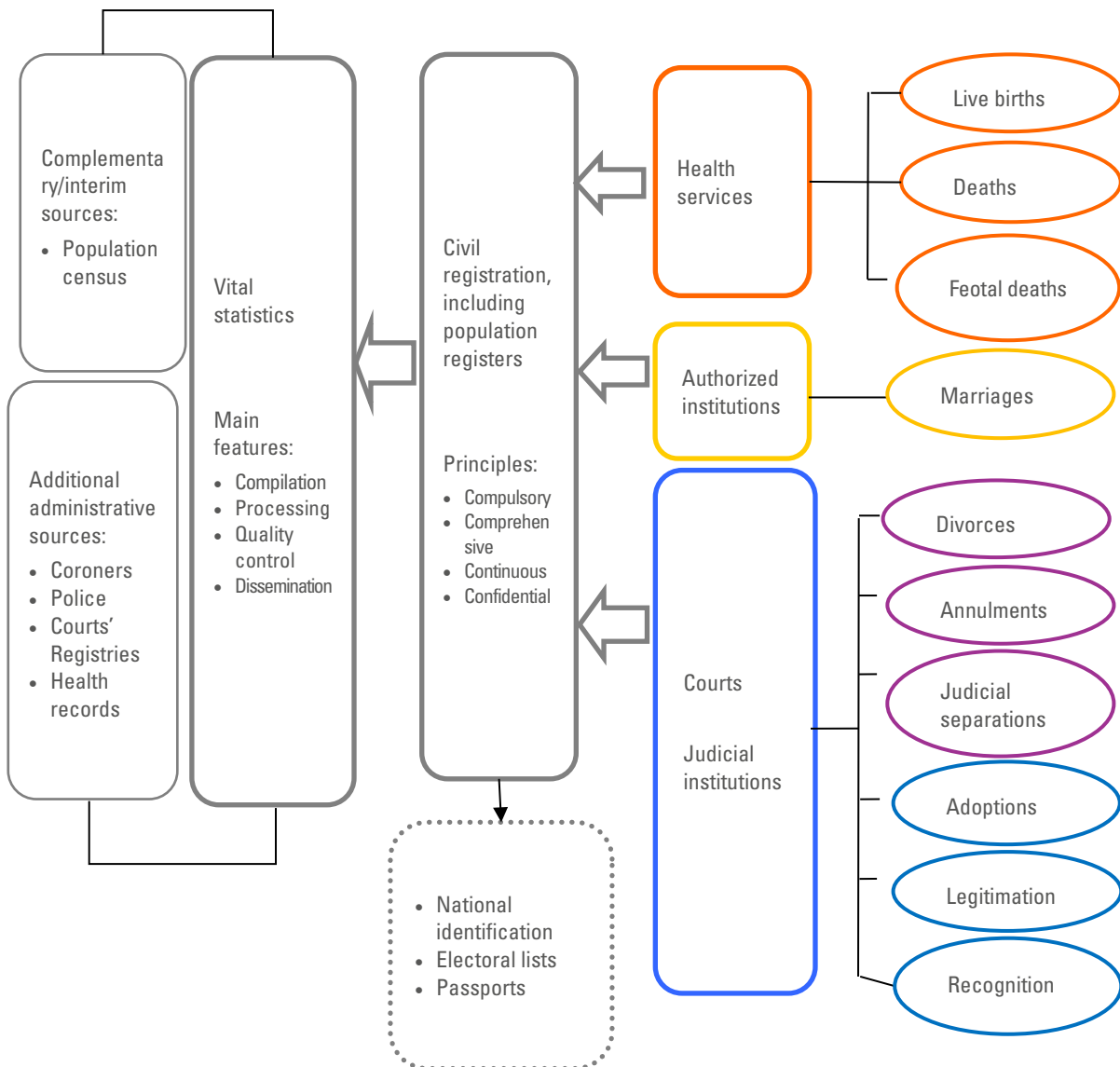
About 'Regional Strategy for Improving Civil Registration Systems and Vital Statistics for 2014-2019'

In its 60th session (September 2013), the WHO Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean approved the 'Regional Strategy for Improving Civil Registration and Vital Statistics Systems 2014-2019'.[3]

By improving civil registration systems, the strategy in question aimed to ensure the right to identity for everyone living in the target territory. It also sought to make collecting vital statistics a documented and sustainable process, so as to use these statistics to improve policy-making mechanisms and support them with the necessary data, as well as to provide the data needed to follow up on the SDGs.

That strategy was based on seven areas:

• Ensuring the availability of a legal and regulatory CRVS framework.

• Enhancing the infrastructure, resources and capabilities needed for registration.

• Removing obstacles (at all levels) that hinder the registration process and the availability of a legal identity.

• Improving practices that rely on medically documenting causes of death and promoting practices of using the appropriate codes for the cause of death.

• Improving the production and dissemination of vital statistics.

• Improving multi-sectoral coordination and aligning vital statistics stakeholders.

• Maintaining and strengthening the existing regional and global partnership to support country strategies.

The strategy has also defined a set of indicators to follow up on the plan implementation at the country and regional levels.

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3   World Health Organization. Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean. (2013). Regional strategy for the improvement of civil registration and vital statistics systems 2014-2019. https://apps.who.int/iris/handle/10665/123416.

Contents

Introduction

This document aims to develop an integrated framework for modernizing civil registration systems in Arab countries during the period 2021-2025, in line with technological developments that allow every citizen to have the right to legal identity and access to civil registry documents.

This document has been developed as a guide for devising national action plans aimed at improving and updating civil registry systems, in line with each State's priorities in this regard. Improving and updating civil registry systems are done in a way that allows producing relevant vital statistics data that comply with international standards in terms of quality, knowing that the efficiency of the civil registry and its operating systems vary from one State to another.

Civil registry systems continue to suffer from several problems in many Arab States, particularly those experiencing humanitarian crises and socio-political instability. These problems include the difficulties some vulnerable groups face in obtaining identity and civil status documents; the lack of comprehensive registration of all necessary data on births, deaths, causes of death, marriages, other transactions; the weak technical capabilities for interoperability between the civil registry components; as well as other problems that limit optimally employing civil registry data to advance development programmes and SDGs.

This strategy seeks to be a key framework for cooperation between different countries on the one hand, and between countries and international and regional organizations on the other, as part of coordination with these organizations on programmes related to the civil registry at the regional and country levels. This pours into preventing duplication in terms of functions and data recording, and also serves to harness the resources available to increase the efficiency and modernization of personal and civil status systems.

This strategy builds on the efforts made by the 'Regional Strategy for Improving Civil Registration and Vital Statistics Systems 2014-2019', prepared and endorsed by the WHO Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean, WHO-Middle East Region at its 60th session (September 2013), in collaboration with relevant international and regional organizations, notably ESCWA, UNFPA, UNICEF and the International Organization for Migration. Moreover, many of the provisions of this strategy stem from the recommendations of the relevant Arab ministerial councils, which addressed the issues of: the right to identity, the right to nationality and the strengthening of civil registry systems in the Arab countries. This document is in line with the strategy by ESCWA and United Nations organizations to support development programmes in Arab States and optimize data recruitment therein. It also forms part of their efforts to follow up on SDGs.

In its conception, the strategy focused on complementing the objectives of the 'Regional Strategy for Improving Civil Registration and Vital Statistics Systems 2014-2019' and

capitalizing on the achievements made in this context. Alongside extrapolating and reviewing relevant literature and publications, devising this strategy has gone through a phase of direct communication with stakeholders, through a questionnaire sent to all Arab countries and answers have been obtained from 13[4] Arab countries. However, the responses and answers provided from Lebanon were not counted due to the limited information in the relevant Lebanese authorities' answers to the questions. Additionally, a number of Arab countries going through unfavourable circumstances have been contacted for more information on the

challenges and opportunities they faced in completing the construction and activation of the civil registry. The findings of this survey confirmed the keenness of Arab countries to support civil registry systems, with 11 of the 12 States under this strategy emphasizing that their national plans included activities and programmes related to strengthening civil registry systems, including those associated with programmes to improve the said systems in terms of quality, services and vital statistics production; some of the said programmes pertained to digitalization and electronic system development.

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[4] State of Palestine, Jordan, Bahrain, Tunisia, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Lebanon, Libya, Iraq, United Arab Emirates, Morocco, Oman, Egypt.

1. Right to birth registration and legal identity

Everyone has the right to be recognized as a person before the law, as enshrined in Article 6 of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights and many international conventions on human rights. In response, the 2030 Sustainable Development Plan, approved by all United Nations member States in September 2015, included a special target, SDG 16.9, under which member States work to provide legal identity for all, including birth registration.

The United Nations defines 'legal identity'[5] as "the basic characteristics of an individual's identity, name, sex, place and date of birth conferred through registration and the issuance of a certificate by an authorized civil registration authority following the occurrence of birth. In the absence of birth registration, legal identity may be conferred by a legally-recognized identification authority. This system should be linked to the civil registration system to ensure a holistic approach to legal identity from birth to death. Legal identity is retired by the issuance of a death certificate by the civil registration authority upon registration of death."

Right to identity in Arab recommendations and declarations

Many Arab declarations and resolutions have included the principle of **the right to identity**, including:

- Sharjah Principles on the 'Protection of Refugee Children', issued during the 'Investing in the Future Conference' (October 2014), and adopted by the Council of Arab Ministers for Social Affairs as a general guidance framework for the protection of refugee children.
- Recommendations issued by the Arab Declaration of 'Belonging and Identity', during the regional meeting 'Our Children... Our Future', held on October 17-18, 2016.
- Recommendations issued by the final statement of the 'First Arab Conference on Good Practices and Regional Opportunities to Strengthen Women's Nationality Rights' on October 4-6, 2017.

At the 2018 Ministerial Conference on 'Belonging and Legal Identity'[6] held in Tunisia under the auspices of the President of Tunisia, in the presence of Arab ministers of social affairs and justice; representatives of the ministries of foreign affairs and interior and women's and children's affairs national authorities; and regional and international organizations, member States signed the Arab Declaration on 'Belonging and Identity', which guarantees their shared commitment to strengthening the protection of individuals in the Arab region, by increasing the efficiency of civil registration and citizenship systems, with special attention to the most vulnerable individuals.

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5   UN Legal Identity Agenda, n.d.
6   Arab Declaration on Belonging and Legal Identity, 2018.

The most significant recommendations of this conference include:

- Calling on the Arab League to consider passing an Arab model law that guarantees the registration of refugee and displaced children at birth.
- Calling on member States to spread awareness of laws relating to nationality and providing all children upon birth with all identification papers, through conducting awareness campaigns targeting all social segments to encourage registering all births. The registration and documentation of all refugee children at birth was also mentioned in the Sharjah Principles on the 'Protection of Refugee Children', issued during the 'Investing in the Future Conference' (October 2014), and adopted by the Council of Arab Ministers for Social Affairs as a general guidance framework for the protection of refugee children.
- Urging member States to establish a database of laws on personal status, civil status and nationality laws in Arab countries, with the possibility of obtaining technical support from the UNHCR to this end.
- Urging member States to do their utmost to reduce statelessness, in the context of member States' international commitments to implement the SDGs.
- Working to update the 1954 Arab Convention on Nationality in line with political, social and economic developments.
- Devising a regional action plan to implement the recommendations of the 'First Arab Conference on Good Practices and Regional Opportunities to Strengthen Women's Nationality Rights'.

2. Importance of civil registration

The need to control, regulate and activate civil registration systems is **not only justified by the resources needed to create a comprehensive registration system, but also from a human rights point of view**. Accordingly, the registration of vital and civil events is a fundamental right for all citizens. It must be noted that failure to include all population groups in civil status systems can be extremely dangerous and costly.

Vital statistics are essential in improving the performance of public utilities and development planning. Having comprehensive civil registration systems can provide several advantages, including:

1. Obtaining population data periodically and in real time, making it easier to estimate population by geographical location and reducing the cost of conducting censuses and surveys.
2. The availability of up-to-date and timely data facilitates the decision-making process regarding planning and provides the population with easier access to services.
3. Avoiding duplication of registration systems (e.g. social protection system and related social and health systems) helps to maximize the benefit of interoperability.

In addition to the basic uses of civil status systems by governments and citizens, the use of such data can be expanded to improve public sector management.[7] Upgrading these systems can lead to significant benefits, such as: (1) promoting equality, (2) increasing transparency, (3) curbing fraud and corruption, (4) increasing policy coordination, and (5) improving policy planning. These expanded functions can also contribute to more effective public sector management.

Vital statistics are also essential in detecting epidemics and monitoring the epidemiological situation. Benefiting from mortality rates by cause of death is essential in planning health programmes in general, based on a country's actual needs. The availability of cause-of-death data is also key for monitoring the epidemiological situation and outbreaks of infectious diseases, particularly in pandemic situations, as is the case with the Covid-19 pandemic.

Vital statistics are essential for monitoring and following up on SDGs. Improving the performance and data of civil registration systems is of paramount importance in this context, as these data are important in devising development programmes and following up on the Millennium Goals. Moreover, the World Bank report[8] indicates that vital statistics data are useful in monitoring 67 of the 230 indicators used to measure the 17 SDGs. For example, there are at least nine indicators that require

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7   Peters, 2016.
8   Mills and others, 2017.

mortality data and fall under the following SDGs and targets: targets 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 9 of SDG 3; target 5 of SDG 11; and target 1 of SDG 16.

Improving the registration of vital statistics is a key means for reducing gender-based disparities, as civil registration systems enable women to obtain basic documents, thus ensuring that they have better opportunities to obtain their rights, particularly in relation to the right to identity, inheritance and access to health and social services, as shown in specialized studies.[9] Vital statistics disaggregated by sex also allow for the follow-up of the main programmes on women and their health, as they comprise one of the most important sources to calculate maternal mortality.

Birth registration provides one of the most basic forms of identity protection of women and their children, particularly in areas of conflict. Studies have shown the extent to which birth registration is linked to vaccination programmes, social services and aid.[10] Death certificates are also essential for women and families to guarantee them their right to inheritance, especially since women's life expectancy is higher than that of men. Death certificates protect a woman's right to benefit from her husband's pension, considering that in the absence of a documented marriage contract she may be deprived of inheritance.

9   Dincu and Malambo, 2019.
10   Rahman and others, 2019.

3. Main challenges facing CRVS systems

A. Updating the legal frameworks governing civil registration as a necessary preliminary step to ensure the right to identity and access to civil registry documents

The questionnaire sent to Arab countries on their civil registry systems showed that the majority of Arab countries have made progress in the civil registry legal framework, with six of the 12 countries that responded to the questionnaire stating that they had appointed legal committees to review the civil registry legal frameworks. In nine of these countries, these committees (or their counterparts) have also prepared procedures to ensure the confidentiality of civil status system data.

As is the case with all State facilities, humanitarian crises and wars have a significant impact on civil registration systems, causing them functional disintegration and disruption. Hence many people, especially children, lose the right to civil registration, which may prevent them from obtaining identity documents afterwards. Many displaced persons and refugees are also at risk of losing identity documents or are unable to register certain births or deaths that occur after leaving their places of residence. Often, it is difficult to establish individual identities.

The lack of flexibility in the application of laws makes it difficult to obtain alternative identity documents for these groups in particular and for the population at large, due to archive destruction or the high cost of procedures, or because of security conditions that prevent them from accessing civil registry facilities or returning to their original place of residence, according to the UNICEF report on Birth Registration and Armed Conflict.[11]

In some cases, the loss of parents' identity documents disrupts the registration of children. Hence, the lack of identity problem spirals from generation to another. Some studies on the reality of birth registration for refugees — including a study exploring this matter by the Norwegian Refugee Council[12]— have stated that requiring documents proving the marriage of the newborn's parents is one of the obstacles to refugee registration. This study attributes non-registration to several factors, including: the lack of adequate information among refugees, the destruction of identification documents, the inadequacy of the laws to the situation of certain groups, and the lack of flexibility in dealing with special cases. Other reasons are that parents are originally in violation of the laws in some host countries. An example on such cases is when the mother is under 18 years of age, which is in violation of the legal age for marriage in the host country and comprises a practice punishable by law. Therefore, parents evade the registration of the child, at least until the mother becomes over the age of 18.

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11   UNICEF, 2007.
12   Norwegian Refugee Council, and International Human Rights Clinic, 2015.

Lack of access to identity documents increases the vulnerability of people living in emergency and crisis conditions and makes them prone to exploitation and victimization by criminal groups. Additionally, they would have limited opportunities for education, employment and free movement.

Children who are not registered at birth are also at risk of becoming stateless. Unregistered women and girls are at risk of exploitation, ill-treatment and early marriage.

The 2007 UNICEF report[13] indicates that Palestinians in Palestine are keen to register births in the Palestinian Civil Registry to obtain identity that is granted upon birth registration. Identity cards designate whether the child was born in Gaza, the West Bank or Jerusalem. However, Israeli occupation authorities may revoke identity cards from some individuals if they leave the city or go away to work or study elsewhere.

Illegal migration is a significant phenomenon in many MENA countries and has largely increased after the events of the Arab Spring. Migrants are sometimes subjected to extortion, seizure of their documents and are left without identity documentation. Therefore, they become vulnerable, including being at risk of human trafficking offences. Many migrants have tragically died following their numerous attempts to migrate illegally to Europe.

Laws in some Arab and neighbouring countries remain unclear or do not allow the registration of certain types of births, such as cases of anonymous births, or births to single mothers (the results of the questionnaire sent to Arab

States have shown that some States do not have clear procedures for registering single mothers' children). Moreover, some States do not allow the registration of marriage of Muslim women to non-Muslims, or to a man of another nationality, regardless of his religion.

B. Disruption or lack of civil registry in countries experiencing political or humanitarian crises

The UNICEF report on Birth Registration and Armed Conflict[14] indicated that in times of crisis, birth and death documents are often lost, or may also be damaged, as is the case with all civil record archives. According to this report, prolonged crises and wars can cause the complete destruction of civil registry systems. In such cases, registration is not available on the same grounds to all components of society. For example, there is an existing rural-urban disparity at the level of registration and the right to identity, as well as one between certain segments of society. ESCWA interviews with some civil status system insiders in such countries have revealed numerous cases resulting in the disintegration of civil registry systems, the destruction of documents, differences and disparities among community groups in obtaining civil status documents, the absence of electronic systems and training programmes for civil status system cadres, as well as numerous problems pertaining to control over and management of records in some countries experiencing internal crises and wars.

To maintain or re-establish CRVS systems, the windows for peace and reconciliation agreements can be used to enlist the issue of

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13   UNICEF, 2007.
14   UNICEF, 2007.

civil registration and the right to identity as part of the undertakings of bodies responsible for the reforms, and to include therein the tasks of reconstructing and reforming CRVS systems. This requires strengthening registration systems in all programmes related to the reconstruction of State institutions, such as drafting feasible laws, if necessary, with the aim of ensuring the right to registration for all citizens. It also requires adopting decentralization to ensure that the population can register and have easy access to the relevant departments. An effective civil registration system would help establish robust reconstruction programmes (stronger recovery efforts) in cases of natural disasters, crises and conflicts. In such circumstances, strengthening the CRVS system forms a component of the humanitarian response and falls within the overall framework of relief operations and service delivery. In this context, the use of modern technology, unlike hard copies, can save data more accurately to be retrieved when needed.

Despite all the challenges faced by civil registration systems in time of war and crisis, maintaining, reforming and strengthening civil status registration systems form an element for the continuity of the State and its institutions, and comprise a guarantee of human rights in general, and the rights of women and children in particular.

From the above, we can conclude that the reconstruction of civil registration systems in the post-crisis and war period requires interventions on multiple levels and calls for the involvement of many actors and stakeholders, including:[15]

- Components of civil society such as NGOs, local leaders, youth and women's groups, charities and civic bodies that enjoy the population's trust; All these associations usually take significant humanitarian action during crises, and their work is focused on peacemaking efforts. The components in question are characterized by their experience in dealing with the public, particularly with the groups most in need and most vulnerable to discrimination.
- The private sector, given its social and political leverage, such as associations of business owners, lawyers, private sector doctors and midwives, as well as other bodies and individuals who are necessarily connected to all actors in the peacemaking and reconstruction process.
- Parliamentarians and elected members of municipal or village councils who play a role in devising or implementing laws.
- International State and non-State organizations that are usually parties to humanitarian programmes and peace processes and have the field capacity and technical competence to address problems related to identity and civil registry issues from a human rights and developmental perspective.
- Local and religious leaders who live within the community and share its religious practice and civil registration-related celebrations such as marriage and death.
- Immigrant organizations and groups of legal or illegal immigrants who can play an effective role in communicating with the families of missing migrants and with the relevant authorities in their countries of origin.

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15   AbouZahr and others, 2021.

Educational and health programmes in particular, often supported by international organizations, play a key role in strengthening the civil registration process by registering births for all born children regardless of their legal status, as well as encouraging the registration of deaths and stating the medical causes.

C. Improving the quality of CRVS data and ensuring the accuracy of civil status documents

Ensuring the quality of data is key to building trust between citizens and civil registration systems. The United Nations Statistics Division (UNSD)[16] considers data quality control to be of paramount importance in this area. Data is one of the main components of civil registration systems. Competent officials in this area are supposed to pay sufficient attention to data quality, to ensure that: all civil registration centres duly play their part; each vital incident and occurrence relating to any individual is accurately recorded in the civil registry; and all local civil registration centres transfer and send the data they have registered to regional and central registrars in accordance with the methods provided by the laws and decrees governing their work. Some States have prepared data quality assessments in their civil registries. However, this step has been neither periodic nor systematic; ESCWA's survey with civil registry departments in Arab countries showed that only a few countries had conducted assessments and analyses of business process quality in their civil registries since 2016 (specifically six out of 12 countries that responded to the questionnaire). It was also noted that the last regional data assessment

initiative had taken place in 2012-2013 and was used to devise the above-mentioned strategy for 2014-2019.

Reviewing the quality of the registration of birth, death and cause-of-death data shows that these data are still incomplete and suffer from many problems in the Arab region, as the recorded data are sometimes non- comprehensive and of a low quality. In this context, it is important that business continuity plans be available to ensure the continued operation of civil registry systems in cases of pandemics and crises. The Covid-19 pandemic crisis and subsequent quarantine procedures for example revealed the importance of maintaining civil registration system services.

The results of the same survey indicate some causes that adversely affect the quality of data on causes of death, including:

- The law does not oblige stating the cause of death (only two out of 12 countries impose this requirement by law).
- The international cause-of-death forms are not used (one out of 12 countries use such forms).
- The forms used do not include questions through which the examining doctor indicates whether a deceased woman of childbearing age was pregnant at the time of death, was recently pregnant or had given birth less than 40 days prior to the date of death (only three out of 12 countries inquire about these details).
- Poor partnership with doctors' associations, such as doctors' unions/syndicates, as well as private sector doctors' associations (only two out of 12 countries stated that such a partnership existed).

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16   UNSD, 2014.

- The medical school curriculum does not include training on the classification of causes of death in accordance with the International Classification of Diseases (only seven out of 12 countries reported having such programmes).
- Unavailability of training courses for private sector doctors on the use of cause-of-death models and their appropriate coding (only seven out of 12 countries are offering such trainings to private sector doctors).[17] However, an encouraging factor indicating the improvement of such data is the interest of States in training the concerned cadres on using the cause-of-death code, as well as their keenness on following up on the quality of cause-of-death data.
- The verbal autopsy tool is not being used.

Death registration varies by country in terms of how **comprehensive and complete** it is, with death registration amounting to more than 90 per cent in six Arab countries, according to the 2020 Demographic Yearbook 2020.[18] Many States have used some indirect methods to assess data quality and the extent to which it is comprehensive. The results therefore varied by country, marking a slight improvement in terms of comprehensiveness, without ascertaining the extent to which data reflecting demographics had improved. According to the survey used to devise the current strategy, in six out of 12 States, the registration rate of vital events and occurrences in civil registries amounts to over 95 per cent.

According to specialized studies, one of the challenges faced by States in estimating mortality is the registration gap between males and females, between rural and urban settings, as well as for some age groups, especially elderly women. Additionally, there is a gap hampering the estimation of neonatal mortality, knowing that newborns are often not registered (neither as births nor deaths).

With regard to the recording **causes of death**, available reports on the quality of cause-of-death data consider the recording of these details to be poor and inaccurate, as indicated by, for example, a 2020 WHO report[19], the results of which were based on a usability of data index.[20] WHO data have highlighted that the quality of cause-of-death data is often weak or very poor in most Arab countries where such data are available (noting that their quality is average in Jordan and good in Kuwait).

It is also noted that the usability of this type of data is relatively weak depending on the situation in each country, ranging from 76 per cent to 100 per cent in Kuwait, and between 21 per cent and 53 per cent in Morocco, but as low as between 12 per cent and 29 per cent in Saudi Arabia. Moreover, country data confirm that there is a discrepancy in the accuracy of cause-

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17   https://www.who.int/standards/classificati.ons/classification-of-diseases.

18   UNSD, 2021.

19   WHO, 2020.

20   The usability of the data is calculated by measuring the completeness rate (i.e. the mortality rate in a geographical area registered with a medical document indicating the cause of death) multiplied by the rate of registered deaths without a documented cause of death. Usability (percentage) = completeness (percentage) x (1 - deaths without an indicative code (percentage)). https://cdn.who.int/media/docs/default-source/gho-.documents/global-health-estimates/ghe2019_cod_methods.pdf.

of-death data. In Tunisia, for example, where internationally agreed mortality registration forms are used, after analysing the causes of death for 2001-2017, the National Institute of Public Health report indicated that the cause-of-death data for only 40.5 per cent of deaths reached the Institute for analysis in 2017 and increased later to 60 per cent in 2020. This, of course, has implications for estimating the odds of death by cause of death, which form key data in planning health programmes and following up on the epidemiological situation. The Covid-19 pandemic revealed the need for such data to follow up on the epidemiological situation.

According to the Demographic Yearbook 2020, **birth registration** exceeds 90 per cent in more than 11 Arab countries surveyed. Demographic surveys, such as the Demographic Health Survey (DHS) and the Multi-Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS), comprise an important source of birth registration ratios. In addition to registration rates, survey data reveal certain registration disparities by sex, although birth registration is essential for obtaining identity documents. Noting significant differences in birth registration by sex, available data indicate marked differences between rural and urban areas in some countries, such as Yemen and the Sudan.[21]

Marriage and divorce registration is of paramount importance particularly in countries with multiple religious communities, given the absence of civil marriage in many Arab states. This importance is reinforced by the fact that many Arab countries allow the marriage of minors between the ages of 15 and 18, although the minimum legal age for marriage is 18. Other related issues include the phenomenon of polygamy, which exists in all Arab states, except

Tunisia, as well as the issue of multiple marriage patterns. Both Islamic Sharia and personal status laws in Islamic and Arab countries agree on the legality and the need to document marriage with the competent authorities, either by providing testimonial evidence, in writing, or both. However, Sharia in Muslim countries allows documenting marriage through making a social proclamation, whether written or not, and this phenomenon can be encountered in the valleys, as well as among nomads. In such cases, we can assume that a significant proportion of marriages are not documented in writing, including those not recorded in the civil registry. Referring to data published in the Arab States, all Arab countries (except Somalia) publish data on marriage and divorce. However, an adequate assessment is lacking, thus hindering our ability to know the rate of marriage documentation. However, taking some laws in account, we note that many Arab-Muslim countries refuse to document marriage contracts between a Muslim woman and a non-Muslim, and may even refuse to document marriage if a woman marries a husband whose nationality differs from hers.

The survey indicated that the marriage registration rate was still unknown in many countries. In one of the countries, it is estimated at 50-70 per cent, seven out of 12 States reported that their marriage registration rate exceeded 95 per cent and four others did not mention any given in this regard. The survey also confirmed that at least four countries have drawn up plans to improve marriage registration rates, while others have begun digitalizing this process.

In general, the **poor registration** of vital events in the civil registry is due to various reasons.

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21   Completeness of birth registration, rural (%) | Data (worldbank.org).

Through the findings of the said survey and some studies, we can point out some of them, as follows:

- Individual and community awareness about the importance of birth and mortality registration is often lacking.
- Sometimes there are financial barriers to registration, especially when registering occurrences requires charges (fees), or when fines are imposed for late registration, in addition to transportation costs and bribes.
- In connection with the above, the place of residence may be far from the registration service centre. Hence, people sometimes have to travel long distances for more than once, and this places financial and material burdens on families.
- Some countries have cumbersome and highly-complex procedures, particularly for refugees and migrants, such as requiring proof of the parents' citizenship to register births, or requesting the marriage contract, and other documents that refugees and migrants, who have forcibly left their countries, may not have.
- In some countries, registration is hindered by discriminatory laws, practices and attitudes, such as births to unmarried women, or cases of women married to men of other nationalities.
- In some cases, marriage registration is not mandatory, but the absence of a marriage contract should not become an obstacle to access to basic services, just as access to education is dependent on birth registration.
- In addition to difficulty accessing registration systems, it may be impossible for some groups or individuals to understand the administrative and legal requirements for registration, especially if they are in different languages than theirs.

- Poor skills of civil registry workers or capacity gaps, and lack of access to civil registry laws pertaining to civil registrars.
- Lack of adequate mechanisms to link healthcare facilities to civil registration offices and facilitate the reporting of vital events.
- Poor coordination between the Ministry of Health and civil registration systems.
- Failure to engage civil society organizations in raising awareness about the importance of civil system registration.

D. Accelerated dissemination of data increases statistical data significance and enhances chances to use them in development programs

Arab countries often publish vital statistics on their websites. In some States, data are published both as hard copies and electronically. Through the survey in question, we note the problem of the lengthy duration between the dates of data publication and their review. Another problem is the publication of marriage and divorce statistics, as many States extract marriage and divorce data tables only by age and gender.

Typically, the Ministry of Health and statistical agencies are responsible for extracting data tables and calculating demographic indicators. It is therefore important to partner with research institutions and data analysis researchers to achieve transparency, ensure data quality and use modern methods to capitalize on data. Encouraging partnership with researchers and research centres is key to expanding the use of vital statistics by planners and officials and helps follow up on development goals. It also allows keeping abreast of the demographic and epidemiological situations. As noted earlier, the

Covid-19 pandemic highlighted the importance of timely data issuance with a view to rapid and immediate follow-up of the epidemiological situation.

E. Effective coordination between the overlapping civil registry actors is essential to improving its quality and updating it to serve individuals' rights and support achieving the SDGs

Coordination mechanisms between civil registry components remain relatively weak in Arab countries, despite initiatives in some to apply interoperability between State agencies. Through the survey, we have noted that civil registry data is directly used by many public utilities and government institutions, including the agencies responsible for identity systems and the unified identification number (or national number), the ministries of social affairs and some institutions affiliated to the Ministry of Health.

One of the most encouraging survey findings in terms of coordination between different entities is that four out of 12 States have already put in place mechanisms (or formed specialized committees) aimed at coordinating between the overlapping civil registry actors (three of the States in question work with private sector and civil society representatives). Another positive aspect highlighted by the survey is that 10 out of 12 countries exchange data between institutions, for example: identity and unified identification systems, retirement systems and the Ministry of Health.

It is important to note that civil registry institutions generally lack information plans (five out of 12 states have information plans). Moreover, they do not engage in activities to carry out promotional or motivational programmes targeting decision makers or stakeholders (only two States have promotional programmes targeting certain groups of decision makers).

Coordination between the overlapping civil registry actors is essential to making the most of the opportunities provided by civil registry systems data. To maximize the benefit of interoperability to facilitate the data flow between components of civil registration systems, the foundations for a common platform should be laid to allow exchanging civil registry information. To establish such platforms, the following points ought to be tackled:

1. Standardizing terms and definitions that can vary between different parties, and sometimes between regions.
2. Appointing a technical team to address technical issues and problems that can arise between different systems when processing data.
3. Addressing issues related to information exchange and ensuring its confidentiality is maintained, as organizations usually use their own software and have their own data maintenance protocols, and software methods and processes.
4. Ensuring citizens' rights to data privacy and storage and guaranteeing that their data are not used for other purposes, such as for commercial and political ends.

F. The importance of developing capacity and leveraging international expertise to improve the efficiency of civil registry systems

The survey showed that the majority of the countries surveyed conducted civil registry training programs. Many countries have

expressed their need and desire to activate these training programmes in cooperation with the United Nations and civil institutions.

Given the areas that require training, they must include business processes of all civil registry sections, as they should be considered interconnected. It is also important to take into account the entire system, from resource appropriation to policy aspects pertaining to evaluation and CRVS system sustainability.

One of the problems that could hinder the development of CRVS systems in Arab countries, particularly in ones ravaged by crises, is the weakness of the statistical capacity, as the World Bank Statistical Capacity Indicator[22] stands at a weak or very weak level in Arab countries in general. It has scored 34.4 per cent in Iraq, 25.6 per cent in Libya, 34.4 per cent in Somalia, 22.2 per cent in the Syrian Arab Republic, 27.8 per cent in Yemen, and 53.8 per cent in the MENA region. This requires vigorously and effectively training all relevant [statistical] producers and partners in CRVS systems. This could include health frameworks, as well as workers in ministries of justice and civil society organizations linked to civil registration systems.

It is also important to rehabilitate statistical competencies working in vital statistics systems and to support and develop new competencies from statisticians and civil registry system workers, including civil registrars and registry officers, who have a central role at the local and central levels in law enforcement and ensuring continued service delivery. These training programmes, particularly those aimed at supporting the new generation's competencies, can also be strengthened by drawing on international expertise and international experts' experience. It is important that ESCWA, in partnership with the United Nations organizations, establish a database for successful experiments and an exchange-of-expertise platform that brings together civil registry experts.

The survey confirmed that Arab countries needed new training programmes to help maintain and develop civil registry functions in the coming years. Programmes should cover multiple areas, such as computing, data integrity, statistical analysis, causes of death, communication, follow-up and evaluation. The States surveyed expressed their need for technical assistance and capacity development in the majority of these areas, particularly those related to the causes of death (10 out of 12), the use of international recommendations (five States), computing (five States) and marriage and divorce systems (five States).

A new generation of specialists in the civil registry must be trained, ensuring to pass on attained experience from one generation the other. Moreover, there should be access to specialists familiar with new technologies in all these fields, including statistics, computing and communication, to ensure the development and continuity of civil registry systems.

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22   https://datatopics.worldbank.org/statisticalcapacity/SCIdashboard.aspx.

G. Significance of digitalization or digital transformation[23] in expanding reporting networks, ensuring the integrity of personal data and allowing automated data exchange between civil status system partners

Digitalization of civil registry activity aims to accelerate the production, dissemination and distribution of vital statistics findings as required by international recommendations. The majority of Arab States have begun to digitalize civil registry systems, but in many cases this digitalization is still limited and solely covers some components of the civil registry systems. Some States have begun to use mobile technologies to expand the data reporting network, particularly for remote areas without access to communication and information networks.

The survey findings confirmed this trend to ensure electronic connectivity between the various civil registry actors; over 90 per cent of the civil registry centres in the countries surveyed were linked. This electronic connectivity is primarily based on the exchange of information through networks. However, connectivity with health centres remains rather weak. All States surveyed have stated that they aimed to improve digitalization and networking.

Problems hindering the modernization of electronic systems include: a mismatch in encoding and protocols between identity systems and civil registry stakeholders, poor equipment, poor technical expertise, failure to ensure sustainable data integrity, communication problems and Internet failures.

Modernizing civil registration systems requires digitalization in a way that maintains data confidentiality. Using modern technologies allows for multiple registration points and accelerates decentralization of systems. Moreover, digitalization allows forming a direct link between civil status data and other sectoral data, such as health data, social data, electoral data, social funds, etc. Additionally, the digitalization of civil status registration increases the efficiency of government services through the use of interoperability information, communication technology and the unified identification number (national number).

When raising problems pertaining to interoperability, we must take into account aspects of data integrity, especially since the key aspect of interoperability is the creation of a platform for information exchange and data transfer, which renders data vulnerable to piracy. This therefore requires strict laws and procedures to ensure data integrity.

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23   Digitalization is the use of digital technologies to change a business model and provide new revenue and value-producing opportunities; it is the process of moving to a digital business.

4. Overall framework for the strategy to improve CRVS systems in the Arab region for the period 2021-2025

Improving the performance of civil registration systems in the Arab region requires devising different strategies in line with the efficiency of the system used in each country. Many Arab States have made significant progress in birth and death registration. Nevertheless, many gaps persist hindering civil registry functions, such as difficulties pertaining to data quality or analysis of causes-of-death data. Without doubt, there is a practical need to modernize and develop the system, as well as integrate all its components to align with social and economic changes and development necessities. That said, this therefore requires continuous modernization of the system's components, particularly at the legislative and technical levels, bearing in mind the human rights perspective of civil registration.

In countries ravaged by humanitarian crises, where the civil registry system has been disrupted or destroyed, appropriate procedures must be adopted to reactivate the system, to ensure individuals' rights to identity, and so that the civil registry system forms a pillar of the reconstruction of State institutions.

Therefore, the strategy for improving CRVS systems cannot be applied in the same way in all countries, but rather has to be made country-specific. The strategy in question should comprise a starting point and a general framework for developing an action plan for each State according to the status of its civil registry system and its government's priorities in terms of digitalizing the civil registration system and using its data.

Despite all the differences outlined above, the purpose of the civil registration systems remains the same, namely, to ensure that **everyone has the right to identity and to obtaining all civil status documents that allow him/her to preserve his/her rights and those of his/her family members**.

Given successive technological developments, particularly in terms of information systems, this strategy seeks, in the near and medium terms, to: **"establish integrated and high-quality vital registration systems that serve as a platform accessible to all population-related programmes, taking into account and respecting the confidentiality and privacy of data and the rights of persons to obtain the civil status documents they need".**

This goal requires working on five strategic objectives (see table below as well):

Registration: Developing the legal and institutional framework of civil status systems to ensure the right of every citizen to identity and

civil registration, as well as to obtaining civil status documents.

Quality: Improving the quality of civil status data so that they can be used to issue civil status documents for each person, while ensuring that these data can be capitalized on in development programmes that poor into improving citizens' living conditions.

Digitalization: Digitalizing civil status statistics systems to become linked e-systems that ensure the integrity and confidentiality of personal data and allow automated data exchange between civil status system stakeholders.

Capacity development: Building capacities, strengthening coordination between systems of identity document issuance, and ensuring their continuity.

Responding to unfavourable conditions: Rehabilitating civil registration systems in countries suffering from extreme conditions, humanitarian crises and conflicts.

Achieving these objectives, in turn, requires working on short- and medium-term sub-objectives, as per the following guidelines:

- National commitment and mobilization of support to strengthen and modernize civil status systems, including in countries that are experiencing, or have experienced crises and wars. National commitment means harnessing financial and human resources, as well as continued Government commitment to prioritizing the civil registration system in national plans.
- Adopting a rights perspective in approaching civil registration issues, which essentially requires that no individual, regardless of their legal status or social status, be excluded. This also means that civil registry data are not used for political, ethnic or other subjective reasons.

- States are showing interest in leveraging information technologies to update the civil registry as part of management development plans. Through this endeavour, States can integrate all civil registry components and facilitate exchange among them, ensure data confidentiality and improve reporting of vital events even in remote and isolated areas. Moreover, the State must provide the necessary conditions for coordination between all civil registry components.
- Devising a strategy to develop capacities and qualify national frameworks working across civil registry components. It is important that this strategy not be limited to some parts of the system, rather cover all components, including aspects of rights, planning, digitalization, electronic connectivity, as well as data processing, analysis and use in development. It is important that this strategy train a new generation of statisticians and civil registry specialists to ensure the continuity and quality of civil registry data.
- Developing partnership with the private sector, particularly with private doctors' associations, in terms of reporting deaths and causes of death, as well as with associations, notaries and legal judges in reporting marriage and divorce contracts.
- Activating partnership with universities and research institutions to develop the process of civil registry data analysis and deepen the vital statistics analysis (including those on causes of death), in addition to comparing these data with demographic survey findings. It is also important to focus on vital statistics in following up on SDGs and weighing their benefits against their costs.

- Activating the role of NGOs, especially human rights and development organizations, in aims at educating society and its leaders about the importance of civil registration to guarantee civil, economic and social rights. These organizations play a key role in motivating decision makers at all levels to update identity and civil registration laws and harness human and financial resources to this end.

- Capitalizing on the opportunities offered by international organizations in terms of transferring knowledge, introducing successful experiences and activating the South-South partnership in exchanging expertise, experiences and financing.

The overall framework of the current strategy, its operational and detailed objectives and practical procedures can be summarized as follows:

The ultimate purpose of the strategy: to make the vital events registration process complete and comprehensive so that: "everyone has the right to identity and access to all civil status documents that allow them to preserve their rights and those of their family members"			
Strategic Objectives			
First Strategic Objective (Registration)	Third Strategic Objective (Digitalization)	Fourth Strategic Objective (Capacity development)	Fifth Strategic Objective (Responding to unfavourable conditions)
Developing the legal and institutional framework of civil status systems to ensure the right of every citizen to identity and civil registration, as well as to obtaining civil status documents	Digitalizing civil status statistics systems to become linked e-systems that ensure the integrity and confidentiality of personal data and allow automated data exchange between civil status system stakeholders	Building capacities, strengthening coordination between systems of identity document issuance and ensuring their continuity	Rehabilitating civil registration systems in countries suffering from extreme conditions, humanitarian crises and conflicts
Short- and medium-term objectives			
Availability of a legal and procedural framework that allows vital events registration for all persons	Creating a platform for the exchange of vital statistics information.	Providing more efficient frameworks at the level of performance and coordination between civil registry components	Improving the performance of civil registration systems in countries going through a crisis
Actions			
Establishing or strengthening national committees to review and update	Establishing a legal framework for digitalization and	Training a committee/establishing a mechanism for coordination between overlapping	Supporting existing civil registry systems, as in light of crises, these systems suffer from a shortage of

The ultimate purpose of the strategy: to make the vital events registration process complete and comprehensive so that: "everyone has the right to identity and access to all civil status documents that allow them to preserve their rights and those of their family members"			
Strategic Objectives			
First Strategic Objective (Registration)	Third Strategic Objective (Digitalization)	Fourth Strategic Objective (Capacity development)	Fifth Strategic Objective (Responding to unfavourable conditions)
laws on the right to identity and civil status registration	laying the foundations for interoperability	institutions working in the field of identity and civil registration systems	capacities and a lack of human resources
Introducing international and Arab recommendations regarding the right to identity and civil registration	Choosing the most convenient and least expensive technologies that ensure safe and accurate data sharing	Training CRVS system cadres on all system components, from resource appropriation to policy aspects pertaining to evaluation and CRVS system sustainability, including data analysis and use, as well as investment in supporting a new generation of experts across all fields related to civil registry systems	Preparing a study to define the impact of conflicts on civil registration systems and assessing what possible reforms are feasible
In countries where citizens are obliged to document marriage contracts, laws must be passed stipulating that marriage contracts be documented in writing and registered in civil status systems	Improving electronic connectivity between civil registry centres at all levels using interoperability networks, the Internet or mobile communication systems	Training civil registrars on all legal and human rights aspects related to vital statistics systems	Changing legal frameworks to rectify individuals' status, particularly in terms of the registration of deaths, causes of death, marriages and divorces
Working to change the laws in line with social developments, to remove all the barriers to the registration of births, deaths and marriages of individuals of all categories	Linking remote hospitals and health centres to electronic birth and death reporting systems	Leveraging the expertise of other countries in improving the performance of CRVS systems, particularly in the areas of digitalization and access to some marginalized or distant groups	Placing the issue of identity and civil registration within the framework of humanitarian response and rebuilding programmes

The ultimate purpose of the strategy: to make the vital events registration process complete and comprehensive so that: "everyone has the right to identity and access to all civil status documents that allow them to preserve their rights and those of their family members"			
Strategic Objectives			
First Strategic Objective (Registration)	Third Strategic Objective (Digitalization)	Fourth Strategic Objective (Capacity development)	Fifth Strategic Objective (Responding to unfavourable conditions)
Finding quick solutions to record all civilian events related to refugees and migrants, including setting up registration points allocated especially for refugees and migrants in coordination with United Nations organizations, particularly the UNHCR	Developing a platform that allows the exchange of information between the overlapping actors in the vital statistics system, thereby enhancing interoperability between all the civil registry system components and the programmes related to the unified identification number	Garnering support for identity systems, a prerequisite for providing the right to identity to each person by including identity programmes in government plans	Coordinating with international organizations to provide civil status documents for migrants and refugees
Making registration free of charge, or reducing its cost in countries where the cost of registration is a barrier to registration	Working on the production, dissemination and distribution of vital statistics and demographic indicators as soon as they are completed, as well as preparing training programmes to calculate these indicators	Leveraging international expertise and coordinating between international actors	Using modern technologies to report vital events to account births, neonatal deaths and deaths in general, in addition to encouraging these States to use mobile technologies
Forming coalitions of civil society associations to activate their role in advocating issues related to the rights to identity and civil registration	Developing systems for private sector doctors to report deaths and their causes	Coordinating with United Nations organizations such as UNHCR and UNRWA to provide the required documents for refugees, displaced persons and illegal migrants	Engaging the civil society in the rehabilitation process to remove all barriers to reporting and status rectification with regard to civil registration
Educating officials about the importance	Updating civil status database	Devising a plan to ensure the continuity of registration	Coordinating with United Nations organizations such

The ultimate purpose of the strategy: to make the vital events registration process complete and comprehensive so that: "everyone has the right to identity and access to all civil status documents that allow them to preserve their rights and those of their family members"			
Strategic Objectives			
First Strategic Objective (Registration)	Third Strategic Objective (Digitalization)	Fourth Strategic Objective (Capacity development)	Fifth Strategic Objective (Responding to unfavourable conditions)
of civil registration systems and issues related to the confidentiality of personal data	management systems in line with the new technological requirements	systems in times of war and crisis	as UNHCR and UNRWA to provide the required documents for refugees, displaced persons and illegal migrants
Establishing legal and practical procedures in countries that have seen the formation of partial or full registry data coalitions, in aims at rebuilding or restoring the archive	Providing funds for networking, electronic connectivity, maintenance of hardware and software, as well as giving priority to digitalizing civil status systems in countries suffering from war or crisis		Giving digitalizing civil status systems the due importance in countries suffering from war and crisis

Strategic Objectives			
Second Strategic Objective (Quality)			
Improving the quality of civil status data so that they can be used to issue civil status documents to each person, while ensuring that these data can be capitalized on in development programmes aimed at improving citizens' living conditions			
Short- and medium-term objectives			
Improving the procedures of civil registration systems	Developing marriage and divorce documentation systems	Strengthening mortality and causes-of-death reporting (adapted from WHO strategy SO2)	Ensure the quality of CRVS data
Actions			
Finding new ways to facilitate access to registration centres	Educating officials in the Ministry of Justice, the Ministry of Endowments and all	Ensuring that hospitals have the appropriate legal status to report deaths and causes of death	Developing a comprehensive data quality assurance plan that ensures continuous and

Strategic Objectives			
Second Strategic Objective (Quality)			
for individuals living in remote areas	institutions that deal with imams, witnesses and judges about the importance of registering marriages and divorces, while taking into account all the necessary details		periodic data quality assessment and business process analysis
Upgrading coordination between the Ministry of Health and the Civil Registry to capitalize on all the opportunities provided by health programmes	Preparing field research to understand and document all ways of drawing marriage and divorce contracts	Training health cadres in hospitals and enabling them to use the International Classification of Diseases (ICD) in defining the causes of death	Developing or updating the assessment guide for all civil registration systems processes
Developing information programmes and awareness campaigns (IEC campaigns) to introduce the necessity and importance of civil registration	Devising a conceptual framework and an action plan in collaboration with ministries concerned with registering marriages and divorces	Referring the responsibility of reporting cases and causes of death to a specific hospital department	Conducting regular evaluations of civil registration systems and using statistical and demographic means to verify the data quality
Forming partnerships with universities and research centres	Educating the community about the importance of written documentation of marriage and divorce contracts and linking it to the legal and human rights aspects it affects, as well as the issue of gender	Conducting periodic testing of the means of collecting data on the causes of death and their quality	
Training and educating civil servants on the importance of recording all data	Working with the civil society to gain the support of the key actors in marriage registration	Developing systems and software for entering mortality and cause-of-death data	

Strategic Objectives			
Second Strategic Objective (Quality)			
Working with civil society organizations, as well as community and religious leaders to educate communities about the importance of documenting marriage in the civil registry	Preparing a standard model for marriage contracts and a model form that includes basic data that must be documented in marriages and divorces	Training public and private sector doctors in reporting deaths	
In countries where civil status records have been destroyed, efforts must be exerted to rebuild the archive to ensure that the identities of all persons are documented	Elaborating new measures for marriage contracts, such as the importance of relying on basic documents (birth certificate, identity card, etc.) in drawing contracts	Teaching the International Classification of Diseases to define the causes of mortality as part of medical training	
	Coordinating with bodies responsible for registering births and deaths, in aims at developing a system that allows information on marriage and divorce to be incorporated into each individual's civil register	Training teams to encode causes of death data	
	Encouraging the use of the family civil status book or family register	Capitalizing on all the opportunities provided by maternal and child health programme services to report births and deaths, especially neonatal and maternal mortality	
	Using demographic surveys to collect data on marriage registration	Building a partnership with private medical associations and engaging them in encouraging private sector doctors to train on	

Strategic Objectives			
Second Strategic Objective (Quality)			
		and practice reporting causes of death	
		Conducting surveys involving representative samples to determine the causes of death using an automated verbal autopsy	
		Propping up support and training activities aimed at conducting a maternal audit	
		Educating the community about the need to issue death certificates before burying the dead, developing systems to facilitate access to these certificates and enhancing community monitoring of burial processes	

5. Components of regional strategy

As previously mentioned, this strategy seeks, in the near and medium terms, to: **"establish integrated and high-quality vital registration systems that serve as a platform accessible to all population-related programmes, taking into account and respecting the confidentiality and privacy of data and the rights of persons to obtain the civil status documents they need"**.

This target revolves around a number of practical objectives and steps that can be summarized as follows:

1. **Registration:** establishing a legislative framework that ensures that all individuals obtain their right to identity and civil registry documents.
2. **Quality:** High-grade recording and documenting of data on births, deaths, causes of death, marriages and divorces to allow optimally capitalizing on this information in comprehensive development plans.
3. **Digitalization:** Creating a digital platform to exchange civil registry data and to employ vital statistics in development programmes.
4. **Capacity development:** Strengthening civil registry systems by enhancing coordination between the civil registry components.
5. **Responding to unfavourable conditions:** Rehabilitating civil registration systems in countries suffering from crises and conflicts.

The following is a detailed discussion of the purposes and targets that form the basis for achieving the above-mentioned objectives.

A. Developing the legal and institutional framework of civil status systems to ensure the right of every citizen to identity and civil registration, as well as to obtaining civil status documents

The legal framework provides the foundations for identity and civil registration systems. This framework comprises a mandatory corridor for these systems to be able to successfully function, ensuring that each individual has the necessary civil status ID and documentation. Passing, strengthening and modernizing civil registry laws is a process that achieves several objectives, notably defining the responsibilities of all actors involved in juvenile registration systems, vital statistics and other identity tasks. These laws define the foundations and quality standards of all procedures that govern data collection and use, as well as preserve the principle of privacy and data confidentiality. This legal framework is of paramount importance in the age of digitalization and electronic information-sharing platforms. These laws must take into account two basic dimensions: the legal framework in force in the country and the human rights aspects.

Proposed actions

- Training or strengthening national committees to deal with CRVS issues, so as to review and update laws on the right to identity and civil registration: The role of these committees is usually to review the legal framework to ensure it be in line with the developments of society and human rights principles. Data collected from Arab States indicate some shortcomings in this area, such as legal procedures that hinder the registration of births of the refugee population and, in some cases, marriage registration. It is also imperative to change identity and civil registry legislation to comply with the requirements for coordination between entities with overlapping functions at the level of civil registration and identity systems. This legislative coordination plays an important role in establishing the unified identification number system and the platform for information exchange.

- Introducing international and Arab recommendations on the right to identity and civil registration: Several international recommendations have addressed the right to identity and have been approved by all Arab States, for example, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Millennium Development Goals Document. At the Ministerial Conference on Belonging and Legal Identity[24], member States signed the Arab Declaration on 'Belonging and Identity', which demonstrates their shared commitment to strengthening the protection of individuals in the region by promoting civil registration and ensuring the right to citizenship, with special attention to vulnerable individuals. Introducing the content of these recommendations to decision makers and officials in identity and civil registration systems would encourage them to enact laws and legislation that take into account aspects of human rights and the overall view of civil registration systems.

- In countries where citizens are not obliged to document marriage contracts, laws must be passed stipulating that marriage contracts be documented in writing and registered in civil status systems. Marriage and divorce registration is of paramount importance, given the absence of civil marriage in many Arab States. To ensure that marriage is registered in the civil registry, laws must be enacted obligating documenting the marriage contract in writing, such that copies of which be handed over to spouses whenever needed, and that the contract be registered in the competent civil courts. It would be advisable that the data that must be provided in the marriage contract be defined by law. Moreover, coordination between the Ministry of Justice, the Ministry of Endowments and parties responsible for the civil registry must be supported. Systems that record marriage data and allow information exchange of other data in the civil registry should be established. The law should also control the statistical data to be published and define a date for their periodic publication.

- Seeking to change laws in line with social developments so as to allow removing all barriers to the registration of births, deaths and marriages of all groups of individuals,

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24   Arab Declaration on Belonging and Legal Identity, 2018.

particularly refugees, migrants, unmarried mothers and women married to foreign nationals.

- Finding quick solutions to record all civilian events related to refugees and migrants, including forming registration points allocated especially for them and coordinating with United Nations organizations, particularly the UNHCR and UNRWA; four priorities can be adopted in this regard:

1. Making laws pertaining to refugees and displaced persons more flexible by complying with UNHCR recommendations regarding the registration and status rectification of unregistered persons, as well as waiving financial fines resulting from delays or failure to register.
2. Exempting refugees and those in similar situations from the costs of registration and/or status rectification in cases of non-registration.
3. Protecting unregistered children.
4. Preparing awareness campaigns and ones to register refugees in remote areas, in addition to allocating registration sites for refugees and displaced persons.

- Adopting the principle of free registration or registration at a reduced cost in countries where cost hinders registration, or when the law imposes penalties for late registration.
- Forming coalitions of civil society associations to activate their role in advocating issues related to the rights to identity and civil registration; these associations educate decision makers to update civil registry system laws, so that each individual can obtain their civil status documents. Moreover, the associations in question seek urging authorities to provide all capabilities to support CRVS systems.
- Educating officials about civil registration systems and issues related to the

confidentiality of personal data, particularly in countries that have experienced or are experiencing crises and wars; this aims at ensuring that data confidentiality does not hinder the comprehensiveness of the registration process.

- Establishing legal and practical procedures in countries that have seen the formation of partial or full registry data coalitions, in aims at rebuilding or restoring the archive.

B. Improving the quality of civil status data so that they can be used to issue civil status documents to each person, while ensuring that these data can be capitalized on in development programmes aimed at improving citizens' living conditions

Despite all efforts, civil event registration remains low in many Arab countries. Problems relating to civil registration have increased with the exacerbation of humanitarian and political crises in these countries, hampering all persons' access to their right to identity and the civil status documents they need. Although the region has seen some improvements at the level of birth registration, the registration of deaths, causes of death, marriages and divorces still faces several problems, particularly in terms of data quality and their inclusion of all the details that can be employed in vital statistics.

To avoid these problems, the strategy suggests focusing in the near future on the following actions:

1. Facilitating legal and administrative procedures, as well as improving the performance of civil registry systems, alongside establishing follow-up and evaluation systems.

2. Ensuring the comprehensive registration of civil events by delivering services to the population in remote and isolated areas and all segments of society, including refugees, displaced persons and certain special groups such as women married to foreign nationals or single mothers.

3. Educating decision makers about the importance of vital statistics in following up on development goals by focusing on the advantages provided by civil status systems compared to their costs; moreover, attention should be drawn to issues relating to the civil registry and the need for procedural and legal solutions to improve the performance of civil registration systems.

4. Harnessing all available capabilities to strengthen civil registration systems, particularly the health system's capabilities, and the roles that the private sector and civil society organizations can play.

5. Leveraging all available capacities to raise community awareness, especially at the level of local communities, about the importance of registering and documenting marriages, divorces or separations.

To achieve these objectives, the strategy proposes the following actions:

(a) In terms of improving the procedures of civil registration systems

1. Founding new ways to facilitate access to registration centres for individuals living in remote areas, for example using roving campaigns to register births and all vital events, and modern communication technologies such as mobile technology like that used in some African countries.

2. Developing coordination between the Ministry of Health and the civil registry to achieve the following targets:

• Capitalizing on all the opportunities offered by maternal and child-oriented health programmes to raise awareness about the importance of civil registration.

• Enabling Ministry of Health staff to benefit from modern technologies and means, such as mobile phones, in reporting births and deaths in areas far from registration centres.

• Communicating vaccination data through the civil registry.

3. Devising information programmes and awareness campaigns (IEC campaigns) to inform the community on the need for civil registration and its importance to all groups of society, especially children and women; this can be attained by focusing on marriage, births and deaths. To this end, population development programmes, such as health or poverty combatting programmes, can also be leveraged.

4. Forming partnerships with universities and research centres to maximize the benefit of civil status data use and analysis, in addition to qualifying and training civil registrants on the importance of recording all required data in civil status documents, such as gender, age and other necessary details.

5. Working with civil society organizations, as well as community and religious leaders to educate communities about the importance of documenting marriage in the civil registry.

6. For countries that have seen the emergence of civil registry coalitions, the archive must be rebuilt to ensure that all persons are documented. For this purpose, efforts can be exerted in cooperation with the existing authorities and relevant regional organizations.

7. In countries where the registration system has significant functional problems, censuses can be used to advance civil registration, provided that data are

confidential, and that census data are not used for purposes contrary to its main objectives.

(b) In terms of developing marriage and divorce documentation systems

Civil marriage remains limited in many Arab countries, particularly in States with multiple religious communities. In many Arab countries, the proportion of marriages performed by the notaries, qadis or religious leaders remains high. Of course, in such cases the contract can be written or verbal, and can be documented or undocumented. Sometimes documentation is not uniform. It is rather done as per various records and contracts, some of which unsafely retained. To ensure that marriage contracts are registered in a database that allows interoperability between civil registration components (a database affiliated to the Ministry of Endowments and the Ministry of Justice), and guarantee the provision of the necessary basic data as stipulated in international recommendations, new procedures must be put in place to improve or establish marriage registration systems, in addition to offering incentives to encourage the registration of marriage contracts (as well as divorces), without getting into the dilemma of duplication between civil and other forms of marriage contracts.

To achieve these objectives, we propose the following procedures:

- Raising awareness among officials in the Ministry of Justice, the Ministry of Endowments and all institutions that deal with religious leaders, notaries and qadis about the importance of documenting marriage contracts as a component of the civil registry (stressing the need to provide all the details necessary to make the contract complete and comprehensive).

- Preparing field research to understand and document all ways of drawing marriage and divorce contracts, determining the category of individuals entitled to draw marriage contracts, as well as monitoring ways to record, register and retain marriage contracts.

- Devising a conceptual framework and an action plan in collaboration with ministries concerned with registering marriages and divorces, under the auspices of parties responsible for the consideration of marriage and divorce contracts; the said plan ought to address legal aspects and practical procedures, including those related to awareness-raising and changing prevailing behaviours.

- Educating the community about the importance of written documentation of marriage and divorce contracts and linking it to the legal and human rights aspects it affects, as well as the issue of gender.

- Working with the civil society to gain the support of the key actors in marriage registration, community educating and NGO training.

- Preparing a standard model for marriage contracts and a model form that includes basic data that must be documented, as stipulated by law. It is recommended that these models be in line with international recommendations. This model is to be sent to all parties responsible for drawing marriage contracts.

- Elaborating new measures for marriage contracts, such as the importance of relying on basic documents in drawing contracts, such as a birth certificate, a national identification card and a medical certificate, if possible, in addition to defining some additional controls, such as obligating the

use of a unified record to register contracts, setting a timeframe to report contracts, and requiring sending the marriage data form to the relevant party.

- Coordinating with bodies responsible for registering births and deaths, in aims at developing a system that allows information on marriage and divorce to be incorporated into each individual's civil register.
- Encouraging the use of the family civil status book or family register, which includes all the data family members may need.
- Using demographic surveys to collect data on marriage registration.

(c) In terms of strengthening mortality and causes-of-death reporting (adapted from WHO strategy SO2)

Improving the registration of deaths and causes of death is a key priority in Arab countries. Death and cause-of-death data are closely linked to health planning and epidemiological follow-up, especially since the majority of Arab countries are going through an epidemiological transition as a result of demographic transformation, change in consumer behaviour and the spread of epidemics, such as Covid and SARS.

Improving the quality of data on deaths and causes of death requires many actions at different levels, including raising awareness about the importance of such data to decision makers and local officials, partnering with private sector doctors who examine and report deaths indicating their causes, and training doctors to identify causes of death using the International Classification of Diseases.

One of the factors that can reflect positively on mortality and cause-of-death data is going over all the business processes of civil event registration and the ways in which cause-of-death documents are exchanged. This aims at ensuring that all the components of death certificates reach the parties responsible for encoding and analysing the causes of death.

The healthcare system and its practitioners play a key role in improving the quality of mortality data, particularly in terms of determining causes of death. If trained well, healthcare centre cadres can identify causes of death as per the International Classification of Diseases. Moreover, training healthcare cadres in verbal autopsy can increase work returns.

Additionally, educating local officials and opinion leaders (such as some religious leaders, educators and local associations) is of great importance in terms of reporting deaths and obtaining burial permits. Modern information and communications technologies provide health service staff and private sector doctors with additional means to improve reporting deaths and death causes. For instance, a programme can be developed to report deaths and death causes using the Internet or mobile phone technology. Additionally, the existence of a unified identification number would facilitate screening data and avoiding duplication.

The proposed actions in this regard include (part of these actions are based on the WHO strategy for 2021-2024):

- Ensuring there is a legal requirement for hospitals to notify the fact and cause of death occurring in their facilities to the civil registry.
- Training and qualifying health cadres in hospitals and enabling them to use the International Classification of Diseases (ICD) in defining the causes of death.

- Assigning the responsibility for reporting deaths and their causes to one of the hospital departments that plays a leading role in ensuring reporting sustainability and data quality.
- Conducting periodic testing of the means of collecting data on the death causes and their quality.
- Developing systems and software to introduce deaths and causes of death in relation to deaths both inside and outside hospitals.
- Training public and private sector doctors in reporting deaths and ensuring that defining causes of death according to ICD standards forms part of continuous medical education, drawing on established curricula.
- Training specialized teams to encode cause-of-death data.
- Capitalizing on all the opportunities provided by maternal and child health programme services to report births and deaths, especially neonatal and maternal mortality.
- Building a partnership with private medical associations to develop awareness programmes and train private sector doctors in aims at improving mortality reporting and cause-of-death processing, including encoding causes of death.
- Conducting surveys involving representative samples to identify the causes of death using automated verbal autopsy and using electronic lists in which the causes of diseases are programmed and that allow sending the collected data immediately to the analysis centre. This method can also be used to collect data in infested areas and in exceptional circumstances (e.g. pandemics, as in the case of the Covid-19 pandemic). It requires adequate physical and technical equipment to prepare this type of survey, in addition to

training central and local teams in survey preparation and programming.
- Supporting and developing the authorities' capacity to conduct maternal audits, so as to reduce preventable maternal deaths.
- Educating the community about the need to issue death certificates before burying the dead, developing systems to facilitate access to these certificates and enhancing community monitoring of burial processes.

(d) In terms of ensuring the quality of CRVS data (Quality assurance)

To ensure high quality data, the following actions can be taken:

- Developing a comprehensive data quality assurance plan that ensures continuous and periodic data quality assessment and business process analysis for all civil registration systems, taking into account all stakeholders involved, namely data producers and primary users. The plan also entails programmes to train national cadres to conduct civil registry assessments and analyses.
- Developing or updating the assessment guide for all civil registration systems processes at all levels.
- Conducting periodic evaluations of civil registration systems that consider the four dimensions of data evaluation: completeness, accuracy, availability, and timeliness, which is an expression of the time between the date of data registration and availability.
- Using statistical and demographic methods to examine and evaluate data quality.
- Leveraging demographic and census data to compare vital statistics, as well as to collect data on the registration of vital occurrences, particularly marriages.

C. Digitalizing civil status statistics systems to become linked e-systems that ensure the integrity and confidentiality of personal data and allow automated data exchange between civil status system stakeholders

Modernizing civil status systems aims to improve their performance and governs the use of civil status data as a key component in the development data ecosystem. Using modern technologies allows having multiple registration points and accelerated decentralization of registration systems; thus, local officials and certain healthcare workers can report births and deaths using information networks and mobile communication systems (especially in areas not covered by interoperability networks). Digitalization also allows establishing a direct link between civil status data and other sectoral data, such as health data, social data, electoral data and social funds. Moreover, the digitalization of civil registration increases the efficiency of Government services using means that allow interoperability. Such means include capitalizing on communication technology and the unified identification number.

When discussing issues of interoperability, attention must be given to aspects of data integrity, especially since the primary objective of interoperability is to create a platform for information exchange and data transfer, putting them at risks of hacking. Therefore, strict laws and procedures must be enacted to ensure data integrity. A key objective of digitalization is to accelerate the production, dissemination and distribution of vital statistics findings as required by international recommendations.

Proposed actions

- Establishing a legal framework for digitalization, and laying the foundations for interoperability, to ensure data confidentiality. The conditions that must be met for data use by all parties must be defined. In this context, international expertise and those of other countries must be utilized.
- Choosing the most convenient and least expensive technologies that ensure safe and accurate interoperability; this requires States to make basic choices regarding the software used, the way data is stored and the dataflow. Of course, these programmes must ensure data confidentiality and must also be scalable in response to future accelerated variables.
- Improving electronic connectivity between civil registry centres at all levels using interoperability networks, the Internet or mobile communication systems; the experience of using mobile phones seems encouraging. For instance, it enables health service providers or civil registry officials to report births in remote areas quickly and easily.
- Linking remote hospitals and health centres to electronic systems for reporting births and deaths; medical cadres have a key role to play in reporting births, neonatal deaths and deaths generally. The said reporting role requires enhancing or developing civil registry centres in hospitals in the countries that have adopted the system in question. In remote areas, many countries have begun to provide mobile communications devices to report civilian events. This has necessitated devising integrated

interoperability system and protocols to ensure the quality of the transmitted data and to train health cadres in reporting these vital events.

- Developing an interoperability platform for vital statistics system stakeholders; the said platform is essential for establishing a comprehensive database of all personal data. It moreover requires devising protocols to ensure proper functioning between information programs used by different overlapping parties in the civil registry, and that data is kept confidential. Legal and technical controls must be developed to ensure the exchange of information, as well as enhance interoperability between all components of the civil registry system and related programmes. The existence of a national coordinating committee would effectively pour into this end.

- Working on the production, dissemination and distribution of vital statistics as soon as they are completed; it is important that vital statistics tables be published in accordance with international recommendations, particularly by age, gender and place of residence. Similarly, it is important that demographic indicators based on vital statistics be published as soon as they are produced, a feat that requires ongoing training in calculating such indicators.

- Developing systems for private sector doctors to record deaths and their causes; private sector doctors have a role to play in reporting deaths that occur outside hospitals. This system allows better reporting of deaths and more accurate identification of death causes. That being said, achieving such results requires training the doctors who are going to use the system, in addition to developing a technical unit to follow up on reporting and integrate it into civil

registration systems. It is recommended that this process be carried out in partnership with private doctors' associations.

- Updating civil status database management systems in line with the new technological requirements.

- Providing the necessary funds for networking, electronic connectivity and maintenance of hardware and software.

- Prioritizing the digitalization of civil status systems in countries suffering from war and crisis.

D. Building capacities, strengthening coordination between systems of identity document issuance and ensuring their continuity

Managing systems responsible for issuing identity documents requires a holistic approach to the civil registry components and functions, ensuring data exchange between government agencies, particularly those of direct relevance to the citizen. Achieving this goal requires addressing four main aspects:

1. Coordinating between overlapping actors in identity systems to maximize operational effectiveness and ensure high operational capability.
2. Training cadres responsible for issuing identity documents, guided by successful experiences in this regard.
3. Devising an emergency response plan.
4. Developing a special framework for coordination with international and regional organizations.

Proposed actions

- Training a committee/establishing a mechanism for coordination between

overlapping institutions working in the field of identity and civil registration: this committee serves as the backbone of the identity system and ensures enhanced interoperability. In addition to coordination, this committee would be responsible for standardizing terminology and definitions, following up on technical problems that may arise between different systems in data processing, addressing issues related to information exchange and ensuring its confidentiality, and ensuring citizens' rights to data privacy and retention. The committee would also guarantee the rights of individuals to obtain documents and their right to know the extent to which their personal data is used. It is important that the said committee have a legal framework that determines the party that leads it and the role of its members, as well as a structure for oversight and accountability.

- Human resource training and rehabilitation: Achieving the comprehensiveness of civil registration systems, particularly with regard to deaths and marriages, requires training that takes into account all system components, from resource appropriation to policy aspects related to the sustainability of CRVS systems. This also requires training all CRVS systems stakeholders. The training may also include healthcare cadres, Ministry of Justice staff and civil society organizations linked to civil registry systems. It is important that the training include aspects of evaluating data registration systems and analysing the vital statistics quality and use in calculating population indicators, as well as vital statistics related to following up on the SDGs. A weight must be attached to forming a new team of experts in all disciplines relating to CRVS systems.

- Training civil registrars on all legal and human rights aspects related to vital statistics systems

- Leveraging the expertise of other countries in improving the performance of CRVS systems, particularly in the areas of digitalization, access to some marginalized or distant groups and harnessing financial and human resources; ESCWA, in partnership with United Nations organizations, can make available successful experiences and good practices, with a view to providing access and guidance.

- Devising a plan to ensure the continuity of registration systems in war and crisis situations: Political and humanitarian crises negatively impact the productivity of all State institutions, including the civil registry. The Covid-19 pandemic and the resulting lockdowns affected the interests of the population in relation to the civil registry. At times, these circumstances prevented the civil registry from providing the necessary data to follow up on the effects of the pandemic. A key lesson learned from this pandemic is the need to develop an emergency plan for civil registration systems in the event of natural disasters or any kind of long-term crisis. In devising this plan, the following actions can be undertaken:

1. Reconsidering the legislative framework for civil registration with a view to meeting the emergency plan requirements.
2. Finding various solutions to ensure providing civil registration utilities in times of prolonged movement restrictions, including overcoming logistical challenges, such as those pertaining to the number of staff, working hours and protection measures.
3. Ensuring the Government perceives civil registration as a basic service to be performed in all circumstances, and also

provides appropriate resources for emergency planning and implementation.

- Garnering support for identity systems, a prerequisite for providing the right to identity to each person by including identity programmes in government plans; such support would guarantee the availability of the necessary material and human resources and political support, in addition to ensuring updating laws, following up on the necessary coordination procedures and establishing partnerships with the private sector and civil society organizations.

- Leveraging international expertise and coordinating between international actors: United Nations and other international governmental or non-governmental organizations offer many opportunities to support CRVS systems, particularly capitalizing on international approaches and recommendations on the development and strengthening of identity systems, training opportunities and the transfer of experiences and expertise provided by international organizations. Each States ought to seek coordinating the efforts of all these organizations into a comprehensive project and avoid fragmented programmes.

- In countries with a large number of displaced persons, refugees and illegal migrants, coordination must be made with relevant United Nations organizations, such as the UNHCR and UNRWA, to provide documentation for these population groups.

E. Rehabilitating civil registration systems in countries suffering from extreme conditions, humanitarian crises and conflicts

Several Arab countries are experiencing humanitarian and political crises that have resulted in displacing large numbers of people, having millions of refugees in neighbouring countries and disrupting public facilities, including civil registration utilities. The data indicate that the groups most affected by these crises (e.g. refugees and displaced persons) have several problems in obtaining identity and civil status documents.

Proposed actions

- Supporting existing civil registry systems that, in the face of crises, suffer from a shortage of capacities and a lack of human resources and even need the necessary forms. Maintaining old and new records remains a necessary priority.

- Preparing a study to define the impact of conflicts on civil registration systems and assessing what possible reforms are feasible.

- Changing legal frameworks to rectify individuals' status, particularly in terms of the registration of deaths and births, as well as processes aimed at meeting the needs of the migrant population who have lost their documents or have not had the opportunity to register.

- Making the issue of identity and the civil registry part of humanitarian response by the United Nations and non-governmental organizations to provide assistance to States; therefore, the components of the civil registry and vital statistics would become priorities in reconstruction programmes.

- Coordinating with international organizations to provide civil status documents for displaced persons and refugees, particularly for those who have lost their documents or have not had the opportunity to register their families' births, deaths and marriages.

- Using modern technologies to report vital events to account births, neonatal deaths and deaths in general, in addition to encouraging these States to use mobile technologies, or any other networks to transfer information.
- Engaging the civil society to remove all barriers to reporting and status rectification with regard to civil registration; in countries where conflicts and crises are prevalent, local and international NGOs are intensively active and fill the gap left by government institutions. These organizations usually operate in the health, education and food supply sectors and are in direct contact with the population. Raising awareness among the said organizations on the issue of civil registration can enhance confidence between the population and civil registration institutions to register unrecorded deaths and births, particularly deaths of war victims.
- Coordinating with United Nations organizations such as UNHCR and UNRWA to provide the required documents for refugees, displaced persons and illegal migrants.
- Giving digitalizing civil status systems the due importance in countries suffering from war and crisis.

6. Follow-up on strategy implementation

Ways to communicate with stakeholders and decision makers about the proposed strategy

Following up on the implementation of the strategy in question forms a key factor in achieving its ultimate goal that: **everyone has the right to identity and access to all civil status documents that allow them to preserve their rights and those of their family members.** ESCWA is responsible for follow-up as part of its coordination functions, through the United Nations organizations Regional Task Force on CRVS Systems.

In cooperation with decision makers in Arab countries, the agencies that manage the civil registration systems in these countries should be urged to devise an action plan for the period 2021-2025 to implement the strategy, based on their priorities and the efficiency of their civil registry at present. To devise the said country action plans, States can coordinate with ESCWA and United Nations organizations for assistance. It is important that the United Nations Country Group play a key role in devising and following up on these action plans in coordination with the Regional Group.

It is also important that the implementation of this strategy be pursued as part of following up on achieving the SDGs, particularly SDG 16 (target 9) and SDG 17 (target 19) concerned with the right to identity and the training of statistical cadres, as well as the evolution of the indicator

17.19.2 (proportion of countries that have achieved 100 per cent birth registration and 80 per cent death registration).

Moreover, the implementation of this strategy forms part of following up on Arab recommendations on the right to identity, such as those issued by the Arab Declaration of 'Belonging and Identity' during the regional meeting 'Our Children ... Our Future' held on October 17-18, 2016, as well as recommendations issued by the final statement of the 'First Arab Conference on Good Practices and Regional Opportunities to Strengthen Women's Nationality Rights' on October 4-6, 2017, and the recommendations of Ministerial Conference on 'Belonging and Legal Identity'[25].

To gain the necessary support to follow up on the implementation of this strategy, it is possible to coordinate with the relevant Arab ministerial councils, such as the Council of Arab Interior Ministers, the Council of Arab Ministers of Health and the Economic and Social Council, in aims at including special recommendations pertaining to implementing the strategy in question along with Arab recommendations on the right to identity and civil registration. Additionally, the follow-up process entails referring back to the results of assessments that Arab countries should conduct during the period 2021-2025. The following tables illustrate the most important indicators that can be used to follow up on the implementation of the strategy:

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25   Arab Declaration on Belonging and Legal Identity, Tunisia, February 28, 2018, available on
      https://www.unhcr.org/ar/5aca0bac4.html.

Strategic Objectives			
First Strategic Objective (Registration)	Third Strategic Objective (Digitalization)	Fourth Strategic Goal (Capacity development)	Fifth Strategic Objective (Responding to unfavourable conditions)
Registration: Developing the legal and institutional framework of civil status systems to ensure the right of every citizen to identity and civil registration, as well as to obtaining civil status documents	Digitalizing civil status statistics systems to become linked e-systems that ensure the integrity and confidentiality of personal data and allow automated data exchange between civil status system stakeholders	Building capacities, strengthening coordination between systems of identity document issuance and ensuring their continuity	Rehabilitating civil registration systems in countries suffering from extreme conditions, humanitarian crises and conflicts
Short- and medium-term objectives			
Availability of a legal and procedural framework that allows vital events registration for all persons	Creating a platform for the exchange of vital statistics information	Providing more efficient frameworks at the level of performance and coordination between civil registry components	Improving the performance of civil registration systems in countries going through a crisis
Follow-up Indicators			
Availability of active laws and procedures to guarantee the right to identity and access to civil status documents for all groups of society without discrimination	Availability of active laws and procedures governing the exchange of information and data confidentiality	Forming a committee/establishing a mechanism for coordination between overlapping institutions working in the field of identity and civil registration systems	Availability of a plan to activate civil status systems addressing the needs of the said systems for financial and human resources
Availability of active laws and procedures stressing the need to register divorce and marriage contracts	Percentage of civil registry centres electronically connected to the network of civil registration centres	Number of training courses, number of trainees by competence and the availability of an appropriate training plan	Amount of financial resources available for identity and civil registration systems
Forming a civil society coalition that is active in advocating civil registry and right-to-identity issues	Fully releasing civil status statistics tables, disaggregated as per the United Nations recommendations	Availability of a plan to ensure the continuity of registration systems during times of war and crisis, such that they be accredited by all Civil Registry components	Number of civil registration centres restarted after halting operations due to crises or conflicts

Impact			
Establishing/ availability of a legislative framework that ensures that no one is denied their right to identity and civil registry documents	Availability of a digital platform to exchange civil registry data, as well as to produce vital statistics and employ them in development programmes	Developing efficient frameworks capable of coordinating between civil registry components	Restarting civil registration systems in countries that are going through/ have gone through political or humanitarian crises

Strategic Objectives			
Second Strategic Objective (Quality)			
Improving the quality of civil status data so that they can be used to issue civil status documents to each person, while ensuring that these data can be capitalized on in development programmes aimed at improving citizens' living conditions			
Short- and medium-term objectives			
Improving the procedures of civil registration systems	Developing marriage and divorce documentation systems	Strengthening mortality and causes-of-death reporting (adapted from WHO strategy SO2)	Ensure the quality of CRVS data
Follow-up Indicators			
Percentage of registered births/deaths	An active and approved action plan by all parties to improve recording marriage and divorce contracts	Percentage of reported deaths including the cause of death	Capacity of conducted business process analyses and their level
Number of new registration centres in areas where registration centres are difficult to access	Number of marriage and divorce contracts documented (compared to the base year)	Death data quality index	Percentage of high-quality data as per evaluations
Improving the quality of data on the recorded events, including age, gender, place of residence and the like	Percentage of women and men having documented marriage contracts	Number of hospitals capable of reporting the causes of death	Results of vital statistics assessments using statistical and demographic methods
Impact			
Data on births, deaths, causes of death, marriage and divorce are of high quality and available for use in development plans.			

7. Strategy implementation and role of ESCWA and United Nations organizations in following up on it

This strategy has been developed to guide the process of devising national action plans aimed at improving and modernizing civil registry systems, in line with each country's priorities. In preparing national action plans, States should coordinate with regional and international organizations present in the countries concerned. Moreover, targets and indicators should be set in a manner that ensures the follow-up of the said national action plans.

At the regional level, the Regional Coordination Committee on Civil Registration and Vital Statistics (CRVS) is following up on the strategy implementation and urging States to adopt a programme approach to avoid duplication and optimize the use of resources. The Regional Committee is also contributing to holding regular meetings with civil registry components in all countries, as well as regular meeting to follow up of the strategy implementation. ESCWA has a leading role in coordinating the work of the said committee and in implementing the strategy.

ESCWA's role in implementing the strategy is based on five key themes: leadership, coordination, technical support, exchange of expertise and experiences, and following up on the strategy implementation.

Theme I: Leadership

This theme aims to enable ESCWA to reach a general vision allowing it to place the issue of the right to identity for all, including civil registration (noted in SDG 16.9), among the development priorities in the region. This theme focuses on executing the following actions:

- Including, whenever possible, the CRVS issue in member States' development agenda, particularly in meetings on issues of population and development, sustainable development, gender and health.
- Enhancing effective partnership with all international and non-international actors involved in civil registry issues, particularly the Arab League, the Council of Arab Interior Ministers, the Council of Arab Ministers of Health and the Arab Parliament.
- Establishing an effective partnership with regional and international NGOs to gain support for identity and civil registration issues. For this purpose, policy briefs must be prepared to link the civil registry issue to that of human rights and gender.
- Seeking to harness financial resources to support regional and country programmes, particularly in countries with inefficient civil registration systems.

- Leading efforts to achieve SDG 16.9 and the other relevant goals (SDG 17.19).
- Campaigning for civil registry issues within humanitarian and reconstruction programmes.

Theme II: Coordination

This theme seeks to coordinate with regional and international civil registration actors in aims at avoiding duplication, optimizing the use of resources and reaching a comprehensive approach to the issue of civil registration with ESCWA States. This theme focuses on executing the following actions:

- Instilling ESCWA's coordinating role within the CRVS Regional Committee, as well as defining its terms of reference and programme of work.
- Instilling the partnership with the ministerial councils concerned with the civil registry in the Arab countries, in particular the Council of Arab Interior Ministers and the Council of Arab Ministers of Health, in addition to including the civil registry issue in these councils' meetings and capitalizing on high-level ministerial meetings to promote issues related to identity and the civil registry.
- Monitoring programmes to support civil registration systems at the country and regional levels.
- Coordination with United Nations organizations to develop a programme approach to support programmes on civil registry, vital statistics and identity systems at the regional and country levels.
- Following up on Arab and international recommendations regarding civil registration and identity.

Theme III: Technical support and capacity development

Theme III aims to improve the technical capabilities of civil registry personnel in the Arab region through providing the necessary technical support. This theme focuses on executing the following actions:

- Transferring CRVS knowledge and relevant emerging technologies.
- Preparing studies on some aspects of the civil registry with a focus on priority topics.
- Learning the needs at the level of training CRVS personnel and devising an appropriate training program.
- Preparing a general vision of a comprehensive plan that ensures that civil registry systems continue to operate in the event of crises or pandemics (such as the Covid-19 pandemic).

Theme IV: Experience exchange between countries

The aim of this theme is to simplify and facilitate exchanging CRVS-related knowledge, experiences and expertise between countries. This theme focuses on executing the following actions:

- Building an expert base for specialists across all civil registry components.
- Constructing a database of successful experiences pertaining to the civil registry.
- Facilitating and simplifying South-South cooperation and exchange of CRVS experiences.

Theme V: Strategy follow-up and evaluation

This theme aims to follow up on the strategy implementation. It focuses on executing the following actions:

- Devising a framework and an action plan to follow up and evaluate the strategy.

- Assessing the extent to which the strategy has been implemented by 2025.
- Regularly holding a regional meeting to follow up on progress and define the way forward.
- Urging countries to prepare a comprehensive assessment of CRVS systems by 2024-2025.

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This document includes an overview of the status of civil records in the Arab region, and its effectiveness in producing vital statistics that contribute to planning development programmes and help monitoring and reporting on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). It tackles ways of developing civil registries, the role of technology in linking records electronically, the right to obtain legal identity, the role of Governments in the production and exchange of data, and the importance of international and regional support. It was prepared at the request of international and regional organizations and authorities working in the field of civil registration and vital statistics, with the aim of developing a strategic framework that will serve as a guideline for work and development in the field of civil registration and vital statistics in the Arab region during the period 2021-2025.

In its formulation, the strategy relied on reviewing relevant literature and publications and the direct communication with concerned authorities in the Arab countries, through a questionnaire. Interviews were also held with several representatives of Arab countries going through unfavorable conditions. The results of this survey indicated the challenges facing countries in the issues of electronic transformation; the completeness of birth and death registration, marriage and divorce data; and legal identities for vulnerable groups. That said, it showed the Arab countries' compliance to support civil registry systems and to include them within their national plans aiming at completing the registers and linking them electronically to relevant authorities. The document concludes that it is important for ESCWA to play a leading role in disseminating this document at the regional level through its mechanisms and mobilizing resources to transform the results and contents of the strategic framework into a regional action plan for the period 2021-2025.