

Building identity management systems in Asia and the Pacific, the role of civil registration



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This policy brief on building identity management systems in Asia and the Pacific, the role of civil registration is a tool to support the Second Ministerial Conference on Civil Registration and Vital Statistics in Asia and the Pacific, and efforts to implement the goals and targets of the CRVS Decade. It has been prepared by the Statistics Division of ESCAP.

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Summary

The present document contains a discussion on the role of civil registration in national identity management system and how civil registration is a key basis for identity management systems that promote inclusion, and on how civil registration facilitates access to services and the production of timely and accurate vital statistics. The United Nations Legal Identity Agenda is introduced, and consideration is given to how it may inform further actions to improve civil registration and vital statistics in the second half of the Asia and Pacific Civil Registration and Vital Statistics Decade (2015–2024) and support accelerated action to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals.

Abbreviations

CRVS	Civil Registration and Vital Statistics
ESCAP	United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific
SDG	Sustainable Development Goals

I. Introduction

Civil registration is closely connected to a person's legal identity. Birth registration provides an official and permanent recognition of a child's existence. Later in life, the proof of legal identity provided by the official birth certificate enables individuals to exercise their rights and access services. At the end of life, the death certificate represents a final and permanent record of the fact of death, which next of kin need to manage the legal or financial consequences of death. The importance of civil registration for legal identity is recognized both at the regional and global level. First, through the promulgation of the Asia and Pacific CRVS Decade (2015–2024) and the adoption of the Ministerial Declaration to “Get Every One in the Picture” in Asia and the Pacific, members and associate members of the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) acknowledged the critical role of universal civil registration for achieving inclusive development and providing documents for individuals to establish their legal identity.¹

Second, legal identity based on civil registration has a critical role in ensuring that the global community upholds its promise of leaving no one behind,

as adopted in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The importance of legal identity is underscored in SDG target 16.9, universal legal identity for all, including birth registration. It is also acknowledged as a catalyst for the achievement of 12 of the 17 Goals, and data generated from civil registration supports the measurement of more than 60 SDG indicators. During the first half of the CRVS Decade, many governments in Asia and the Pacific implemented identity management systems² to issue national identity cards and numbers as well as digital credentials for establishing uniqueness and enabling secure identity verification.

1 Commission resolution 71/14, annex.

2 United Nations, Handbook on Civil Registration and Vital Statistics Systems: Management, Operation and Maintenance, Revision 1 (New York, 2018)

United Nations, Implementation of the United Nations Legal Identity Agenda: United Nations Country Team Operational Guidelines (New York, 2020)

This brief summarizes the paper entitled “Intersection between civil registration and identity management systems in Asia and the Pacific” presented at the Second Ministerial Conference on CRVS in Asia and the Pacific in November 2021.³ It aims to provide the reader with concise information on the importance of civil registration for identity management systems and recent developments in that area. It also includes some opportunities for action during the second half of the CRVS Decade.

³ ESCAP/MCCRVS/2021/7, available at: <https://getinthepicture.org/crvs-decade/second-ministerial-conference/official-documents2021>

II. Identity Management Systems

GUIDANCE AND PRINCIPLES FOR THE IMPLEMENTATION OF IDENTITY MANAGEMENT SYSTEMS BASED ON CIVIL REGISTRATION

Legal identity is defined as the basic characteristics of an individual's identity (e.g. name, sex, place and date of birth) conferred through registration and 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.

This holistic approach to civil registration, vital statistics and identity management systems advocated in the United Nations Legal Identity Agenda¹ was officially adopted as the internationally recommended model by the Statistical Commission in March 2020 and by the Economic and Social Council in June 2020. It aims to support member States in the development of CRVS and identity management systems, including through the development of a common definition of legal identity and a set of guidelines for its

1 See E/CN.3/2020/15.

implementation in countries.² The Agenda further emphasizes the importance of coordinated investments in both civil registration and identity systems.

In conjunction with other organizations, the World Bank have developed a set of principles on identification for sustainable development.³ The principles serve to promote identification systems that are robust, inclusive, accountable.⁴

UNIVERSAL CIVIL REGISTRATION AND IDENTITY MANAGEMENT

2 United Nations, Implementation of the United Nations Legal Identity Agenda.

3 The principles were developed in conjunction with the following organizations: United Nations Children's Fund; Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees; United Nations Development Programme; Economic Commission for Africa; International Organization for Migration; International Telecommunication Union; United Nations Capital Development Fund; and World Food Programme. See "Principles on identification for sustainable development: toward the digital age" (Washington, D.C., 2021).

4 According to "Principles on identification for sustainable development", legal identification systems provide recognition before the law and proof of legal identity. Legal identification systems vary in name and nature in accordance with national law but typically include civil registration systems, national identification systems, population registries and other foundational identification systems.

SYSTEMS

Legal identity founded on civil registration leverages the strength and infrastructure of an existing civil registration system. Advantages may include the following:

- Ensuring that legal identity starts from birth;
- Facilitating up-to-date population registers with clear methods;
- Ensuring the accuracy of an identity management system;
- Improving access to public and private sector services;
- Reducing duplication, multiple identities and inaccuracies;
- Strengthening the availability of demographic and health data.

The implementation of the Agenda calls for Member States to ensure that the most vulnerable groups are not excluded owing to legal, procedural, social, economic or other barriers. As legal identity is made more widely available, the cost of not having proof of legal identity can be exacerbated for vulnerable populations, further limiting their access to public and private sector services.

Policies need to be sensitive to the possibility of exclusion and include mitigation measures to promote universal coverage concerning essential services, including in the absence of proof of legal identity. The design of identity management systems should ensure inclusion from the outset through consultations with communities and vulnerable groups to identify and mitigate access barriers.

Legal identity also promotes and enhances gender equality. Identification is a critical factor in ensuring women and girls have

equal access to social and economic opportunities, political participation, and civic engagement. It also impacts their decision-making power within the household.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR ACCELERATED ACTION

Universal legal identity is an essential part of the pledge to leave no one behind. Proof of legal identity enables individuals to exercise their rights and access services. To ensure that legal identity from birth to death is founded on civil registration, members and associate members of ESCAP may draw on the following opportunities for accelerated action:

- a. Implement the United Nations Legal Identity Agenda to accelerate action to achieve SDG target 16.9, legal identity for all;
- b. Strengthen the interlinkages between civil registration and identity management systems;⁵
- c. Promote the inclusion of identity management systems in coordination mechanisms to improve governance and service delivery;
- d. Ensure robust regulatory frameworks for the linkages between civil registration and identity management systems to remove access barriers affecting hard-to-reach and marginalized groups;
- e. Invest in safe and innovative technological solutions to enhance access to civil registration and identity management systems;
- f. Ensure that effective data protection safeguards are in place for

⁵ Africa Programme on Accelerated Improvement of Civil Registration and Vital Statistics, CRVS Systems Improvement Framework, (Addis Ababa, 2021).

the protection of personal data and the integrity and security of digital systems;

g. Engage and empower communities to demand birth registration and legal identity for all, and co-create solutions to promote the full inclusion of otherwise marginalized and poor communities and the prevention of statelessness and to leave no one behind.

III. Conclusion

An increasing number of countries are implementing identity management systems to improve the delivery of government programmes to the target population and facilitate access to services, such as healthcare and banking. The holistic approach to legal identity from birth to death with civil registration as the basis for legal identity is recommended to be implemented by countries. Providing all individuals with legal documentation of civil registration is therefore all the more relevant for countries moving towards implementing identity management systems founded on civil registration. Indeed, identity management systems should be implemented in conjunction with investments in civil registration, otherwise there is a risk of further marginalizing population groups not necessarily covered by civil registration.

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