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Items for discussion and decision: civil registration and vital statistics

Introduction of the United Nations Legal Identity Agenda: a holistic approach to civil registration, vital statistics and identity management

Report of the Secretary-General

Summary

The present report was prepared in accordance with Economic and Social Council decision 2019/210 and past practices. The Statistical Commission is invited to endorse the United Nations Legal Identity Agenda as a holistic approach to civil registration, vital statistics and identity management in the context of extending the International Programme for Accelerating the Improvement of Vital Statistics and Civil Registration Systems, initially adopted by the Commission at its twenty-sixth session; to urge all countries to implement the United Nations Legal Identity Agenda as a matter of priority; and to take note of the existing methodological framework for that purpose.

Points for decision by the Commission are contained in paragraph 7 of the report.

* E/CN.3/2020/1.



I. Introduction

1. Recognizing the critical importance of functioning and universal civil registration for the production of reliable, comprehensive, regular and accurate small area vital statistics, the Statistical Commission adopted the International Programme for Accelerating the Improvement of Vital Statistics and Civil Registration Systems at its twenty-sixth session (E/1991/25-E/CN.3/1991/32, para. 121 (a)). Under the Programme, the Commission approved and endorsed three revisions of the *Principles and Recommendations for a Vital Statistics System*,¹ as well as extended series of handbooks and guidelines on the management, operation and maintenance of civil registration and vital statistics systems,² on the legal framework,³ on communication⁴ and on policies and protocols for safeguarding civil registration records.⁵

2. In implementing the International Programme, the Statistics Division of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the Secretariat developed, organized and conducted a series of workshops in all regions of the world (with the exception of Europe), introducing the methodological framework for civil registration and vital statistics, with the participation of over 100 countries and over 400 professionals from civil registration, official statistics, public health and identity management, as regularly reported to the Statistical Commission in yearly reports.

II. United Nations Legal Identity Agenda

3. Having noted substantial initiatives in a number of Member States to institute and deploy biometric identity credentials to the population that were unconnected to the functioning of civil registration and vital statistics systems, and in an effort to provide Member States with consolidated advice, the Deputy Secretary-General established the United Nations Legal Identity Expert Group, co-chaired by the Statistics Division, the United Nations Development Programme and the United Nations Children's Fund and composed of 12 United Nations agencies and

¹ *Principles and Recommendations for a Vital Statistics System, Revision 1* (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.73.XVII.9), *Principles and Recommendations for a Vital Statistics System, Revision 2* (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.01.XVII.10) and *Principles and Recommendations for a Vital Statistics System, Revision 3* (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.13.XVII.10).

² *Handbook on Civil Registration and Vital Statistics Systems: Management, Operation and Maintenance* (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.98.XVII.11) and "Handbook on Civil Registration and Vital Statistics Systems: Management, Operation and Maintenance, Revision 1", New York, United Nations, 2018.

³ *Handbook on Civil Registration and Vital Statistics Systems: Preparation of a Legal Framework* (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.98.XVII.7) and "Guidelines on the legislative framework for civil registration, vital statistics and identity management", New York, United Nations, 2019, available at https://unstats.un.org/unsd/demographic-social/Standards-and-Methods/files/Handbooks/crvs/CRVS_GOLF_Final_Draft-E.pdf.

⁴ *Handbook on Civil Registration and Vital Statistics Systems: Developing Information, Education and Communication* (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.98.XVII.4) and "Handbook on civil registration, vital statistics and identity management systems: communication for development", New York, United Nations, 2019.

⁵ *Handbook on Civil Registration and Vital Statistics Systems: Policies and Protocols for the Release and Archiving of Individual Records* (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.98.XVII.6) (under revision).

programmes.⁶ The purpose of the Group was to establish a unified United Nations position with regard to the life cycle approach to legal identity by promoting the holistic model of civil registration, vital statistics and identity management, both at the normative level and on the ground.

4. In the process, and working closely with the World Bank, the United Nations Legal Identity Expert Group developed the operational United Nations definition of legal identity. Legal identity is defined as the basic characteristics of an individual's identity, for example, name, sex, and 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.

5. On the basis of this definition, the United Nations Legal Identity Expert Group developed and introduced the United Nations Legal Identity Agenda, which consists of the holistic approach to ensure complete civil registration and universal registration of all vital events, the production of regular, comprehensive and accurate vital statistics, and the establishment and maintenance of population registers and identity management apparatus from birth to death. There should be full interoperability between these functions in a simultaneous manner, in accordance with international standards and recommendations.⁷

6. The United Nations Legal Identity Agenda builds on the existing methodological framework for civil registration and vital statistics as developed under the auspices of the International Programme for Accelerating the Improvement of Vital Statistics and Civil Registration Systems and expands it to ensure a holistic and interoperable approach between civil registration, vital statistics production and identity management. As described in paragraph 1 above, the work on updating the existing framework, consisting of the *Principles and Recommendations for a Vital Statistics System* and supporting handbooks and guidelines, to incorporate the holistic approach is almost complete.

III. Action to be taken by the Statistical Commission

7. The Commission is invited:

(a) **To endorse the United Nations Legal Identity Agenda as a holistic approach to civil registration, vital statistics and identity management in the context of extending the International Programme for Accelerating the Improvement of Vital Statistics and Civil Registration Systems;**

(b) **To urge all countries to implement the United Nations Legal Identity Agenda as a matter of priority;**

(c) **To take note of the existing methodological framework for that purpose.**

⁶ Economic Commission for Africa, Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, International Organization for Migration, Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, United Nations Children's Fund, United Nations Development Programme, United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women), United Nations Population Fund, World Food Programme, World Health Organization and Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the United Nations Secretariat.

⁷ The United Nations Legal Identity Agenda is elaborated in a background document entitled "United Nations strategy for legal identity for all".