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**Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific****Seventy-third session**

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Item 3 (h) of the provisional agenda\*

**Review of issues pertinent to the subsidiary structure of the Commission, including the work of the regional institutions: statistics****Report on the Regional Steering Group for Civil Registration and Vital Statistics in Asia and the Pacific on its 2nd meeting****Note by the secretariat***Summary*

The Regional Steering Group for Civil Registration and Vital Statistics in Asia and the Pacific held its 2nd meeting in Bangkok on 6 and 7 September 2016, with the main objective of identifying challenges and opportunities to accelerate the implementation of the Regional Action Framework on Civil Registration and Vital Statistics in Asia and the Pacific in order to achieve the shared vision that, by 2024, all people in Asia and the Pacific would benefit from universal and responsive civil registration and vital statistics systems that facilitate the realization of their rights and support good governance, health and development.

The report on the Regional Steering Group on its 2nd meeting, prepared with the guidance of the Regional Steering Group, contains a number of recommended actions for Governments and development partners in Asia and the Pacific to maintain the momentum generated by the Ministerial Declaration to “Get Every One in the Picture” in Asia and the Pacific and resolution 71/14 of the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, leverage the opportunities proffered by the emphasis on the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, and strengthen alignment with the collective vision and framework for action by the Asia-Pacific statistical community to advance official statistics for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

The Commission is invited to take note of the report on the Regional Steering Group on its 2nd meeting and provide guidance to Governments and development partners in implementing the recommended actions.

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\* E/ESCAP/73/L.1.

## **I. Introduction**

1. The 2nd meeting of the Regional Steering Group for Civil Registration and Vital Statistics in Asia and the Pacific was held in Bangkok on 6 and 7 September 2016.

2. The meeting marked the first milestone for reporting and reviewing progress on implementing the Regional Action Framework on Civil Registration and Vital Statistics in Asia and the Pacific, consisting of the submission of baseline reports to the secretariat by members and associate members of the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) beginning in December 2015. The meeting reviewed the progress that countries have made in implementing the Regional Action Framework as well as challenges to achieving the vision of the Asian and Pacific Civil Registration and Vital Statistics Decade, 2015-2024, at regional, subregional and country levels.

3. In that context, the members of the Regional Steering Group discussed strengthening support to member States to accelerate the implementation of the Regional Action Framework in order to leverage the opportunities proffered by the emphasis on the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The Regional Steering Group also discussed options for strengthening the production and dissemination of vital statistics in alignment with the development of a collective vision and framework for action by the Asia-Pacific statistical community to advance official statistics for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

## **II. Key outcomes**

4. The Regional Steering Group made six major recommendations regarding the acceleration of the implementation of the Regional Action Framework (section III).

## **III. Summary of the meeting**

### **A. Maintaining the momentum of the implementation of the Regional Action Framework**

#### **1. Baseline report and analysis**

5. The Regional Steering Group was briefed on areas of major progress in and challenges to implementing the Regional Action Framework, which was a synthesis of information primarily drawn from national baseline reports. With assistance from the secretariat, the Regional Steering Group prepared the synthesis report<sup>1</sup> and submitted it to the Commission at its seventy-second session in May 2016 for the Commission's guidance.

6. In the regional synthesis report, it was noted that, due to the Ministerial Declaration to "Get Every One in the Picture" and Commission resolution 71/14, the Asia-Pacific region has made significant contributions to the increasing global momentum to improve national civil registration and vital statistics systems. Throughout the region, solid progress has been made in achieving the three goals of the Ministerial Declaration. Most countries have established ambitious targets for improvements throughout the Asian and Pacific Civil Registration and Vital Statistics Decade, 2015-2024.

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<sup>1</sup> E/ESCAP/72/22.

By themselves or with support from development partners and donors, some countries have been able to make good progress in the implementation steps recommended in the Regional Action Framework, in particular the development of comprehensive multisectoral national civil registration and vital statistics strategies and associated investment plans.

7. Although progress has been made across the region, countries are at very different stages of improving their civil registration and vital statistics systems and implementing the Regional Action Framework. In particular, the implementation steps on assessing subgroup inequalities and plans for monitoring and evaluation of progress under the Regional Action Framework have been conducted by only a small number of members and associate members, and a large number of countries have not reported on their progress.

8. The Regional Steering Group was briefed in detail on selected national and subregional practices and experiences, including (a) improving data and information management systems (Fiji); (b) developing a comprehensive national civil registration and vital statistics plan (Cambodia); (c) expanding the use of vital statistics (Vanuatu); and (d) digitizing civil registrars and service points (Mongolia). Member States also shared common challenges, notably the lack of adequate financial and human resources, especially for coding causes of death in compliance with the International Classification of Diseases. Public engagement and capacity-building were also noted as areas that need priority support.

9. The Regional Steering Group noted the uneven progress across the region in implementing the Regional Action Framework. In particular, 18 member States have yet to nominate a focal point, which raises questions about the other implementation steps recommended in the Regional Action Framework. While it was worth celebrating that 37 member States submitted baseline reports, the remainder of the 62 had not at the time of the meeting. The Regional Steering Group discussed potential causes holding those countries back from completing and submitting their baseline reports, including (a) delays in the process to approve the report; (b) limited capacity to produce the report; and (c) lack of interest in submitting due to sufficiently advanced civil registration and vital statistics systems.

10. In recognition of the fact that the baseline reports provided an opportunity to take stock of the successes and challenges in implementing the Regional Action Framework as well as the above-mentioned factors, the Regional Steering Group emphasized the importance of advocating for political support through tailored and strategic communications. The Regional Steering Group pointed out in particular the promotion of linkages between the Sustainable Development Goals and civil registration and vital statistics as a way to underscore the latter's relevance to the core development priorities of the member States, which could provide incentives for the enhanced engagement of policymakers.

11. Given the consideration that some member States might be in need of substantive support, the Regional Steering Group suggested that assistance should be provided to those member States in conducting baseline reporting by utilizing existing resources, such as the country reports already available on the website of the Asian and Pacific Civil Registration and Vital Statistics Decade, 2015-2024.<sup>2</sup> Follow-ups with and tailored support for individual countries could also be conducted through the extensive network of civil registration and vital statistics partnerships. The Regional Steering Group

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<sup>2</sup> [www.getinthepicture.org](http://www.getinthepicture.org).

noted an example of a member State with relatively advanced systems (Republic of Korea) that benefited from the implementation of the Regional Action Framework.

12. The Regional Steering Group also discussed opportunities for strengthening regional support to member States in implementing the Regional Action Framework. The Regional Steering Group noted the ongoing and upcoming support activities by civil registration and vital statistics partner organizations and suggested that priorities in regional support could include (a) capacity-building, particularly for registering cause of death, including training in coding in compliance with the International Classification of Diseases and verbal autopsy (Data4Health); (b) raising awareness of the importance of assessing and addressing inequalities (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees); (c) mobilizing resources to scale up existing projects and mobilizing support to maintain momentum (Secretariat of the Pacific Community); (d) promoting data sharing and using partnership networks to access key stakeholders (Pacific Civil Registrars Network); and (e) providing regional support to ensure effective implementation of enhanced information and communications technology (ICT) use in civil registration and vital statistics and inequality assessment support through knowledge-sharing and case studies (Plan International).

13. The Regional Steering Group agreed that continued political support and country ownership were crucial to maintaining the momentum generated by the Ministerial Conference on Civil Registration and Vital Statistics in Asia and the Pacific in 2014 and to accelerating the implementation of the Regional Action Framework. In that regard, the Regional Steering Group underscored the cross-cutting nature of civil registration and vital statistics and how interministerial collaboration backed by firm political commitment from all relevant ministries was vital to the implementation of the Regional Action Framework. Hence, communication and outreach strategies should account for the organizational structure of the countries' Governments. Furthermore, cooperation between countries in the form of peer-to-peer collaboration was emphasized as an effective mechanism to support member States. Coordinated follow-up and country-specific consultations were also mentioned as key action areas in support of the implementation of the Regional Action Framework.

14. **Recommendation A.** Member States are encouraged to reaffirm their political commitments contained in the Ministerial Declaration to "Get Every One in the Picture" in Asia and the Pacific and the Regional Action Framework, including the submission of the baseline reports. Development partners are requested to support ESCAP member States in the implementation of the Regional Action Framework through cooperation on priority areas and the exploration of effective modalities of support. Specifically, the secretariat, under the guidance of the Regional Steering Group, is requested to work with other development partners to follow up with countries on the submission of baseline reports and to provide in-depth regional analysis.

## 2. Addressing underregistration

15. The Regional Steering Group noted that of the countries that submitted baseline reports, only five (Australia, Kiribati, the Lao People's Democratic Republic, the Philippines and Viet Nam) indicated that they were conducting research to identify the particular challenges for subpopulation groups to access civil registration. Some countries pointed out that such targets were not needed, as they had no difficulties with the registration of

subgroups. This is the case in Azerbaijan and several other countries with close to 100 per cent registration rates (Hong Kong, China; Japan; Macao, China; Maldives; and Republic of Korea).

16. The Regional Steering Group was informed of examples of using multiple modes of communicating the importance of addressing inequalities, including reaching 100 per cent coverage, filling gaps in geographic coverage, targeting population groups and achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. The Regional Steering Group was also informed that existing tools, such as “Passport to Protection: A Guide to Birth Registration and Programming” of the United Nations Children’s Fund and the Bali Process Civil Registration Assessment Toolkit, can be used to assist such assessments. It was emphasized that guidance from the Regional Steering Group needed to be strengthened in the following areas: facilitating the sharing of good practices, providing tools and conducting surveys in addressing challenges.

17. The Regional Steering Group emphasized that those assessments are critical to identifying and assisting marginalized and hard-to-reach groups and enhancing the coverage and completeness of civil registration and vital statistics. In the context of the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly target 17.18 on disaggregated data, inequality assessments could guide policies to ensure inclusive development that leaves no one behind. In that regard, the Regional Steering Group highlighted that it was important for countries to carry out this implementation step and incorporate the results in baseline, midpoint and final reporting.

18. **Recommendation B.** Member States should incorporate inequality assessments in baseline, midpoint and final assessments. Development partners are called upon to provide sufficient technical assistance for identification and outreach to marginalized communities. Development partners should compile and share existing resources for identifying marginalized populations.

## **B. The Sustainable Development Goals and opportunities to strengthen civil registration and vital statistics**

### **Leveraging the Sustainable Development Goals to support the advancement of the Regional Action Framework**

19. The Regional Steering Group agreed that the Asian and Pacific Civil Registration and Vital Statistics Decade, 2015-2024, came at an opportune time, coinciding as it does with the implementation period of the 2030 Agenda for the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals. The Regional Steering Group discussed the array of contributions civil registration and vital statistics can make to the Goals, including, among other areas, measurement and monitoring, human rights and governance. Furthermore, the Goals could contribute to civil registration and vital statistics, which have not been given enough attention in the development agenda. In that regard, strategies put forth include (a) promoting awareness of civil registration and vital statistics systems and pointing to their relevance for Goal issues; (b) emphasizing that civil registration and vital statistics data would enable policymakers to respond concretely to the information requirements of the Goals; and (c) incorporating the Goals in civil registration and vital statistics action areas and implementation steps.

20. As a cross-cutting area that has an impact on a multitude of sectors ranging from health and education to justice and good governance, well-functioning national civil registration and vital statistics systems are essential

to the planning, implementation and monitoring of a significant number of the Sustainable Development Goals and associated targets (namely, 10 of the Goals and 26 of the targets). Furthermore, the impact of such systems extends beyond the domain of statistics and information; for instance, identification issued through civil registration promotes legal protection and helps ensure inclusive development.

21. The Regional Steering Group noted that communicating the linkage between civil registration and vital statistics and the policy priorities of high-level leadership is critical in cultivating political support. For instance, by linking death registration with the pension system, significant amounts of money could be saved. Linkages between civil registration and vital statistics with the day-to-day lives of citizens include education, mobile phones and banking. Those linkages and the potential benefits should be highlighted when sharing country practices on the basis of which recommendations can be made.

22. The Regional Steering Group emphasized that it was important to raise the awareness of civil registration and vital statistics stakeholders that the Regional Action Framework is well positioned to align with the Sustainable Development Goals. Improvements in civil registration and vital statistics can both benefit from and contribute to the Goals. In order to ensure that civil registration and vital statistics systems benefit from the implementation of the Goals, the wider statistical community needs to develop a strategy that integrates efforts at the national, subregional and regional levels.

23. More specifically, the Regional Steering Group highlighted that the national coordination body for the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals and the progress monitoring report present opportunities for civil registration and vital statistics stakeholders to make the case for relevance. The concept of civil registration and vital statistics should be embedded firmly within the monitoring and implementation governance structure of the Goals.

24. The Regional Steering Group noted existing efforts on communication and advocacy, such as those in the Philippines, where the National Economic and Development Authority and its high-level inter-agency committee to plan and oversee implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals is actively engaged in ensuring that civil registration and vital statistics are duly represented. In that regard, the Regional Steering Group encouraged all countries to review national strategies for the development of statistics and ensure that civil registration and vital statistics were duly reflected in national statistical systems and thus the monitoring framework for the Goals. Furthermore, given that the impact of civil registration and vital statistics extends beyond the domain of statistics, member States are also encouraged to incorporate development plans for civil registration and vital statistics in their national development strategies. In addition, countries are encouraged to continue the discussion with stakeholders and bring the private sector to the discussion.

25. The Regional Steering Group was also informed of opportunities for advocacy at the regional and global levels. Those included the annual sessions of the Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development, which has themes that are aligned with civil registration and vital statistics measurement issues. The high-level political forum on sustainable development presents opportunities to communicate that civil registration and vital statistics are a key component in the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals. The Regional Steering Group emphasized that the strategy to integrate civil

registration and vital statistics into the framework of the Goals should focus on existing global mechanisms such as the Inter-Agency and Expert Group on Sustainable Development Goal Indicators and the High-level Group for Partnership, Coordination and Capacity-Building for Statistics for the 2030 Agenda. The Regional Steering Group encouraged the wider statistical community to communicate clearly and strategically and to advocate for civil registration and vital statistics in Asia and the Pacific, including by requesting the High-level Group to consider activities on civil registration and vital statistics with development partners. Towards that end, the Regional Steering Group emphasized that chief statisticians had a vital role in linking civil registration and vital statistics to the Goals at the Statistical Commission of the Economic and Social Council.

26. The Regional Steering Group noted with concern a trend of identification systems being preferred to civil registration and vital statistics. Identification systems, while responding to several needs, are incomplete and lack coverage for critical population groups, including children and the deceased. Identification systems should be designed to complement civil registration and vital statistics systems but they by no means offer an alternative. The civil registration and vital statistics community should advocate for the integration of identification and civil registration and vital statistics systems, including identification numbers on birth certificates and using death registrations to remove members from identification systems. In that regard, the Regional Steering Group emphasized that it was important to bring other partners who were working on identification systems to the table, including the World Bank and the United Nations Development Programme.

27. The Regional Steering Group emphasized the linkages between the core issues of civil registration and vital statistics – identity, rights, planning and coordination – and a range of development goals, including health, inequality, education, gender, sustainable economic growth and infrastructure. In that regard, the Regional Steering Group proposed a civil registration and vital statistics tracking tool (or dashboard) that is linked to the Sustainable Development Goals and displays the status of the progress of implementation of the Regional Action Framework in parallel with the impact of the Goals. It might draw from existing tracking tools, such as the Goals tracker of the Government of Bangladesh, which is currently in the pilot phase.

28. **Recommendation C.** Member States are encouraged to incorporate the improvement of their civil registration and vital statistics systems in their national strategies for the development of statistics as well as national development strategies as a way to promote the planning, implementation and monitoring of the Sustainable Development Goals. Development partners are called upon to support the integration of civil registration and vital statistics into global and regional Goal processes, including through the Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development, the Inter-Agency and Expert Group on Sustainable Development Goal Indicators, the Statistical Commission and the high-level political forum on sustainable development. The Regional Steering Group, with support from the secretariat, should look into options for supporting communications and advocacy to highlight linkages between the Goals and civil registration and vital statistics, including modalities to enhance their visibility in the Goal processes.

## C. Civil registration and vital statistics and the framework for advancing official statistics

### 1. Investment

29. The Regional Steering Group noted the ongoing efforts of the Asia-Pacific statistical community to develop a collective vision and framework for action to advance official statistics in support of implementation of the 2030 Agenda. The principles and action areas of the Regional Action Framework are closely interlinked with those of the wider collective vision and framework. Therefore, the Regional Action Framework is well positioned to respond and feed into the global and regional transformative processes. The Regional Steering Group noted that political commitment, especially sufficient investments, are key to driving the implementation of the Regional Action Framework as well the achievement of this collective vision.

30. In that regard, development partners are requested to engage Governments to build political commitment. Major challenges relate to (a) service delivery, particularly through online platforms; (b) raising awareness of the importance of registration in rural areas; and (c) certifying causes of death and coding.

31. The Regional Steering Group underscored the need to collect and disseminate best practices and success cases regarding progress and achievements, which could serve as concrete and compelling advocacy materials that could help engage policymakers and garner support, including human and financial resources. Success stories include those from the Philippines (successful integration with national identification systems), the Cook Islands (100 per cent registration through the cooperation of stakeholders) and Bangladesh (enhancing the coverage and efficiency of civil registration through improved service delivery).

32. **Recommendation D.** Member States are encouraged to reaffirm their political commitment to the Regional Action Framework by channelling to it sufficient resources and sharing with the wider statistical community target areas in need of priority support. Development partners are requested to identify key gap areas where resources should be targeted, including service delivery, identification systems, death certification, coding in compliance with the International Classification of Diseases and digitization of civil registration and vital statistics systems.

### 2. Integration and modernization

33. The Regional Steering Group agreed that integration of official statistics through the promotion of linkages between civil registration and vital statistics data and other national data is instrumental in filling gaps and building comprehensive data. During a discussion of the successful initiative by the Australian Bureau of Statistics to integrate data and statistics on mental health services and census data, the Regional Steering Group noted that actions on integrated data sources and integrated production could include (a) promoting the recognition of the clear benefits of integration to enable efficient and effective civil registration and vital statistics; (b) promoting the use of international standards to frame civil registration and vital statistics data across key collections to deliver on the Sustainable Development Goals; (c) emphasizing the importance of designing end-to-end systems; (d) promoting tools that have been developed to support integration; (e) promoting linkages between birth and death data and other key data sets;



and (f) supporting the building of capacity and capability to link and strengthen national data through integration.

34. The Regional Steering Group noted the benefits of integrated civil registration and vital statistics platforms and digitized databases based on modern ICT and discussed a number of options to assist member countries in modernizing national civil registration and vital statistics systems. The Regional Steering Group also emphasized robustness and responsiveness as key goals of national strategies to improve civil registration and vital statistics systems. Moreover, such systems should aim to follow global standards and to stay innovative, including through the use of modern ICT infrastructure and the incorporation of big data initiatives. The Regional Steering Group encouraged member States to update national statistical systems with civil registration and vital statistics embedded within and with links to national strategies for the development of statistics.

35. Regarding the enhancement of ICT in civil registration and vital statistics, the Regional Steering Group identified public-private partnerships and the incorporation of civil registrars into existing e-governance systems as potential mechanisms that could aid implementation. Given the significant progress made by a number of member States in the areas of integration and modernization, knowledge-sharing and cooperation among member States were highlighted as effective modalities to accelerate the work in those areas. Partners and other key stakeholders could support knowledge-sharing by providing a platform for coordination and communication, as well as providing guidelines and technical advice.

36. **Recommendation E.** Member States are encouraged to continue the modernization of civil registration and vital statistics systems, including digitization and integration with existing administrative and survey data. Development partners should facilitate the identification, documentation and sharing of best practices and provide guidelines and recommendations on modernization and integration.

### 3. Strengthening skills for civil registration and vital statistics

37. The Regional Steering Group highlighted several areas for capacity-building, including the provision of long-term support, the utilization of existing materials, the provision of comprehensive training in areas such as quality assurance, due attention being paid to confidentiality issues, and support for the production and dissemination of vital statistics. In that regard, the statistical community was encouraged to consolidate and share information on capacity development. The Regional Steering Group also underscored the importance of addressing existing needs and the particularities of national systems in the proposed training activities. Furthermore, the Regional Steering Group emphasized that capacity-building requires long-term efforts that should be forward looking and continuous.

38. In particular, the Regional Steering Group noted some of the key challenges to progress towards the targets under goal 3 of the Regional Action Framework. Goal 3 focused on the production of timely vital statistics from civil registration records. In particular, statistics on death were affected by issues such as a lack of awareness related to death registration and technical coding issues related to classifying the cause of death. In order to address those challenges, countries in the region could benefit from expanded efforts to share expertise and lessons learned at the national level.

39. The Regional Steering Group took note of a proposed road map for strengthening training on the production of vital statistics in the region. The road map consisted of three major phases: (a) the development of a trainer's manual and the identification of resources; (b) the provision of technical assistance; and (c) the development and implementation of training curricula, as well as detailed step-by-step guides for implementing the road map.

40. **Recommendation F.** Member States are encouraged to document best practices, case studies and lessons learned. Development partners are requested to support the documentation and dissemination of information to facilitate mutual learning, including through South-South cooperation. More specifically, development partners are requested to develop stepwise capacity development planning and to support member States in implementing such plans. In that regard, interdisciplinary teams could help facilitate discussions and peer learning with prioritization given to key areas, such as survey methodology, research, evaluation and target setting.

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