



Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General
29 November 2010¹

Original: English

Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific Committee on Statistics

Second session

Bangkok, 15-17 December 2010

Item 3(a) of the provisional agenda

Regional initiatives: Vital statistics

Development of a regional programme for the improvement of vital statistics in Asia and the Pacific

Note by the secretariat

Summary

At its first session in February 2009, the Committee on Statistics recognized the central role of vital statistics in generating reliable population estimates and other development indicators required for policy planning and evaluation. It took note of the persistent lack of progress in the development of vital statistics in the Asia-Pacific region and recommended that the secretariat facilitate further expert discussions on developing and improving vital statistics in the region.

This document informs the Committee of the actions taken by the secretariat, under the guidance of the Bureau of the Committee, to engage national, regional and global development partners and stakeholders, including through self-assessments of national civil registration and vital statistics systems and a first-ever regional forum of national statisticians, health officials and civil registrars. It outlines a proposal for a regional programme, including guiding principles and strategies, as well as possible components and supporting activities to promote and accelerate the development and improvement of civil registration and vital statistics systems of countries in the Asia-Pacific region.

The Committee is invited to endorse the Outcome Statement of the regional forum, and to consider and decide on the appropriate means to bring the issues to the attention of the Commission to secure the highest level of government commitment possible for the improvement of vital statistics in the Asia-Pacific region. The Committee may wish to review and endorse the proposed regional programme for the improvement of vital statistics in Asia and the Pacific, including the proposed management arrangement, and provide guidance and advice on its full development and implementation.

¹ The late submission of the present document is due to the need for extensive consultations.

Contents

I.	Introduction.....	3
II.	Putting vital statistics on the regional agenda.....	3
III.	Responding to the recommendations of the Committee	4
	A. Setting the scope and planning: meeting with development partners	4
	B. Setting priorities: meeting of the Regional Task Force	4
	C. Understanding the state of vital statistics: region-wide rapid assessments.....	5
	D. Building consensus: regional forum of national stakeholders	6
IV.	Moving towards a regional programme to improve vital statistics.....	8
	A. Main challenges to be addressed	8
	B. The case for taking action now.....	10
V.	Objective, strategy and components of the regional programme.....	11
	A. Overall goal and programme outcomes.....	11
	B. Guiding principles and strategy.....	12
	C. Key components and supporting activities.....	14
VI.	Management arrangements	17
	A. Role of the member States.....	17
	B. Role of the secretariat.....	18
VII.	Actions to be taken by the Committee	19

I. Introduction

1. The present document makes the case for the urgent need to place vital statistics on the regional agenda. The call for action to improve vital statistics in Asia and the Pacific, made at the first session of the ESCAP Committee on Statistics (henceforth referred to as “the Committee”), has been taken on by statisticians, civil registrars, health ministries, researchers, and regional and national development partners through a series of consultative meetings and forums organized jointly by the secretariat and other partners.

2. The document provides an overview of the main outcomes of the series of discussions held, highlighting the consensus among stakeholders on the need for a regional programme to support national capacity development for the improvement of civil registration and vital statistics systems. It presents a proposal for such a regional programme and outlines its proposed objectives, guiding principles, key strategies and possible components.

II. Putting vital statistics on the regional agenda

3. Reliable vital statistics are essential for producing timely and accurate population estimates and other demographic and health statistics, which are some of the most basic requirements for evidence-based planning and efficient resource allocation. Vital statistics could be derived largely from records of vital events, such as births, deaths and marriages, obtained through a national civil registration system.

4. A civil registration system² allows for the compulsory, permanent, continuous and universal recording of the occurrence and characteristics of vital events. Civil registration is carried out primarily for the purpose of establishing the legal documents provided for by law. As such, it safeguards human rights with respect to social identity of, and benefits for, every member of the population. At the same time, when functioning effectively, a civil registration system provides the ideal data source for the vital statistics system—the total process of collecting data on the occurrence and characteristics of vital events, and compiling, processing, analysing, evaluating, presenting and disseminating these data in statistical form.³

5. Civil registration systems in many countries of the Asia-Pacific region, however, suffer from various deficiencies. For example, registration coverage is often incomplete, vital events are not recorded properly and registration records do not reach the vital statistics system in a timely manner (See E/ESCAP/CST/6 and Corrs.1 and 2). As a result, many countries have resorted to developing and/or using alternative sources of data on vital events, such as population censuses, household sample surveys

² A system of civil registration includes all institutional, legal and technical settings needed to perform the civil registration functions in a technically sound, coordinated and standardized manner throughout the country, taking into account cultural and social circumstances particular to the country. *Source: Handbook on Training in Civil Registration and Vital Statistics Systems* (United Nations publication, Sales No. 02.XVII.10).

³ *Principles and Recommendations for a Vital Statistics System, Revision 2* (United Nations publication, Sales No. 01.XVI.10). Available from http://unstats.un.org/unsd/publication/SeriesM/SeriesM_19rev2E.pdf.

and surveillance on sentinel sites or sample registration systems to generate vital statistics. Although these sources do provide important information on vital events, they cannot replace civil registration records as a source of data that is available on a continuous and universal basis.

6. The Committee at its first session in February 2009 emphasized the importance of accurate and complete vital statistics as the basis for producing reliable population estimates and other basic development indicators required for policy planning and progress assessment. It recognized the slow progress in the development of vital statistics in many countries in the region and stressed the need for collaboration among health authorities, civil registrars and national statistical offices to improve civil registration and vital statistics.

7. The Committee recommended that its Bureau, supported by the secretariat, explore modalities for organizing an expert group meeting of officers of health authorities, civil registrars, and national statistical offices of member States and that, in the interim, the secretariat assist countries with weak civil registration systems in exploring alternative methods of generating vital statistics.

III. Responding to the recommendations of the Committee

8. In response to the Committee's recommendations, the secretariat, under the guidance of the Bureau of the Committee, pursued a series of activities to identify the main challenges and explore concrete ways to accelerate the development of vital statistics in the region.

A. Setting the scope and planning: meeting with development partners

9. As the first step, the secretariat engaged development partners and networks at the national, regional and global levels to set the scope and plan of work. A planning meeting was held on in Bangkok on 28 and 29 May 2009 with the participation of senior statisticians and health experts from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), the Asian Development Bank (ADB), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), the World Health Organization (WHO), the West Pacific Regional Office of WHO (WHO-WPRO) and the University of Queensland Health Information Systems Knowledge Hub (UQ HISHub).

10. Participants reviewed the existing and planned initiatives for improving vital statistics by various agencies. They acknowledged the unique strengths and comparative advantages of each development partner and stressed the importance of harnessing and coordinating efforts in supporting vital statistics development in the region. They agreed on the urgent need for a concerted effort in developing and implementing a region-wide capacity-building programme and mapped out a tentative action plan. It was recommended that a regional task force comprised of experts from development agencies and selected ESCAP member States be established to assist the secretariat in formulating the regional programme.

B. Setting priorities: meeting of the Regional Task Force

11. ESCAP and WHO-WPRO jointly convened a meeting on 15 and 16 September 2009 to organize the Regional Task Force and to hold consultations on developing a road map for improving vital statistics in the

region. Health, civil registration and vital statistics experts from Australia, Cambodia, China, Mongolia, Samoa, Sri Lanka, Thailand, UNFPA, UNICEF, WHO, WHO-WPRO, the WHO Regional Office for South-East Asia (WHO-SEARO) and UQ HISHub agreed to serve on the Regional Task Force.

12. Participating countries shared information and experiences on the status, development initiatives and concerns regarding their respective civil registration and vital statistics systems. Development agencies informed the meeting of their institutional interests and ongoing and potential future initiatives in this field. The meeting outlined the scope, strategies and expected outcomes of a regional capacity-building programme and recommended possible components for the programme.⁴

13. The regional task force also recommended that a high-level regional forum on improving civil registration and vital statistics be organized in 2010 to bring together national stakeholders to further elaborate the priorities and elements of the regional programme. The task force further recommended that all member States conduct a self-assessment through an assessment tool developed by WHO and UQ HISHub⁵ to provide a better understanding of the state of the civil registration and vital statistics systems of countries in the region. Results of this region-wide self-assessment would guide the development of the regional programme and would also serve as a baseline against which the future progress of national vital statistics systems could be measured.

C. Understanding the state of vital statistics: region-wide rapid assessments

14. In February 2010, the secretariat sent a request to all national statistical offices in the region, inviting them to carry out a self-assessment of their respective civil registration and vital statistics systems using the WHO-UQ HISHub tool. The national statistical offices were encouraged to engage other national stakeholders, including ministries of health and civil registrars, when filling out the questionnaire. By 26 March 2009, 23 offices had submitted their reports to the secretariat, and an additional 3 countries have provided their assessments since then.

15. The WHO-UQ HISHub rapid assessment tool scores 25 aspects of a civil registration and vital statistics system.⁶ Based on the overall score, the level of development of such a system can be classified into three categories: (a) dysfunctional or weak systems (type I); (b) functional systems with many inadequate aspects (type II); and (c) “satisfactory” systems that register more than 90 per cent of births and deaths but for which further improvement, such as in data quality, is required (type III). Dysfunctional and weak systems require substantial improvement of a large

⁴ See “Report on the ESCAP/WHO Meeting on the Improvement of Vital Statistics and Vital Registration in Asia-Pacific”, 15-16 September 2009, Bangkok. Available from www.unescap.org/stat/meet/vs-Sep09/Vs-meeting-report.pdf.

⁵ Rapid assessment of national civil registration and vital statistics systems, WHO/IER/HIS/STM/2010.1, in World Health Organization and the University of Queensland, *Improving the quality and use of birth, death and cause-of-death information: guidance for a standards based review of country practices*, (Geneva, 2010).

⁶ The assessment is mainly concerned with births, deaths and causes of death and does not cover foetal deaths, marriages or divorces.

number of aspects; functional but inadequate systems work, but some aspects function poorly; and most aspects of satisfactory systems function well, but the systems require relatively minor improvements.

16. According to the 26 civil registration and vital statistics assessments submitted to the secretariat, 5 countries have an overall score that would place their systems in type I, 11 are in type II and the rest (10) are in type III (see table 1). Table 1 summarizes the weakest areas by the level of development of the systems as revealed by the assessments.

Table 1.
Civil registration and vital statistics systems of 26 Asia-Pacific members and associate members: current level of development and ranking of the five weakest areas

Weakest areas	Level of development		
	Dysfunctional or weak	Functional but inadequate	Over 90 per cent complete birth and death registration
Organization and functioning of civil registration and vital statistics systems	2	5	2
Completeness of birth and death registration	3		
ICD-compliant practices	1		5
Quality of cause-of-death data	4	4	3
Coder qualification and quality of coding	5	1	1
Data quality checks		2	
Data storage and transmission		3	4

Source: ESCAP secretariat.

Abbreviation: ICD, International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems.

Notes: The scale of ranking is in descending order, with “1” representing the weakest area. The 26 respondents that provided self-assessments do not include most of the least developed countries and small island developing States in the ESCAP region. The following ESCAP members and associate members provided self-assessments: Armenia, Australia, Azerbaijan, Bangladesh, China, Cook Islands, Fiji, Georgia, Iran (Islamic Republic of), Japan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Malaysia, Mongolia, New Zealand, Pakistan, Philippines, Republic of Korea, Russian Federation, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Turkey, Uzbekistan, Viet Nam, Hong Kong, China, and Macao, China.

D. Building consensus: regional forum of national stakeholders

17. The Regional Forum on the Improvement of Vital Statistics and Civil Registration in Asia and the Pacific⁷ was held in Bangkok from 23 to

⁷ The forum was organized as part of the ADB/ESCAP/UNDP Tripartite Project on Supporting the Achievement of the Millennium Development Goals in Asia and the Pacific (Phase III).

25 June 2010. The forum, organized by ESCAP and WHO in collaboration with ADB and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), brought together, for the first time, key institutions involved in national civil registration and vital statistics systems, including ministries of health, national statistical offices and offices of the civil registrar. Country experts from 17 member States were joined by civil registration and vital statistics experts, advocates and development partners from academia, international agencies and civil society to share experiences, explore common challenges and identify collective actions that can be taken to improve vital statistics and civil registration in the region.

18. At the forum, participants emphasized the importance of civil registration and vital statistics in supporting good governance and protecting the rights of the population, particularly vulnerable and marginalized groups, and expressed deep concern for the failure of many existing systems to do so. Country participants called upon their respective governments, as well as development partners, to increase their commitment and support to strengthen the civil registration and vital statistics systems.

19. In reviewing the results of the self-assessments of national civil registration and vital statistics systems, participants recognized the usefulness of the rapid assessments for engaging the national institutions responsible for civil registration and vital statistics in discussions on the weaknesses and strengths of the systems. They also emphasized the importance of obtaining, for the region as a whole, a complete set of baseline information on the level of development of national civil registration and vital statistics systems. Such baseline information would not only allow countries to set their own targets and monitor progress but also provide a basis against which the impact of the proposed regional programme could be assessed. It was agreed that all countries that had yet to complete a rapid self-assessment in the region should be encouraged to do so.

20. Participants at the regional forum identified the main challenges—technical, institutional, political and sociocultural—that need to be addressed through a regional programme and reached consensus on the priorities, guiding principles and strategies, as well as the key components and supporting activities, of the proposed regional programmes for strengthening the capacity of member States to address these challenges.⁸

21. The forum concluded with an outcome statement (E/ESCAP/CST(2)/INF/12), which called on member States, statistics development partners and the secretariat to act on the recommendations of the forum.

22. Forum participants requested the secretariat to submit the Outcome Statement to the Committee on Statistics for endorsement and for the Committee to bring to the attention of the Commission the urgent need to improve civil registration and vital statistics systems of countries in the region.

⁸ The report of the forum is available from www.unescap.org/stat/meet/vs-Jun2010/forum-report.pdf.

IV. Moving towards a regional programme to improve vital statistics

A. Main challenges to be addressed

23. Through the regional consultations, analysis of region-wide self-assessments and discussions at the regional forum, it has become clear that the regional programme should address the following challenges that affect the availability and quality of vital statistics.

1. Improving the legal framework and increasing political commitment and public awareness

24. In many developing countries in the Asia-Pacific region, the development and improvement of civil registration and vital statistics systems has been hampered by the lack of a supporting environment, particularly the lack of a strong legal framework to underpin the system, public awareness of the need for and benefits of registration, and the absence of high-level political commitment.

25. No civil registration system can function well without a legal basis that makes registration compulsory, determines the functions, duties and responsibilities of local registrars and of citizens, and issues details on, among other things, the registration procedures, fees, time limits and penalties for failure to register or provide evidentiary requirements.

26. The lack of a strong legal framework is characteristic of dysfunctional and weak systems. These systems need to progressively develop and improve, which requires real political commitment to strengthen the legal framework and provide adequate resources on a sustained basis.

27. Even where laws exist, they may have deficient provisions, such as a failure to make registration compulsory, or the laws may be poorly implemented. Sometimes changes are made in the procedures for registration but the public may not know of these changes. When citizens are aware of the purpose and benefits of registration, they will not only comply with the laws but will also demand that the registration processes be efficient.

2. Strengthening national coordination and collaboration

28. In most countries, the system for registering vital events and issuing birth and death certificates is administered by a civil registration office,⁹ while the processing of data and the production of statistics is mostly done by the national statistical office. Registration also involves the participation of many other agents, such as doctors, birth attendants and local government officials, and the relevant health ministry, which processes and compiles statistics for health information systems. Clearly, the production of vital statistics is a collaborative work involving several parties that requires good coordination and cooperation.

⁹ The civil registration office is usually attached to a Government ministry, such as the Ministry of Interior or the Ministry of Justice). A unique case is the Philippines, where the head of the national statistical office is also the national civil-registrar general.

29. The rapid assessment results indicate that, regardless of the level of development of the civil registration and vital statistics system, a prerequisite for a sound, efficient and effective vital statistics system is that there be close collaboration among all the agencies involved; they should function as a system with little or no duplication of functions across different areas of government and facilitate the effective use of registration records for statistical purposes.

30. In the absence of effective coordination mechanisms, problems often arise in the exchange of information on vital events, for example, among hospitals, ministries of health and statistical offices. Thus, good management at each functional level within each part of the system is not enough; good coordination among the different institutions is crucial. Setting up mechanisms to strengthen coordination and facilitate collaboration in the production of vital statistics is a major challenge for many countries.

3. Improving completeness of registration of vital events

31. To produce reliable vital statistics from civil registration records, all events must be registered. This is difficult, however, for many reasons. In some countries where a high proportion of births and deaths take place at home, these vital events do not reach the registration system. Newborn infants who die within the first month are the most likely to be missed by the system. The problem of under-registration differs in rural and urban areas and may be worse in remote areas or underserved areas. The problem is worse in weak and dysfunctional systems but is also an aspect of concern even for functional systems.

32. Incomplete registration may also be due to a lack of awareness of the need to register, the lack of incentives to register or the existence of barriers to registration. For example, the costs to individuals of making an effort to register a vital event may outweigh the perceived benefits of registration. In some subpopulations, language, beliefs and practices may also be reasons for not accurately reporting vital events. Hence, even where registration facilities sufficiently cover the entire population, registration will remain incomplete.

4. Improving the availability and quality of vital statistics

33. As with all data collection methods, the practices and procedures used in registration offices are the foundation of a good civil registration system, and it is there that a lack of standards and checking procedures will irreversibly corrupt the value of the data. Regular training of registrars and monitoring of the quality of the procedures used for data collection and transmission to the next administrative level in the system is needed but is not done as often as needed.

34. In the case of cause-of-death statistics, the two most important factors to ensure good data quality are the use of the international form of medical certificate for cause-of-death and the availability, capability and willingness of doctors to certify the event according to the rules and principles of the International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems (ICD). As the rapid assessments indicate, regardless of the level of development of the civil registration and vital statistics systems, lack of proper training among coders often contributes to the poor quality of data on cause of death.

5. Increasing the use and dissemination of vital statistics

35. The *United Nations Principles and Recommendations for Vital Statistics* states that the compilation of vital statistics should have as its ultimate minimum goal (a) the provision of total monthly or quarterly summary counts of live births, deaths, foetal deaths, marriages and divorces on a time schedule prompt enough to provide information for health intervention and population estimation programmes, administrative uses or other needs, and (b) the production of detailed annual tabulations of each type of vital event cross-classified by its demographic and socio-economic characteristics.¹⁰

36. The recommendations further stress the importance of ensuring that resources are available to complete the tabulations on a “regularly established basis and on a time schedule that will ensure the effective use of the analysis of the interrelationship between demographic, economic and social factors to plan, operate and evaluate public health programmes, and for the purposes of the formulation and evaluation of economic and social plans.”¹¹

37. For many countries in the region, this ultimate minimum goal is far from being achieved. Thus, they continue to face major challenges in assessing progress towards the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals, in particular those related to health and reductions in child and maternal mortality, as well as indicators of progress that are dependent on accurate population estimates, such as those for education and gender equality.

38. Where systems are already functioning, the challenge is to increase the timeliness in making the data available for analysis and dissemination. In many cases, the potential of information and communications technology (ICT) to improve the efficiency of the collection, compilation, sharing, dissemination and analysis of data on vital events has yet to be realized.

B. The case for taking action now

39. In recent years, the heightened commitment of a wide range of partners has made an array of resources and targeted initiatives available that promote the development and improvement of civil registration and vital statistics in the Asian and Pacific region.

40. First, the global commitment to the Millennium Development Goals has highlighted the critical role of reliable, continuous and comparable vital statistics and created momentum to improve these data. It has become clear that the long neglect of the civil registration and vital statistics systems in many countries has had a detrimental impact on their ability to develop and monitor targeted development policies, particularly in the area of health.

41. Second, the process of improving civil registration is now even more technically feasible due to the availability of tools and methods and a better understanding of their applications. For example, UNICEF and PLAN International, a child-centred community development (CCCD),

¹⁰ *Principles and Recommendations for a Vital Statistics System. Revision 2*, (United Nations publication, Sales No. 01.XVI.10), para. 62. Available from http://unstats.un.org/unsd/publication/SeriesM/SeriesM_19rev2E.pdf.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

organization have been working with national partners in the Asia-Pacific region to develop, implement and replicate good practices to increase the registration of births.

42. Third, international support for health statistics is expanding rapidly. Partners such as WHO are offering more resources, training and technical assistance related to the collection and coding of vital statistics. For example, since 2000, the WHO Family of International Classifications and the International Federation of Health Records have collaborated to provide training and resources aimed at helping countries to properly certify deaths using ICD, train new in-country coders and correctly analyse cause-of-death data. The overall goals of this collaborative programme are to improve the quality of mortality and morbidity data and the capacity of ICD coders.

43. The Health Metrics Network (HMN), launched in 2005, is a global partnership of countries, development agencies and the private sector¹² focused on strengthening health information systems. In 2007, HMN successfully coordinated a multi-partner effort called MoVE (Monitoring of Vital Events), which led to a series of papers in *The Lancet*,¹³ to diagnose the situation, identify obstacles and set out a strategy for strengthening civil registration systems in countries. HMN has been requested to support an Asia-Pacific regional approach to accelerate the high-quality and effective strengthening of civil registration and vital statistics through a jointly-developed proposal by WHO-WPRO, WHO-SEARO, ESCAP, the Secretariat of the Pacific Community and UQ HISHub support.

44. The Australian Agency for International Development (AusAID) sponsored UQ HISHub¹⁴ is one of four hubs comprised of expert networks which work with other development partners strongly committed to supporting the Millennium Development Goals in the region. A key focus of the work is developing tools and expertise that can assist countries to strengthen their vital statistics systems, including assessment tools, cause-of-death data and population statistics. UQ HISHub is an active member of the regional task force established in September 2009.

V. Objective, strategy and components of the regional programme

A. Overall goal and programme outcomes

45. Through the increased availability and use of reliable vital statistics derived from civil registration systems, the proposed regional programme aims to contribute to the improvement of evidence-based policymaking, efficiency in resource allocation and good governance, as well as the progressive realization of the basic rights of all citizens.

46. The expected outcomes of the regional programme are: (a) an increased number of countries in the region with sustained political commitment and enhanced public awareness to support the development and improvement of civil registration and vital statistics systems; (b) an

¹² For a complete list of partners, see www.who.int/healthmetrics/partners/en.

¹³ See www.thelancet.com/series/who-counts.

¹⁴ The Committee was informed of this development at its first session. For more information, see E/ESCAP/CST/INF/14 and Corr. 1. Available from www.unescap.org/stat/cst/1/CST1-INF14.pdf.

increased number of countries in the region with strengthened legislation and established mechanisms for coordination among key stakeholders within civil registration and vital statistics systems for the effective production and dissemination of basic vital statistics; (c) an increased technical capacity of countries in the region to record and process information on vital events and associated characteristics for statistical purposes; and (d) an increased technical capacity of countries in the region to analyse, use and disseminate vital statistics.

B. Guiding principles and strategy

47. The following principles and strategies emerged from the preparatory discussions and consultations to guide the development of the proposed regional programme.

1. Supporting country commitments and plan

48. The proposed regional programme will focus on supporting country commitments and initiatives.

49. One critical lesson learned from past capacity-building programmes is that improving civil registration and vital statistics systems requires long-term, continuing efforts and that the country's own commitment and investment ultimately determines whether improvement is sustainable and long-lasting. Although costs are an important consideration, they are not necessarily a deciding factor: the results of the region-wide rapid assessments revealed that progress is possible even in low-income countries.

50. The regional programme will advocate sustained government commitment at the regional level and will support countries in the systematic assessment of the state of development of their civil registration and vital statistics systems, identify priorities, set goals and formulate a time-bound action plan. The programme will promote the integration of this national plan into the national strategy for statistics development.

2. Stepwise approach towards progress

51. The path to improved civil registration and vital statistics systems varies greatly across countries according to their current state of development. For many countries with a dysfunctional or weak system, or a system that is functional but inadequate, improving vital statistics requires investing in the improvement of the civil registration system itself—a long-term goal requiring sustained efforts. While the regional programme will advocate the improvement of civil registration systems, it aims to support these countries in developing and applying interim approaches to make use of alternative data sources in order to meet urgent data needs.

52. At the same time, the regional programme will also support these countries in progressively moving “up the ladder” in stepwise increments. For example, to improve the coverage and completeness of registration, priority could first be given to targeting specific geographic areas, subgroups of the population or specific vital events, such as maternal mortality.

53. Through systematic assessment, the regional programme will support national efforts in defining a targeted, stepwise approach based on

the needs and priorities of the country and will identify the appropriate tools and assistance required.

3. Targeting specific needs for support with a flexible mix of activities

54. With the wide regional variation in the current state of development, improving vital statistics in different countries in the region requires a targeted approach with a flexible mix of support activities.

55. At each level of development, a country's needs for support could be broadly categorized into two technical areas: (a) improving the completeness and accuracy of birth and death registration; and (b) improving the production of vital statistics. Each of these two areas at a given level of development would require an appropriate intervention "package", depending on the priority issues to be addressed.

56. The regional programme will support countries in designing the relevant intervention packages by making available a judicious mix of capacity-building activities, including organizing forums and developing tools for advocacy; using, building and sharing knowledge and good practices; providing technical assistance through training and advisory services; and researching and developing new approaches and tools.

4. Building on regional diversity

57. The diversity in the state of civil registration and vital statistics systems in the region provides a wealth of experience, expertise and knowledge that can be and should be drawn on for capacity development in the region.

58. The regional programme will support the establishment of a resource base for improving these systems by strengthening regional cooperation, including South-South cooperation. This would be achieved through regional forums and networking and by facilitating knowledge sharing. The programme will draw on the expertise available at the national, regional and global levels. The array of existing resources that are available and those that will be developed, including training materials, computer-based resource kits, assessment tools, analysis tools and good practices, will be systematically documented and dynamically shared.

5. Relying on partnership and improving coordination

59. The success of the regional programme is dependent upon improved coordination among relevant development partners, both as a means of achieving the objectives of the programme and as an outcome of the programme itself. While a close partnership among key development partners in the region has been established through the preparatory work on the current proposal, the regional programme will rely on a regional coordination mechanism, to be established at the First Meeting of Partners for Statistics Development in Asia and the Pacific (to be held on 14 December 2010), to bring about stronger, coordinated support for its further development and implementation, creating synergies among activities and resources of different development partners.

60. Through advocacy and the promotion of good practices, the regional programme will also encourage the improvement of coordination and

collaboration among the institutions comprising the national civil registration and vital statistics systems.

C. Key components and supporting activities

61. Following the proposed guiding principles and strategies, the proposed regional programme will focus on six key components, as summarized in table 2.

Table 2. Main components of the proposed regional programme

Number	Components
1	Assessing national capacity and supporting the formulation of national action plans
2	Increasing public awareness and strengthening political support
3	Strengthening the legal framework and improving coordination
4	Improving the availability and quality of vital statistics
5	Improving the analysis, dissemination and use of vital statistics
6	Furthering research and development

1. Assessing national capacity and supporting the formulation of national action plans

Objective:

To secure national commitment to the improvement of civil registration and vital statistics systems through the formulation of a results-oriented, nationally-owned action plan that is based on systematic assessments.

Supporting activities:

- Encourage and support all countries in the region in conducting a rapid self-assessment by 2011
- Support countries in the region in carrying out a comprehensive assessment of the civil registration and vital statistics system
- Support countries in the region in formulating results-oriented national action plans to accelerate the development of their civil registration and vital statistics systems

2. Increasing public awareness and strengthening political support

Objective:

To secure sustained commitment to invest in the improvement of civil registration and vital statistics systems on the part of national authorities, politicians, decision makers and national development partners.

Supporting activities:

- Develop an advocacy tool to make a “business case” for investing in the improvement of civil registration and vital statistics systems and assist countries in applying it for national advocacy

- Organize a ministerial-level regional forum to raise the awareness and understanding of the importance of national civil registration and vital statistics systems and the main challenges and issues that need to be addressed to improve the systems and to advocate the provision of resources on a sustained basis
- Launch a regional advocacy campaign to heighten the visibility and importance of civil registration and vital statistics, such as through the declaration of a year/decade for civil registration/vital statistics and other similar region-wide advocacy channels and instruments
- Establish a regular regional forum aimed at promoting the exchange of experiences and information on strategies and plans to strengthen civil registration and vital statistics systems, report on accomplishments, compile lessons learned and foster South-South and peer-to-peer cooperation to improve civil registration and vital statistics systems
- Provide technical/advisory services to support country advocacy events

3. Strengthening the legal framework and improving coordination

Objective:

To strengthen the legal basis for the functioning of civil registration and vital statistics systems as a means of increasing the registration of vital events and improving the production of vital statistics.

Supporting activities:

- Develop tools, such as a model civil registration law, to assist countries in reviewing existing civil registration and vital statistics laws and identifying areas that need to be strengthened
- Promote the establishment of a national coordination structure or mechanism comprised of key institutions and stakeholders of the civil registration and vital statistics system
- Through the regular regional forum, identify, review and compile good practices in the coordination of civil registration and vital statistics functions, and facilitate the exchange of good practices in civil registration laws and coordination mechanisms, documentation and online/offline dissemination
- Provide technical advisory services to support country efforts in strengthening legislation and coordination

4. Improving the availability and quality of vital statistics

Objective:

To improve the relevance, timeliness, reliability and accuracy of vital statistics.

Supporting activities:

- Provide technical advisory services and training to assist countries with weak/dysfunctional or inadequate civil registration and vital statistics systems in identifying and setting up appropriate interim methods, such as demographic surveillance systems and sample vital registration with verbal autopsy, to improve the availability of data for vital statistics
- Through the regular regional forum and South-South cooperation, facilitate the exchange of knowledge and good practices that ensure timeliness in the collection and compilation of civil registration records for statistical purposes
- Through the regular regional forum and South-South cooperation, facilitate the exchange of good practices in improving registration in remote areas and among poorly covered subpopulations, as well as the registration of specific types of vital events, including through the use of information and communications technology (for example, community birth and death reporting using mobile phones)
- Support the strengthening of capacity of national training institutions to deliver effective training on ICD-compliant certification, reporting and coding to improve the quality of cause-of-death data
- Develop tools, such as an electronic tool, and provide relevant technical advisory services and training to enable countries to analyse the quality of existing vital statistics, including fertility and mortality data
- Develop training curricula and assist national training institutions in strengthening their capacity to deliver training on the skills and knowledge needed to improve the quality of vital statistics

5. Improving the analysis, dissemination and use of vital statistics

Objective:

To increase the capacity of national civil registration and vital statistics systems to effectively analyse, disseminate and use vital statistics.

Supporting activities:

- Provide training on guidelines and recommendations for the analysis, dissemination and use of vital statistics, as contained in the *United Nations Principles and Recommendations for a Vital Statistics System, Revision 2*¹⁵
- Through the regular regional forum, facilitate the exchange of knowledge and good practices on how vital statistics have been

¹⁵ See note 10.

used to guide policy, including through documentation and offline/online dissemination

- Provide technical advisory services to countries to support the implementation of principles and recommendations, including the development of an engagement strategy to regularly discuss data needs with the main data users, the preparation of analytical reports and the development of dissemination strategies and policy
- Develop training curricula and assist national training institutions in strengthening their capacity to deliver training on the skills and knowledge needed to improve the analysis of vital statistics data

6. Furthering research and development

Objective:

To develop and test innovative methods and tools for accelerating the improvement of civil registration and vital statistics systems.

Supporting activities:

- Develop a research and development programme on the basis of identified gaps in country assessments
- Conduct research and development studies in priority areas to be identified with pilot countries
- Through the regular regional forum, facilitate the sharing of research and study results and formulate guidelines on their potential application

VI. Management arrangements

A. Role of the member States

62. The Committee will have ultimate “ownership” of the regional programme and will oversee its further development and implementation. To ensure that the regional programme remains relevant and leads to sustainable results, the Committee—through its subsequent sessions—will periodically review its progress, identify emerging needs and decide on strategic adjustments to the programme.

63. The Bureau of the Committee will guide the secretariat in coordinating the follow-up actions required by the Committee’s decisions and recommendations on the regional programme.

64. Considering the scale, complexity and time frame of the regional programme, it is proposed that a dedicated steering group for the programme be established by the Committee to directly oversee its implementation. This long-standing body would be in place for the duration of the programme to ensure continuity and stability in its programme management. The steering group would be comprised of representatives of national statistical offices, civil registration offices and ministries of health, as well as representatives of international organizations and agencies

involved in the improvement of civil registration and vital statistics systems. The group will direct the development of the implementation plan for the programme, provide both strategic and technical advice to the secretariat for its day-to-day management and monitor progress in its implementation. It may report on the progress to the Committee and seek its direction.

65. The national coordination structure for civil registration and vital statistics that is proposed to be established by member States participating in the regional programme will appoint a national coordinator to liaise with the secretariat on relevant programme activities.

B. Role of the secretariat

66. The secretariat will support the further development, implementation and monitoring of the regional programme through: (a) its regular budget activities; (b) its regular programme for technical cooperation and secured extrabudgetary funding activities; and (c) extrabudgetary activities for which funding needs to be raised.

67. Through its regular budgetary functions, it is proposed that the secretariat will fulfil the roles of: (a) the custodian and coordinator of the programme, including its periodic revisions and monitoring of the programme's implementation through periodic assessments of the capacity of countries to produce vital statistics; (b) the focal point of the regional programme, providing countries with a central point for all the queries and requests related to the regional programme; and (c) the secretariat to the programme steering group. In addition, the regular budget allows the secretariat to organize occasional expert group meetings on issues relevant to the regional programme.

68. Under its regular programme for technical cooperation and secured extrabudgetary funding, the secretariat may contribute to the implementation of the regional programme as outlined below.

69. Through the unique ESCAP intergovernmental regional forum, the secretariat will be instrumental in: (a) raising awareness and working with relevant stakeholders to create high-level political commitment for civil registration and vital statistics; (b) facilitating the promotion of exchanges of experiences and information on strategies and plans to strengthen civil registration and vital statistics systems, report on accomplishments, compile lessons learned, and foster South-South and peer-to-peer cooperation to improve civil registration and vital statistics; and (c) mainstreaming attention to civil registration into relevant subprogrammes under the ESCAP programme of work and forging strong links with human rights constituencies.

70. The secretariat, through the Statistics Division, will: (a) take a lead role in the development and dissemination of standards, evidence, tools and guidelines for civil registration and vital statistics, in partnership with regional knowledge hubs and technical agencies, including WHO, the United Nations Statistics Division and the Secretariat of the Pacific Community; (b) facilitate the provision of technical assistance, including training and advisory services, in close collaboration with technical partners and United Nations agencies, to build national capacity in civil registration and vital statistics; (c) collaborate closely with relevant partner agencies, especially WHO, HMN, UNICEF, UNFPA, UNDP, the World Bank, ADB

and the Secretariat of the Pacific Community to coordinate support and mobilize global, regional and country resources for civil registration and vital statistics; and (d) support countries in the region, in partnership with the countries and drawing on regional resources, in monitoring progress in improving civil registration and vital statistics systems.

VII. Actions to be taken by the Committee

71. The Committee may wish to:

- Review and endorse the Outcome Statement of the Regional Forum on the Improvement of Vital Statistics and Civil Registration in Asia and the Pacific (E/ESCAP/CST(2)/INF/12)
- Consider and decide on the appropriate means to bring the issues to the attention of the Commission to secure the highest level of government commitment for improving vital statistics in the region

72. The Committee may wish to:

- Review and endorse the proposed regional programme for the improvement of vital statistics in Asia and the Pacific, including the proposed management arrangement
- Provide guidance and advice on the full development and implementation of the regional programme

73. The Committee may wish to:

- Encourage all member States to undertake a rapid self-assessment within the next six months to ensure that a regional baseline on the status of national civil registration and vital statistics systems is properly prepared to serve as a basis for the further development of the regional programme and the monitoring of its effectiveness during implementation
- Call upon member States and development partners to actively support the formulation and implementation of the regional programme, including via the provision of technical and financial resources and through the active coordination of national and regional capacity development initiatives