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Harnessing Civil Registration and Vital Statistics (CRVS) Systems in **Conflict, Emergencies, and Fragile Settings**

OVERVIEW



This publication is a single chapter in a larger body of work. The *Compendium of Good Practices: Harnessing Civil Registration and Vital Statistics (CRVS) Systems in Conflict, Emergencies, and Fragile Settings* was developed by the Centre of Excellence for Civil Registration and Vital Statistics Systems in collaboration with Open Data Watch.

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OVERVIEW

INTRODUCTION

The first two decades of the 21st century saw a significant increase in crises and emergencies due to conflict, climate, and disease. Today, as we continue to experience the COVID-19 pandemic, no country or statistical system has been left untouched. Despite the hardships, life in conflict, emergency, and fragile situations goes on – people are born, marry, divorce, and die. In these contexts, civil registration and identification are vitally important, even as significant strains are placed on these systems. The hazards faced by people in conflict, emergency, and fragile contexts could weaken or destroy entire civil registration and vital statistics (CRVS) systems and archives. This would prevent people from accessing basic services guaranteed by fundamental rights – the right to an identity, the right to a name, and so on. Access to these services is critical; people rely on them for everything from humanitarian aid to health care, education, and job training.

Conflicts and natural disasters pose a risk for the wholesale destruction of identification archives, such as Côte d'Ivoire experienced during its civil war.¹ This risk is compounded by the fact that in these crisis situations, CRVS systems are often

last on policymakers' list of priorities, which puts the information and rights of entire generations at risk. For example, in a case where a Syrian couple lacks a marriage registration, the husband's death in the conflict and the pregnant wife's flight would prevent the woman from registering the children born of that marriage with Syrian authorities. In many contexts like this, a single mother cannot register the child or transmit her nationality, which bars the child from acquiring their nationality later, further complicating their potential return to Syria.

The 21st century has also seen the effects of climate change hitting countries that are the most vulnerable to extreme weather events. In particular, small island countries face a very real risk of disappearance. Even in less drastic circumstances, records are at risk of disappearing if a natural disaster occurs, making it difficult to account for deaths and to mitigate the consequences of these disasters. In all these situations, it is critical that governments have robust disaster risk reduction plans in place that protect civil registration records. Protecting CRVS systems must be part of each country's climate change mitigation and adaptation plans to ensure that natural disasters do not leave multiple generations without access to rights and services.

¹ World Bank. 2016. ID4D Country Diagnostic: Côte d'Ivoire. id4d.worldbank.org/sites/id4d.worldbank.org/files/2018-04/Cote%20d%27Ivoire_ID4D_Diagnostic_Web040618.pdf

Data are also critical to emergency responses. Accurate and timely data support governments and stakeholders such as NGOs and foreign donors to effectively deliver services and aid in the wake of an emergency such as COVID-19. Data also contribute to strengthening governance in fragile settings and protecting those who are the most vulnerable. As the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has reported, the COVID-19 crisis is having an unprecedented socioeconomic impact on people around the world. This is hitting vulnerable populations, such as the forcibly displaced and the stateless, even harder. While a full picture has yet to be established, UNHCR estimates that global forced displacement surpassed 80 million by mid-2020; the refugee count has grown to 23.6 million.² Even before the pandemic, displaced people and the stateless struggled to obtain legal identity and work permits and get access to formal employment and social safety nets. In particular, refugees faced (and still face) additional legal and practical barriers to basic rights and services. CRVS data are essential for informing policymakers as they address humanitarian crises, respond to emergencies, and provide for a displaced population. Together with local outreach, data-driven decisions can reduce violence against vulnerable groups and improve access to services.

Despite their promise, CRVS systems often remain underdeveloped and underfunded in fragile contexts. Bridging these shortfalls and bringing CRVS onto the fragility agenda is a vital step forward in the Decade of Action.

INTRODUCING THE COMPENDIUM OF PRACTICE

Since 2016, the Centre of Excellence for CRVS Systems has been working with countries throughout the world to strengthen and improve their CRVS systems. As well as lending technical assistance and support to its partners, the Centre has been a globally recognized conveyor, bringing together a diverse range of stakeholders working in this field to discuss, debate, and make progress. In February 2018, the Centre, in partnership with the World Health Organization and UNICEF, co-hosted the first global meeting on CRVS, *Making the Invisible Visible: CRVS as a Basis to Meeting the 2030 Agenda*, in Ottawa.

Two years later, in February 2020, the Centre, Open Data Watch, and the UN Population Fund convened another conference – *ConVERGE: Connecting Vital Events Registration and Gender Equality*. The two-day discussions highlighted themes similar to those examined at the 2018 conference and reinforced the need to explore CRVS in conflict, emergency, and fragile contexts more specifically. Even though the need for research into effective CRVS practices in conflict, emergency, and fragile contexts exists, the evidence base remains scarce.

The Centre of Excellence is leading efforts to document a series of practices in this field and share them with the broader community in a compendium. This is intended to advance the dialogue around building effective CRVS systems in conflict, emergency, and fragile contexts and thereby contribute to leaving no one behind. The result of this effort is a series of 12 papers, including this overview, commissioned by diverse experts such as civil registrars, practitioners, and

2 UNHCR. 2021. Refugee Data Finder. unhcr.org/refugee-statistics

researchers. The compendium's collection of case studies and real-world examples applies to a range of audiences:

- Academics with scientific knowledge of the field who are interested in learning about gaps in our knowledge on the topic of CRVS in conflict, emergency, and fragile settings;
- The UN Statistical Commission and standard-setting bodies looking to understand how international standards can better meet needs in emergencies;
- Government agencies, national statistical offices, and civil registrars striving to improve their CRVS systems and learn from countries that have tackled similar issues;
- Refugee-relevant organizations such as UNHCR, UN Relief and Works Agency, International Rescue Committee, and Women's Refugee Commission, so they can better prioritize efforts and understand the barriers refugees face in accessing documentation; and
- Funding and philanthropic agencies, so they can recognize the lack of countries' capacity to deliver CRVS systems and financially support efforts to strengthen these systems.

The emergencies the papers focus on include:

- CRVS in the context of responding to natural disasters;
- CRVS serving as a safeguard for gender equality during conflict;
- Protecting the rights of refugees and migrants;
- Ensuring proper death registration for all; and
- Combatting COVID-19.

The compendium begins with four papers that provide an overview of the state of CRVS affairs in the context of these topics. The remaining seven papers feature country case studies on Brazil, Ecuador, New Zealand, South Korea, Syria and Iraq, and Vanuatu. Below is a complete list of the papers and their summaries.





Photo: Dominic Chavez / World Bank

BUILDING RESILIENT CRVS SYSTEMS: LESSONS FROM THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC AND OTHER EMERGENCIES

By Carmen Sant Fruchtmann, Anna Socha, Laura Monzón Llamas, Carla AbouZahr, Irina Dincu, and Daniel Cobos Muñoz

Available in English | French

As other emergencies before it, COVID-19 is highlighting the importance of reliable and timely CRVS systems for policymakers and individuals. This paper examines the role of CRVS systems before, during, and after an emergency. It uses examples from the current COVID-19 crisis and previous emergencies, such as natural disasters and the Ebola outbreak. Building on the literature for resilient health systems, combined with lessons learned and experiences from CRVS systems under stress, the paper proposes the Framework for Resilient CRVS Systems, which captures seven competencies for resilient CRVS systems: integrated, responsive, agile, efficient, essential, inclusive, and robust. This framework aims to provide common ground for CRVS practitioners and implementers to create the foundation of resilient CRVS systems.

CIVIL REGISTRATION: MAINTAINING INTERNATIONAL STANDARDS IN EMERGENCIES

By Srdjan Mrkić

Available in English | French

A civil registration system includes all institutional, legal, and technical settings needed to perform civil registration functions in a technical, sound, coordinated, and standardized manner throughout the country, taking into account the cultural and social circumstances particular to that country. The most crucial undertaking in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic has been facilitating universal registration of all vital events occurring in a country. This paper finds that for civil registration to function during the COVID-19 pandemic and to ensure adherence to international standards for civil registration, a priority must be to digitize and computerize the civil registration system and apparatus. This has proven to be the unique factor in mitigating the pandemic's impact and ensuring that civil registration is firmly embedded in the legal identity management model that the United Nations calls to be implemented in all Member States by 2030.

WHERE THERE IS NO CRVS: COUNTING AND REGISTERING DEATHS IN CONFLICT, EMERGENCIES, AND FRAGILE SETTINGS

By Carla AbouZahr, Laura Monzón Llamas, Carmen Sant Fruchtmán, and Daniel Cobos Muñoz

Available in English | French

Recent years have been characterized by significant movements of people fleeing war, civil conflict, disasters, and emergencies to find a better life elsewhere. We examine the role of CRVS systems during crises associated with conflict, migration, disasters, and health emergencies. We focus in particular on counting and registering deaths and determining causes of death in such circumstances. This is essential for public health and for planning and delivering healthcare interventions to affected people. It is also critically important for individuals and families, because civil registration provides legal documentation of the occurrence of vital events and of identity, civil status, and family relationships. Often neglected, but of particular importance to surviving family members, is the legal documentation of the death of a family member. This provides evidence of changed civil status and of a surviving spouse's eligibility to remarry, to claim nationality by descent, and to access possessions, benefits, entitlements, and inheritance. The paper identifies key gaps in the international response to the recording and registration of deaths; it also discusses how capturing information on deaths and providing surviving family members with information and death certificates can support institutional and societal resilience, contribute to post-crisis recovery, and pave the way for stability in the post-disaster and post-conflict future.

APPLYING A “SYSTEMS LENS”: CRVS AND FRAGILITY IN THE DIGITAL AGE

By Lauren Harrison and Liliana Suchodolska

Available in English | French

CRVS systems are critical to support institutional development, accountability, and effective policy design. For this reason, they represent a strategic investment in the long-term development of fragile and conflict-affected states. Emerging technologies, tools, and data sources in the digital age have created new opportunities to build and strengthen CRVS systems in these contexts while also amplifying challenges in data privacy and governance. This paper draws on PARIS21's 20-year history working in low- and middle-income countries to analyze barriers to CRVS development in fragile and conflict-affected states, and strategies to overcome them. Through an assessment of capacity and financing, the paper motivates a renewed emphasis on systems-based approaches to CRVS to advance inclusion and participation in situations of crisis and fragility.



Photo: Dominic Chavez / World Bank

ALTERNATIVE INFORMATION SOURCES ON DEATHS IN BRAZIL IN THE CONTEXT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

By Everton E. C. Lima, Marcos R. Gonzaga, Flávio H. M. de A. Freire, and Bernardo L. Queiroz

Available in English | French | Portuguese

Health and development challenges in the coming decades cannot be effectively addressed without reliable data on births, deaths, and causes of death. Only a comprehensive civil registration and vital statistics system can offer this. This paper finds that even with significant improvements in the collection and accuracy of death information in Brazil over the last 40 years, it is still necessary to develop research that presents evidence on which strategies work best for collecting civil records and statistics, and in which contexts. The authors highlight that a recurring problem that compromises the speed of epidemiological and demographic studies is related to the pace of disseminating mortality information system data. The research suggests that the Ministry of Health should create a dual flow of information delivery. Doing so would ensure that unverified and uncorrected death data is made available immediately to health managers and researchers and that verified death data is made available later, after the quality of the information has been analyzed.

THE BURIAL OF UNIDENTIFIED PEOPLE IN RIO DE JANEIRO: THE DISAPPEARANCE OF PEOPLE IN THE STATE BUREAUCRACY

By Alexandre Trece, Cláudio Machado, and Raquel Chrispino

Available in English | French | Portuguese

This article deals with the issue of deaths of unidentified people in Rio de Janeiro based on the observations of the authors as professionals and members of national and state committees, therefore, directly responsible for the implementation of actions aimed at combating the issue. The article is divided into four parts:

- The first part contextualizes the issue of deaths of unidentified people as a public policy problem and the main elements of civil registration and identity system organization are presented;
- Next, occurrences of unidentified deaths in the health system, social assistance, those resulting from crime, prison system inmates, and victims of urban militia groups are described;
- Thirdly, measures taken so far to correct this are presented, with emphasis on revising regulations and the identification process at the time of death; and
- The last part concludes with the presentation of recommendations that may contribute to mitigating the problem in Rio de Janeiro and nationally.

STRATEGIES FOR DEALING WITH THE CHALLENGES OF COVID-19 TO ECUADOR'S CIVIL REGISTRATION SYSTEM

By Vicente Andres Taiano Gonzalez, Gustavo Pedroso de Lima Brusse, and Vinicius Souza Maia

Available in English | French | Spanish

Early on, Ecuador was one of the countries most affected by COVID-19 in South America. It had a high concentration of cases in the city of Guayaquil, in the province of Guayas. The emergency situation caused by the pandemic directly affected the basic principles that underlie the country's CRVS system, such as its statistical role (ongoing registration of data) and its social role (ensuring access to basic human rights). Specifically, the need for social distancing challenges people's ability to register births, deaths, marriages, and divorces, which increases existing socioeconomic, cultural, and geographic barriers. This paper presents the emerging response of Ecuador's CRVS system to the pandemic since March 2020. It highlights the main strategies that were put in place to guarantee that operations would function so people could continue to register civil acts and events during the health emergency. Among the main actions were medium- and long-term processes: these included modernizing the civil registry system, creating a mobile teams strategy, and using the online vital statistics registry system. Short-term emergency measures were also taken, such as coordinating the integration of hospital units, using a colour-coded service provision strategy, adjusting work shift schedules, opening new offices, offering an online service desk through the virtual office, and giving data updates every day.



Photo: Josiah Farrow / Pexels

COVID-19 AND CRVS IN NEW ZEALAND: THE SHOW MUST GO ON

By Jeff Montgomery

Available in English | French

This paper outlines the Government of New Zealand's response to the COVID-19 crisis from a civil registration perspective. It examines the initiatives the government took to reduce the effects of the pandemic on health and civil registration services. It also highlights the long-term benefits of the emergency response efforts put in place at the onset of the crisis. The paper is based on a presentation at the Asia-Pacific Stats Café Series: Asia and the Pacific CRVS Systems' Responses to the COVID-19 Crisis.



Photo: Ketut Subiyanto / Pexels

THE ROLE OF CRVS IN ESTIMATING COVID-19-RELATED EXCESS DEATHS IN SOUTH KOREA

By Eunkoo Lee, Seokmin Lee, and Tanja Brøndsted Sejersen

Available in English | French

In situations like the current pandemic, deaths can be both directly and indirectly linked to COVID-19. Some people may succumb to the virus, but other deaths will result from a lack of medical resources while these are being intensely directed toward the pandemic response. To inform the response to the pandemic, the authors of this paper jointly analyze COVID-19 excess deaths by the Korea Disease Control and Prevention Agency, which leads the COVID-19 response, and Statistics Korea (KOSTAT), which manages CRVS in the Republic of Korea. This paper suggests that calculating excess deaths can be useful for estimating the mortality level by removing the uncertainties associated with COVID-19.

DOCUMENTING LIFE AND DEATH: WOMEN'S EXPERIENCES DURING CONFLICT IN SYRIA AND IRAQ

By Martin Clutterbuck

Available in English | French

This paper focuses on the experiences of women in two countries ravaged by protracted conflict in recent times: Iraq and Syria. Conflict in Syria, starting in 2011, and Iraq, as of 2014, has placed enormous pressure on the ability of families to register life events and have them certified. Women are especially impacted, because they have often lost spouses during the fighting, resulting in reduced family and income support. These women are required to prove the whereabouts or identity (or both) of missing husbands to obtain nationality and legal identity for the children from those relationships. The security situation limits the ability of women to travel to government offices to register family events and access services. At a time when they are required to shoulder additional responsibilities, the impact of paternalistic laws and cultural practices has reduced their ability to do so.



Photo: Silke von Brockhausen / UNDP

MITIGATING THE IMPACT OF NATURAL HAZARDS ON CIVIL REGISTRATION AND VITAL STATISTICS SYSTEMS: THE CASE OF VANUATU

By Gloria Mathenge, Benue Lenge, Joemela Simeon, Carah Figueroa, Christine Linhart, and Ana Janet Sunga

Available in English | French

Sitting at the centre of the Pacific cyclone belt in the South Pacific, Vanuatu, with a population of 272,459 is considered one of the world's most vulnerable countries to natural hazards. Vanuatu is recovering from the impact of the severe category 5 Tropical Cyclone Harold, which hit the country in April 2020 following Cyclone Tino in

January 2020, Cyclone Oma in 2019, and Cyclone Pam in 2015. Vanuatu is also prone to and has experienced volcanic eruptions, earthquakes, storm surges, coastal flooding, and landslides. In addition to causing a saddening loss of lives, these disasters have had an important and direct impact on people's livelihoods, including those of civil registration officials. They have also impacted the government's infrastructure, including civil registration offices, and its capacity to maintain important functions during and after – and in response to – the crisis. This paper draws on Vanuatu's experiences to discuss the importance of CRVS systems and the challenges faced when these systems are implemented during disasters and emergencies. Measures to mitigate the impact of disasters on CRVS systems are also discussed.

FORGING A WAY FORWARD FOR BETTER CRVS SYSTEMS

The benefits of civil registration and vital statistics (CRVS) range from governance and peace to human rights and social protection, to the economy. In this light, CRVS systems represent an essential tool for state-building and good governance – not only in fragile and conflict-affected states, but in all states. Registering vital events, including births, marriages, divorces, and deaths, is crucial to provide basic population statistics. This enables better monitoring of population movements, demographic changes, and potential health threats. CRVS systems offer immediate value during times of crisis and in their aftermath, signifying a strategic, cost-effective allocation of limited financial and human resources in fragile contexts. As the world looks to rebuild itself amid the reverberating consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic – and looks ahead to the shrinking timeline to reach the Sustainable Development Goals – improving and strengthening CRVS systems becomes increasingly important.



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