



## Noël Luenda

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# To increase birth registration rates

**Thanks to improvements to civil registration systems piloted by Noël Luenda, birth registration rates in Kinshasa have increased from 20 to 72%.**

Noël Luenda first learned about civil registration at his grandfather's knee. The elder was customary chief of Kuzi village in the province of Central Kongo, Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). "During holiday visits, I was interested in his responsibilities, including the census and the handling of administrative files," he says. And as the eldest — and only boy — of nine children in a polygamous family in Kinshasa, "I was already concerned about the civil status of my three mothers and we children."

He maintained that interest as a lawyer in private practice in Kinshasa/Gombe, where for five years he specialized in the field of civil status. In 2001 he joined the United Nations High Commission for Refugees, where he was responsible for the legal protection of Angolan refugees in the DRC. Now director of the Civil Registration and Population Office in the Urban Division of the Ministry of the Interior since 2009, he manages Kinshasa province's civil registration services with particular responsibility for legal, contentious, and administrative issues.

Given this experience and training in civil registration, Luenda was chosen by UNICEF and other organizations, such as the World Bank, to be the focal point in managing birth registration projects.

"Statistics have become my favourite subject," he says, "and are a main part of my work managing civil status and population services," he says.

### Putting the house in order

"When I took office, I inherited poorly performing systems," he says. Birth registrations in Kinshasa were under 20% and death registrations under 5%. Among the problems impeding registration were the distance between service points and the parents' homes, slow manual processes, underqualified staff, poor demand for services due to a lack of information and inadequate services, weak political will, and lack of interest on the part of key stakeholders.

After an in-depth analysis of issues and possible solutions, Luenda developed guides to improve both civil registration and population services, detailing processes to follow. He organized training sessions for staff at all levels, followed by annual refresher courses. To overcome distances, secondary offices were set up: from 24 in 2010, there are now 85 in Kinshasa. He also drafted pamphlets to educate the public about the importance of civil registration and partnered with other ministries and organizations



to organize awareness campaigns. "As a result," he says, "birth registrations increased to 72% in 2018-19, statistics are regularly collected, and we share them with partners and at the national level."

"At the end of each year," he says, "my division organizes evaluation workshops where we share data with stakeholders and community and city authorities. That's when I can grab authorities' attention to involve them and help them understand the importance of civil registration and vital statistics in order to facilitate planning and follow-up on government actions."

"What satisfies me most," he says, "is this improvement in the services we provide. "Today," he says, "the city of Kinshasa is held up as a model by other provinces for sharing its civil registration experiences and vital statistics."

### A drive to modernization

His next challenge is the computerization of the registration system. "Congolese laws appear to favour manual systems," he says, "making our work more difficult: documents are lost, statistics aren't reliable, the drafting and signing of documents is cumbersome." Sensitizing key stakeholders to the process is crucial, he says, but many are not interested.

Digitizing personal data is also crucial. "The law," he says, "shares responsibility between central and provincial powers to organize civil registration services and manage statistics. But we need a national law to determine how this is to be implemented."

Reforming civil registration also requires political, logistical and financial support, staff support, and means to protect personal data. Luenda is encouraged that "two laws are now before parliament," he says, one revising the Family Code to make registration easier and provide more complete

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data — for instance by adding cause-of-death information. The other law deals with digitization and the security of personal data.

### Working in partnership

Luenda credits his efforts to ensure that civil registration services don't work in isolation as key to success. "I innovated by working in synergy with other actors potentially tied to our efforts, like involving health services to sensitize mothers in maternity wards and registering births by proxy in maternity clinics, health centres and during vaccination campaigns." Using proxies who have parents' written authorization to register births in the city of Kinshasa was a first in the country and allowed a great number of children whose parents were far from services to be registered.

"This wasn't easy to do," says Luenda, "because it required great speed in the drafting of legal documents."

Among his most valued leadership qualities are honesty, integrity, tolerance, and a strong moral sense. "You also have to listen," he says. "As a leader I talk to my staff and others about the difficulties and failures of our services and what's been done to correct them. I avoid coming into conflict with others on methods used to nevertheless arrive at the same results."

To others working in civil registration, his advice is to first carry out in-depth analysis of systems and involve workers on the ground in finding solutions. And rather than look for new solutions, he says, "adapt and improve on what exists by introducing new technologies." ■

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