



Belly Lunanga

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To build political support

The Democratic Republic of the Congo's civil registration systems are improving, thanks to the assiduous work of leaders like Belly Lunanga who emphasise increasing awareness and political support.

The law is in Belly Lunanga's blood. He recalls being fascinated watching his father, an associate judge in a rural court, participate in trials. "Even when I was very young, I wanted to become a magistrate," he says. But although he studied law at the University of Kinshasa, he never worked in the judiciary.

Instead, he became a civil servant, joining the Democratic Republic of the Congo's Ministry of the Interior and Security in 2002. His interest in CRVS had first been piqued at university by a course on marriage registration. That interest grew during a 2006 training mission for people involved in the civil registration process officers from the ministries of the interior, justice, and health, as well as the National Institute of Statistics. As a lawyer, he was enlisted to conduct a session for officers and others responsible for civil status in the provinces. "I was a neophyte," he says, "but I developed a taste for it."

Then, in 2006, he participated in a meeting on registration systems in Southern African Development Community countries. "I realized how undeveloped the systems in my country were compared to others," he says. "That motivated me to work in this field."

Facing challenges

As an officer in the Department of Population in the Ministry of the Interior's general secretariat, Lunanga was appointed the focal point for civil registration and vital statistics in 2010. Today he is director of the Office of Population Identification, a position he attained, he modestly claims, "largely because of the shortage of people within our country's administration who have the required skills or postsecondary education in civil status management."

Problems with the Democratic Republic of the Congo's (DRC) civil registration systems that he had noted in 2006 persist today. "Our legal framework is obsolete given the new international norms and needs to be adapted," he says. "Our work tools are ancient and don't take innovative solutions, such as new information and communication technologies, into account." Civil registration activities are also poorly financed: "These isn't a single line in the national budget for this," he says.



Given these difficulties, "we do as best as we can," he says. And they have made progress. Reforms to the Family Code in 1987 to make registration easier and provide more complete data is now before parliament. Lunanga is optimistic the new law will pass. "We created a core group of members of parliament who will support the project in plenary," he says. They have the backing of technical and financial partners, such as UNICEF.

Also notable is the creation of secondary registration offices and the introduction of a proxy birth registrations that allow persons in health centres, authorized by parents, to register a baby's birth. This has enabled the DRC to increase the birth registration rate by 15%: in 2014, the rate was 25%, in 2018, it had reached 40%.

Building political support

Lunanga draws great satisfaction from sharing the CRVS message with others involved in civil registration. He is proud of the work of the National Coordinating Committee that has been operating at the technical level since 2009. This inter-institutional working group monitors national and provincial civil registration activities. "Although working informally," he says, "it brings the civil registration message up to decision-maker level. I take pride in the cohesion of all those structures involved in civil status management and the growing interest in our activities."

This, for him, is crucial. "If you don't have political support, you can't do anything," he says. Obtaining that support "is an ongoing process," he says.

"We've also had meetings with members of parliament and I'm happy to say that they support us. And the group of federal members grows larger at each meeting."

"When you don't have resources, you have to motivate others through personal example."

Setting an example

This work has required perseverance and integrity, he says. "I've been fighting for almost 10 years for us to change how we do things." To Lunanga, being a leader also means being able to communicate to advocate to authorities and with communities. A leader also needs to convene and mobilize people because civil registration requires intersectoriality and coordination. Above all, he says, a leader must be humble, honest, and keep an open mind.

"I motivate others by my behaviour," he says, "When you don't have resources, you have to motivate others through personal example. My know-how also makes others want to imitate what I do." Lunanga himself has been inspired by Benin's civil status evaluator, Hippolyte Togonou, who "always encouraged me and advised me to not give up when I felt misunderstood or exhausted." He also draws inspiration from two countries: Botswana for its integrated, interconnected civil registration services, and Côte d'Ivoire for its national identification office.

His vision for the DRC's civil status system? "Within 10 years, a modern, well functioning registration system, at the centre of administrative and economic governance, that is adapted to generally accepted standards and uses innovative solutions to produce reliable statistics." ■

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