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To build integrated statistical systems

Under Oliver Chinganya's leadership, the African Centre for Statistics is spearheading improvements in systems and training. The goal: integrated statistical and civil registration systems.

Oliver Chinganya, Director of the Africa Centre for Statistics (ACS) at the UN Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA), attributes his illustrious career to taking advantage of opportunities when they presented themselves, of fully engaging without being shy about it.

Those opportunities started early. Born the eldest of 11 children in Livingstone, close to Victoria Falls — known locally as Mosi-o-Tunya or “the smoke that thunders” — he was able to start school at a younger age than was the norm in Zambia at the time. “Going to school those days was not easy,” he says. “There were not many educated people in my family whom I could emulate, other than my parents.”

While in secondary school, he was head of the school “military-style” cadet and House Captain. “That was very helpful in the sense that some of my leadership skills started at school,” says Chinganya. After a compulsory term in the national military service, “I was fortunate that the Zambia Statistics Agency was then recruiting young graduates.” So, although he had intended to study accounting in India, at age 19, he chose employment to help his parents. Once at the statistical office, “my mind changed, and I decided to become a statistician.”

A varied career

In 1984, still at the [Zambia Statistics Agency](#), he was admitted to an in-service statistical training program supported by the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), earning an intermediate certificate in statistics. He then enrolled at the Eastern Africa Statistical Training Centre at the University of Dar es Salaam, earning the equivalent of a bachelor's degree. There followed a postgraduate certificate (1988) and MSc in statistics (1991) at Southampton University (UK) and a MBA in 2008 at Jomo Kenyatta Agriculture and Technology University, Kenya, as well as other certifications. Chinganya has been a Chartered Statistician of the Royal Statistical Society (UK) since 1999 and is vice-president of the International Statistical Institute.

By 2001, Chinganya was an acting director at the Zambia Statistics Agency. Having climbed the ranks so quickly, he faced some skepticism. “Because I was a young person, other directors in meetings would say ‘who is this young boy?’ Eventually they respected me because they saw the value I brought to the committee of directors.”

During the following 18 years, Chinganya's career took him to Nairobi as Resident Regional Advisor for the International Monetary Fund, to Washington as a



Consultant to the World Bank Group, to Côte d'Ivoire as manager of the Statistical Capacity Building Division for the African Development Bank Group, then to UNECA in Ethiopia.

Of his varied career and rapid rise, Chinganya says that "I took advantage, seized opportunities when they came my way. I made sure that whatever I did, I did it well and put my best into it. Some motivational speakers say that you have to set a plan and goals to be a certain place in your life. But things in real life don't work like that. It's only in hindsight that you realize the wise decisions and choices you made to attain certain accomplishments. To me, authenticity and focus are key. You have to use opportunities when they're given to you. Do your best. And when you do, what you do well will speak for you."

The value of teamwork

Of the many initiatives he's been involved in recently, a few stand out. The annual Africa Regional Forum on Sustainable Development is one. Under his leadership, attendance at this forum, which is held in different countries each year, grew from 150 in 2015 to 1,000 in 2019, then to over 3,000 representing all African countries in 2020.

More important to Chinganya is "that I've been able to develop a team that is cohesive, that understands the need for a common vision and purpose. We've been able to deliver major activities, we contribute to the global body of knowledge in statistics." For example, he and his team developed the Statistical Development Indicators, a tool for countries to assess the development of their national statistical systems.

"I give credit to the team I work with," he says. "It's the way we manage and work together that has allowed us to achieve so many tasks."

To lead that team, Chinganya sets clear objectives, timelines, and roles. He believes in delegating effectively and providing honest feedback. "I also recognize my staff," he says. To empower staff particularly younger members he gives them space to think about initiatives to undertake, challenging them to provide ideas. As a result, ACS staff are ranked among UNECA's highest achievers.

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Reforming civil registration

Civil registration systems in Africa face many challenges, which COVID-19 has aggravated. "Reforming the systems requires modernization to move away from paper-based to digital processes," he says. And it requires enhancing statistical literacy among citizens: "We can talk about modernization, but do people have the capacity to use digital systems?" he asks. Reform will also need stronger integration and collaboration between civil registration system and the national statistical office.

One of the ways ACS is helping modernize systems is through a new Young Professional Programme that seeks to build statistical research capacity, particularly among young women; hone young statisticians' skills in statistical development leadership; and prepare them for future data demands for sustainable development outcomes.

Chinganya is a strong believer in effective partnerships and in taking a holistic approach to civil registration. And that is the advice he would give to countries: "Countries must work with agencies and development partners that believe in a holistic approach to ensure a well-functioning CRVS system." To help countries build their CRVS systems, ECA and its partners launched the Civil Registration and Vital Statistics Systems Improvement Framework this past April.

Chinganya's vision for the future is an integrated, modernized civil registration system that ensures everyone is counted, everyone has an identity card ID and can be identified. This will help in attaining the goal of "Leaving No One Behind." "A couple of years ago, 500 million Africans were said to have no identification. If we can reduce that to zero, that would be achieving my vision. To do that you need integrated systems." ■

Learn more about CRVS in Africa: Read [country profiles](#), technical briefs on [CRVS in Africa during the COVID-19 pandemic](#) or visit the [APAI-CRVS website](#).