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To be a servant leader

A strong strategic plan, embraced by all staff and government, is leading to tangible improvements in Kenya's Civil Registration services.

Janet Mucheru learned to advocate for herself at an early age. One of 12 children – of whom nine were girls – she needed to stand up to her brothers. Her solution was to study very hard, walking eight kilometers to school every day. She actively sought sponsorship to help her parents pay her school fees, she explains "I liked school very much. I never gave up."

That love of learning led Mucheru to pursue a degree in public administration and economics at the University of Nairobi, followed by a master's in strategic management. She entered the civil service in 1989 as an administrator, climbing the ladder to the critical position of director of civil registration services in 2017.

Mucheru brought her determination to achieve what she set out to do. Since taking office she has reduced corruption by preventing brokers from charging parents a fee to apply for registration and certification of vital events on their behalf. As she explains, registration in Kenya is manual, so there's no consistency across the country. "Sometimes what is done in Nairobi may not be what is done in another county," she says, "and some people get registered twice." To overcome this problem, registration rules

were changed so that only parents can apply for a child's birth certificate. Anyone over 18 must apply for the document in person.

One of the achievements Mucheru is most proud of is the automation of two million records within one month in 2019, "so when we develop a digitised platform, all those records will be in the server and we will be able to retrieve them when we require them."

A unified vision

The rates of birth and death registration have been improving in Kenya but at 76% for births and about 40% for deaths, are still far from Mucheru's vision of 100% completion rates. One factor is the registration process itself. Because deaths and births often occur at home, chiefs and assistant chiefs are responsible for capturing the data in their community and sending the information to the Civil Registration Services. Meanwhile, health facilities are capturing data for events that occur in clinics and hospitals. The COVID-19 pandemic hindered this process as chiefs and assistant chiefs could not register events in a timely way and civil registration officers were not in their offices to receive the forms.



Mucheru is confident they will achieve their goal of universal registration. "When I joined the Department," she says, "the first thing we did was develop a strategic plan for 2018-2023. We've been able to follow that. She spearheaded training for staff — 2,000 in head office and in 125 offices across the country — about the expectations "so they understand where we want to go and what we want to achieve. Everybody understands our vision as a department, so we are working very closely to achieve it."

"You need to train people, empower them, so that when you're not there, things are not at a standstill. Most of my officers, even at the lower levels, are empowered and know what we are doing. You cannot delegate to people when they don't understand," she says. "I make sure that I have officers I can delegate to and that has really helped me. I don't believe that there's anything a human being can't do as long as they work with other people," she says.

Muturu has particularly focused on empowering female staff. "Women normally shy away from leadership positions," she says. "I try to empower women in my office because I see some of them are qualified but don't want to take positions. I talk to them, tell them they can do it. Women have a lot to offer so I encourage my fellow women to take up challenges."

She also motivates staff by making sure even small needs are met, such as offering morning tea to all workers and ensuring their offices are very habitable. "Everybody has a computer and proper desk, cleaned properly," she says.

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Leading by example

What makes a great leader? "You have to go out and make it happen," she says. "You have to sacrifice to make sure what needs to be done is done. You have to be ready to be a servant leader. This department is funded by taxpayers," she says, "so you have to focus on them and make them happy. Find out what difficulties they are facing and make sure you provide the services you are paid to do."

And you also have to be creative and do what you can without funding. "Most of my officers don't have funds for activities. I tell them to do what they can do without funds. You realize it's still a lot."

That is also the piece of advice she would give to other CRVS leaders in Africa to do what they can do without funds because there's still a lot they can do. And because many governments don't understand the importance of civil registration, it's very important to sensitize them and create awareness so that civil registration can be properly funded. They should even make it a priority because it's the foundation for other registration systems. And, she says, "I would tell them not to give up and be prepared to be a servant leader in civil registration if you are to achieve your goals." ■

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