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To build robust, interoperable systems

Tulimeke Munyika has successfully led the review and drafting of new laws to support the modernization of Namibia's civil registration and identity systems.

Reforming civil registration and vital statistics systems requires changes at many levels—political, legal, technological, and cultural, among others. Perhaps most fundamental are the legal and governance structures that underpin systems. As the Director of the National Population Register, Identification and Production, Tulimeke Munyika has focused on reforming and harmonizing civil registration laws to underpin the modernization of Namibian society, including the e-governance policy that requires trusted and interoperable identity systems.

In Namibia, civil registration is embedded in no fewer than four laws that Namibia inherited from South Africa at the time of independence in 1990.

The laws in question — the *Aliens Act* (relating to change of surname), *Marriage Act*, *Births, Marriages and Deaths Registration Act* and the *Identification Act* — were passed in 1937, 1961, 1963, and 1996 respectively. Among these, only the *Identification Act* was passed after independence. The forthcoming *Marriage Act* is expected to revise the requirements for designating marriage officers, introduce pre-solemnization procedures for marriages, and provide tools for addressing marriages not entered into in good faith. The *Uniform Matrimonial Property Act* is a new law that will set a uniform matrimonial

property regime throughout the country, set up clear property regimes, and repeal an apartheid-era law of 1928. Another new bill, named *Civil Registration and Identification Act*, is in the pipeline, thanks to Munyika's leadership. She hopes that it will soon be tabled in parliament.

A focus on law reform

Born in a village on the bank of the Kavango River in Northern Namibia, Munyika was raised by her maternal grandparents after the death of her mother when she was just a year old. "I think this catapulted me into maturing quicker and being more responsible. But if you asked my grandparents back then, I'm sure they would not have agreed," she says as she laughs it off.

Munyika studied law at the University of Namibia, earning a *B. Juris* in 2005 and an LLB in 2007, at the ages of 21 and 23, respectively. After working as a legal practitioner in the Directorate of Civil Litigation under the Ministry of Justice, she joined the Ministry of Home Affairs and Immigration as Head of Legal Support Services in 2013, a decision based on having lost court cases where she represented the Ministry. "The legal problems the Ministry was faced with at the time could only be addressed from the inside, during decision-making, not afterwards in front of a judge," she says



Then, in 2019, “an opportunity opened up and I was appointed Director for the National Population Register, Identification and Production under the Department of Civil Registration. For some years the Department had been reviewing and drafting a new civil registration and identification law to repeal existing legislation, and harmonizing several laws governing civil registration and identity management. I believe that my legal background ushered me into an open door of opportunity. So, preparation met opportunity.”

The importance of e-registration

The legal changes are only part of the civil registration system reforms being implemented in Namibia. The 2015/16–2020/20 *Strategic Plan for the Civil Registration and Vital Statistic System* calls for the establishment of a “reliable, integrated and dynamic civil registration and vital statistics system with complete, timely and quality data meeting stakeholders’ expectations.”

To realize this vision, Namibia introduced electronic notification systems for both births and deaths between 2016–2018, linking them to the National Population Register, which hosts both the civil registers and identity management system under one profile. “This,” she says, “highlighted the need to strengthen stakeholder collaboration.” Key stakeholders included the Ministry of Home and Immigration, Ministry of Safety and Security, Ministry of Health and Social Services, and the Namibia Statistics Agency, among others. The new e-death notification system, launched in November 2018, is reported to be the first of its kind in Africa.

Recognition of the importance of birth registration and identify documents was heightened by the COVID-19 pandemic. “As COVID took centre stage,” she says, “the government sought to roll out a social grants program to assist the nation.” The digitalized National Population Register enabled citizens to apply for a grant using mobile phones. The data in the application was automatically validated against the data in national population register and other databases, allowing for a quick and effective turnaround of 72 hours.

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Munyika's initial vision was to ensure comprehensive birth registration coverage from birth but, “I now also wish to see civil registration and identity data serving other sectors to strengthen social protection, improve governance, and promote identity verification and authentication.” In Namibia, this should be achievable because of a linked, interoperable civil registration and identity management system.

Empathy and a kind word

As a leader, Munyika most values professional excellence, integrity—doing the right thing, even when no one is watching—and being a team player. “Civil registration is never a one woman’s show,” she notes. Kindness and empathy are also crucial. “I’m in an environment where I deal with people’s problems daily, many people are going through a lot of difficulties. A kind word and an ear to listen go a long way.”

Perhaps not surprisingly, she most enjoys “helping people. Hearing someone say ‘thank you’ because their problem has been resolved—well, even if its not solved, they have received a plausible explanation for their situation.”

To other countries envisioning civil registration and vital statistics systems reform, she advises merging civil registry and identity management systems. “This makes a more robust and reliable source.” And, she says: “Rome wasn’t built in one day, and the same is true for Namibia’s comprehensive National Population Registration system. It takes years of meticulous planning and resource mobilization.” ■

Learn more about CRVS in Namibia: Read the [country profile](#), a [case study about the links between civil registration and social protection](#), a technical brief on [Namibia’s use of civil registration systems in their COVID-19 emergency response](#), or another technical brief on the [role of notification systems during COVID-19](#).