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SOCIAL AND DEMOGRAPHIC STATISTICS:  
CIVIL REGISTRATION AND VITAL  
STATISTICS

Statement submitted by the International Institute for Vital  
Registration and Statistics, a non-governmental organization  
in category II consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is circulated in accordance with paragraphs 29 and 30 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1296 (XLIV) of 23 May 1968.

1. On behalf of its 208 national ex officio associates in 110 countries and its 33 associates in international agencies, all of whom are officials responsible for some aspect of civil registration and/or vital statistics, the International Institute for Vital Registration and Statistics welcomes the action of the Statistical Commission in placing civil registration and vital statistics on the agenda of the twenty-first session and is grateful for the opportunity of addressing members on the subject, especially on civil registration, for which, as you know, the Commission is solely responsible within the United Nations system. It also appreciates the opportunity of underlining the importance it attaches to the future plans and objectives of the Secretariat in promoting the improvement of civil registration and vital statistics systems throughout the world, as set forth in the "progress report on civil registration and vital statistics" (E/CN.3/547).

2. The progress report makes brief reference, in paragraph 35, to the origins of the Institute and its interest in agenda item 7 (b), but additional details seem called for in order to inform the Commission more fully of our goals and programmes. The Institute was founded to provide an international professional forum for the exchange of administrative and technical information relating to civil registration and vital statistics, with the ultimate aim of improving vital records and statistics. Such professional forums existed for vital statisticians, in the International Statistical Institute, and for demographers, in the International Union for the Scientific Study of Population. But, up to 1974, the national officials responsible

for civil registration had been relatively outside the mainstream of international activity. To give them a voice in civil registration matters at the United Nations level and to bring to bear their expertise in assisting the United Nations in its work in this area, the Institute was incorporated in 1974; in 1977, it was granted consultative status, category II, with the Economic and Social Council.

3. In pursuit of its goals of promoting the world-wide production of more accurate vital statistics from complete registration records, the Institute, in consultation with the United Nations Statistical Office, has undertaken an investigation of the major obstacles that its national associates in developing countries face in achieving satisfactory civil registration of vital events and the compilation of reliable vital statistics from those records. It is hoped that the identification and appraisal of the actual problems as they are perceived by the responsible national officials in 1980, as well as indications of the success achieved in overcoming such obstacles in the past, will provide valuable guidance for the design of an action programme required to promote the improvement of vital statistics worldwide. The results of the inquiry will be made available to members of the Commission during the session.

4. An analysis of the responses indicates, as would be expected, that a wide range of obstacles or barriers to achieving complete registration and reliable vital statistics still exists and that most, if not all of them, are endemic to developing countries in all parts of the world. Moreover, one of the most important obstacles appears to be the lack of recognition on the part of national policy-makers, as well as the population at large, of the value of vital records and statistics.

5. In an attempt to clarify and emphasize the legal value of vital records, that is, birth, death, marriage and divorce records, the Institute has published a catalogue of those human rights whose implementation depends on having such records available. The report points out that registration of birth has itself been proclaimed a human right in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, while the right to registration of marriage became legally binding on States by the coming into force of the Convention on Consent to Marriage, Minimum Age for Marriage and Registration of Marriages. The right to death and divorce registration is not proclaimed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, but it is implicitly recognized in connexion with a number of rights. Copies of the report (Technical Paper, No. 7) will be available to members of the Commission during the session.

6. To underline the value of vital statistics as part of the battery of social indicators for appraising economic and social development, the Institute has traced the development of social indicators from their beginning in 1954 to the Commission's approval of Social Indicators: Preliminary Guidelines and Illustrative Series 1/ at its nineteenth session. It is noteworthy that some 36 of the indicators included in the Guidelines are derived from vital statistics. Their importance in appraising progress is proved by their selection as implementation indicators in such action programmes as the International Development Strategy for the Second United Nations

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1/ United Nations publication, Sales No. E.78.XVII.8.

Development Decade, the World Population Plan of Action and the World Plan of Action for the Implementation of the Objectives of the International Women's Year. The infant-mortality rate, a priority social indicator, has even been suggested by members of the Human Rights Committee as a possible indicator of the effective implementation of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. These important uses clearly demonstrate the need for every country to give priority to the improvement of its traditional vital statistics system. A report on the study is in preparation.

7. In its future plans and objectives in the field of civil registration and vital statistics, the United Nations Statistical Office recognizes the fact that, with the winding down of the activities relating to the 1980 World Population and Housing Census Programme, the improvement of vital statistics may now be given even more attention in international programmes in demographic statistics. The Institute welcomes this indication of renewed vigour in implementing the World Programme for the Improvement of Vital Statistics, undertaken in response to Economic and Social Council resolution 1307 (XLIV) of 31 May 1968. It hopes that the Commission will authorize an innovative and strong programme that will help countries to improve their civil registration system - and thereby, their vital statistics - to the level where they can meet the challenging needs of the 1980s.