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**Items for discussion and decision: civil registration,
vital statistics and statelessness statistics**

Implementation of the United Nations Legal Identity Agenda: civil registration and vital statistics

Report of the Secretary-General

Summary

The present report was prepared in accordance with Economic and Social Council decision 2021/224 and past practices as a follow-up to the report submitted to the Statistical Commission at its fifty-first session ([E/CN.3/2020/15](#)). The report summarizes the progress made in implementing the United Nations Legal Identity Agenda in the midst of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic and the impact of the pandemic on the reporting and registering of births and deaths and the production of accurate and reliable vital statistics. It also provides information on the activities of the United Nations Legal Identity Agenda task force. The Statistical Commission is invited to reiterate its call for Member States to implement the United Nations Legal Identity Agenda as a matter of high priority. In addition, the report provides an overview of initiatives by the Department of Economic and Social Affairs and the World Health Organization related to the excess deaths assessment and the work of the Technical Advisory Group on COVID-19 Mortality Assessment.

Action to be taken by the Commission is set out in paragraph 15 of the report.

* [E/CN.3/2022/1](#).



I. Introduction

1. Recognizing the critical importance of well-functioning and universal civil registration systems for the production of reliable, comprehensive, regular and accurate vital statistics, including for small geographical areas, the Statistical Commission adopted the International Programme for Accelerating the Improvement of Vital Statistics and Civil Registration Systems at its twenty-sixth session (see [E/1991/25-E/CN.3/1991/32](#), para. 121 (a)).

2. At its fifty-first session, the Statistical Commission supported the introduction of the Legal Identity Agenda as an expansion of the existing methodological framework for civil registration and vital statistics (see [E/2020/24-E/CN.3/2020/37](#), chap. I.C, decision 51/113, para. (a)). The Legal Identity Agenda consists of a holistic approach to civil registration, vital statistics production and identity management to ensure complete civil registration through universal registration of all vital events, the production of regular, comprehensive and accurate vital statistics, and the establishment and maintenance of population registers and identity management apparatus ensuring legal identity for all from birth to death. There should be full interoperability between these functions in a simultaneous manner, in accordance with international standards and recommendations.

II. Implementation of the United Nations Legal Identity Agenda

3. As reported to the Statistical Commission at its fifty-second session (see [E/CN.3/2021/18](#), sect. III), the United Nations Legal Identity Agenda task force, which is co-chaired by the Statistics Division of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the Secretariat, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and whose membership consists of those entities and 12 other United Nations agencies and programmes, undertook a series of activities to assist Member States in implementing civil registration systems, including documenting the adverse impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the functioning of civil registration and, consequently, on the compilation and production of reliable, comprehensive and accurate vital statistics.¹ Findings indicate that the lockdowns and other measures instituted by Governments to mitigate the spread of the COVID-19 virus in several developing countries resulted in a decrease in the registration of vital events, primarily births and deaths. This also affected the compilation of vital statistics, as the linkages between health systems, civil registration systems and national statistics malfunctioned, underscoring the need to fully deploy the United Nations Legal Identity Agenda model to ensure full interoperability and effective performance of civil registration and vital statistics components.

4. The task force continued with the development of country assessment reports in 13 countries in Africa, in cooperation with the Economic Commission for Africa, to identify opportunities to accelerate work to leave no one behind by strengthening civil registration and vital statistics systems and their integration into national identity systems in line with the United Nations Legal Identity Agenda and provide seed funding to initiate the process in pilot countries. At the time of drafting of the present report, a synthesis report based on 10 country assessment reports was at an advanced stage of finalization. The report will align recommendations on the way forward with

¹ See United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Statistics Division, United Nations Legal Identity Agenda task force, "Civil registration: maintaining international standards in emergencies", 5 October 2020. Available at: <https://unstats.un.org/legal-identity-agenda/documents/CR-ER.pdf>.

existing international standards and propose specific areas of investment where the technical and financial support of the task force could facilitate a significant acceleration of the execution of the Agenda. The report will also provide recommendations on areas of concern/risk that would require attention during the implementation of the Agenda at the country level and will be presented as a background document to the Statistical Commission at its fifty-third session.

5. During the reporting period, the task force continued to execute its annual workplan, with different members of the task force focusing on specific themes, such as assessment of the unregistered population without legal identity, the use of biometrics, the costs of inaction in terms of implementing the Agenda and coordination with the activities of the World Bank in countries. The task force as a whole focused on supporting the country teams in implementing components of the Agenda by providing direct advice and guidance as necessary and developing the United Nations country team operational guidelines for the implementation of the United Nations Legal Identity Agenda, in which the overall model and components of the Agenda are elaborated, in English² and French.³ The task force intends to initiate, starting in January 2022, a set of webinars to introduce and elaborate on these operational guidelines for country teams in Africa and Asia and the Pacific.

6. The task force continues to contribute to and support global and regional events related to the implementation of the Agenda, such as the Second Ministerial Conference on Civil Registration and Vital Statistics in Asia and the Pacific.

III. Department of Economic and Social Affairs/World Health Organization Technical Advisory Group on COVID-19 Mortality Assessment

7. As reported to the Statistical Commission at its fifty-second session, the Department of Economic and Social Affairs and the World Health Organization (WHO) established the Technical Advisory Group on COVID-19 Mortality Assessment, with the primary goal of advising and supporting WHO and the Department in assisting Member States to obtain accurate estimates of the numbers of deaths attributable to the direct and indirect impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. The Statistics Division and the Population Division, together with WHO, serve as the secretariat of the Technical Advisory Group (see [E/CN.3/2021/18](#), para. 18).

8. The Technical Advisory Group established five working groups to ensure that it took a comprehensive and multidimensional approach to delivering on its responsibilities.⁴

9. Working group 1, on global mortality estimates, including COVID-19, follows a two-track approach, focusing from the beginning on both tracks: (a) short-term guidance and assistance in the production of mortality estimates by age and sex for all countries and areas for the year 2020, using all information available by June 2021 to identify the excess mortality attributable to COVID-19; and (b) a strategy for generating authoritative, transparent and well-documented estimates of global mortality for each year beginning in 2019, using all information available on deaths

² Available at <https://unstats.un.org/legal-identity-agenda/documents/UNCT-Guidelines.pdf>.

³ Available at <https://unstats.un.org/legal-identity-agenda/documents/UNCT-Guidelines-f.pdf>.

⁴ The complete terms of reference for the Technical Advisory Group and its working groups are available at <https://www.un.org/development/desa/pd/events/TAG>.

from COVID-19 and other causes to quantify the excess mortality directly or indirectly attributable to the pandemic.⁵

10. Working group 2, on the use of household surveys and population censuses to fill data gaps, was established to provide advice and recommendations to WHO, the Department of Economic and Social Affairs and national statistical offices on using censuses and surveys for time-sensitive and reliable information on COVID-19 mortality at the country level.⁶ The Intersecretariat Working Group on Household Surveys, established by the Statistical Commission at its forty-sixth session, in 2015, contributed, in collaboration with the Statistics Division and the Population Division, to a stocktaking exercise on countries' use of censuses and surveys for adult mortality data. The report is available as a background document. A set of recommendations on how to better collect adult mortality data through censuses and surveys in the context of COVID-19 will be prepared for submission to the Commission at its fifty-fourth session.

11. Working group 3, on death registration and reporting systems: lessons learned from the pandemic, focuses on the registration of deaths during the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, in a number of countries and areas, the pandemic has had an adverse impact on the functioning of the civil registration system, in particular with respect to the registration of deaths and issuance of death certificates, owing possibly to pre-existing deficiencies in registration systems or to the breakdown of such systems during the pandemic. Those deficiencies have resulted in data gaps that constrain the timely and reliable assessment of the number of deaths and the level and patterns of mortality. Simultaneously, national health systems, facing a once-in-a-century pandemic and stretched to their limits, have had difficulties in maintaining regular functions, such as the reporting of deaths and causes of death to the civil registration system, which ultimately resulted in discrepancies among sources concerning the number of deaths caused by COVID-19. In discussing the relevant national experiences, the working group highlighted several points that should be taken into consideration by national authorities:

(a) Maintain timeliness. The more time that elapses between the occurrence of vital events, especially unregistered deaths, the more difficult it becomes to fill the gaps and rectify the non-registration;

(b) Introduce interim solutions. Several experiences involving the collection and compilation of data directly from cemeteries and funeral homes during the pandemic yielded valuable information;

(c) Reiterate the need to fully implement the United Nations Legal Identity Agenda as the fully developed model of interoperability of various components;

(d) Define a minimum standard in times of pandemic and simplify the registration procedures;

(e) Learn from national experiences. Countries adapted to the circumstances, and the practices used provided valuable documentation that should be followed up and synthesized;

⁵ A more complete elaboration of the results of working group 1 is presented to the Statistical Commission at its fifty-third session in the report entitled "Report of the World Health Organization on health statistics: strengthening statistical systems to track the health-related Sustainable Development Goals" (E/CN.3/2022/13).

⁶ A concept note for the working group is available at https://www.un.org/development/desa/pd/sites/www.un.org.development.desa.pd/files/undesa_pd_2021_tag_wg_2_concept_note.pdf.

(f) Digitize the civil registration system. Enabling online registration of vital events proved to be effective in a time of pandemic.

12. Working group 4, on summary metrics of the toll in lives lost, aims to summarize the impact of COVID-19 on mortality through metrics such as death counts, years of life lost or the decrease in life expectancy at birth. The working group will provide advice and recommendations on appropriate interpretations and possible applications of different summary metrics to assess the death toll from COVID-19. The metrics will be illustrated and compared using real-world data from the current and historical pandemics, such as the pandemic of 1918–1919.

13. Working group 5, on inequality in COVID-19 mortality between and within countries, will lay the groundwork for a comprehensive global study to document and analyse the differences in levels of mortality attributable to COVID-19 between and within countries. To that end, the working group will undertake an assessment, with illustrative examples, of the potential for the use of existing operational frameworks, in particular the WHO approach based on the social determinants of health, to assess inequalities at the local, national and global levels. The working group will consider the utility of assessing inequality by focusing on (conditional) risks of progression through various stages of the disease, from the risk of becoming infected to the risks of developing mild or severe disease or disability and the risk of succumbing to the disease. Priority will be given to analytical approaches or frameworks that can be used to identify possible windows for intervention, so that policymakers, civil society, programme administrators and others can use the recommended framework(s) to drive policy formulation and programme implementation.

IV. Other activities

14. The Statistics Division continues to serve as the secretariat for the Global Civil Registration and Vital Statistics Group and maintains its website, which provides information on the activities of all of the members of the Group relating to improving civil registration and vital statistics. The Group discussed various projects and programmes of members, ensuring a coordinated approach and the use of international standards and recommendations.

V. Action to be taken by the Statistical Commission

15. **The Commission is invited:**

(a) **To reiterate its call from its fifty-first session for Member States to implement the United Nations Legal Identity Agenda, namely, universal registration of all vital events, the production of regular, accurate and comprehensive vital statistics and ensuring legal identity for all from birth to death, as a matter of high priority, especially in the light of the adverse impact of the COVID-19 pandemic;**

(b) **To express concern regarding the negative impact of the pandemic on the availability and quality of vital statistics owing to interruptions in the functioning of national civil registration systems, and urge Member States to designate civil registration as an essential service and conform to international standards;**

(c) **To express its support for the work and activities of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs/WHO Technical Advisory Group on COVID-19 Mortality Assessment, welcome its findings and outputs and encourage the Group to continue its work and continue to report to the Commission;**

(d) To request the Statistics Division, in collaboration with UNICEF and UNDP as Co-Chairs, under the auspices of the United Nations Legal Identity Agenda task force, to continue to monitor the impact of the pandemic, to document the availability of reliable vital statistics, to monitor and report on the overall implementation of the Agenda and to continue to develop the methodological framework in that respect.
