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## Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific Committee on Statistics

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Item 3 (c) of the provisional agenda\*

### Regional initiatives: Civil registration and vital statistics

## Civil registration and vital statistics: Make every life count\*\*

### Note by the secretariat

#### *Summary*

Recognizing the importance of reliable vital statistics for producing timely and accurate population estimates and other demographic and health statistics, the Committee at its second session in December 2010 in decision 2/4 supported the development of a regional programme for improving vital statistics in Asia and the Pacific.

Subsequently, the Commission, in its resolution 67/12 of 25 May 2011 on the improvement of civil registration and vital statistics in Asia and the Pacific, while recalling the United Nations Millennium Declaration and the Declaration on the Right to Development, encouraged all member and associate members to review and assess the current functioning of the civil registration systems and the quality of vital statistics produced internally within each country. In the resolution, it also called upon members and associate members to strengthen the capacities of relevant institutions to improve civil registration and vital statistics in their countries and requested the Executive Secretary to take a lead role in the region, in partnership with regional knowledge hubs and technical agencies, in developing and disseminating standards, evidence, tools and guidelines for civil registration and vital statistics and to convene a high-level regional meeting of decision makers from national statistical organizations, civil registration offices, ministries of health and other relevant stakeholders to raise awareness and foster increased commitment to improving civil registration and vital statistics.

The present document informs the Committee of the actions taken by the secretariat to implement the decisions of the Committee and the Commission, including developing the regional strategic plan for the improvement of civil registration and vital statistics (CRVS), as contained in document E/ESCAP/CST(3)/6/Add.1.

The Committee may wish to endorse the regional strategic plan. The Committee may further wish to provide guidance on approaches to ensure the successful implementation of the regional strategic plan, including recommending pathways for securing a broad, ministerial-level commitment for improving CRVS in the Asia-Pacific region.

\* E/ESCAP/CST(3)/L.1/Rev.1.

\*\* Late submission due to the timing of expert consultations.

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### **I. Introduction**

1. The present document provides an overview of progress achieved towards creating regional resolve and momentum to improve civil registration and vital statistics (CRVS) in Asia and the Pacific. The strong and broad partnership that has been built around these efforts is presented along with the endeavours to establish high-level consensus on a regional strategic plan to further the issue.

2. The present document describes the process that led to the development of the regional strategic plan for the improvement of CRVS in Asia and the Pacific. The regional strategic plan, as contained in document E/ESCAP/CST(3)/6/Add.1, is brought forward for consideration and endorsement by the Committee. The present document also describes the approach taken for organizing the High-level Meeting on the Improvement of Civil Registration and Vital Statistics in Asia and the Pacific, which will be held on 10 and 11 December 2012, and will review of the regional strategic plan prior to consideration thereof by the Committee.

3. The present document outlines the proposed next steps towards further strengthening support among main stakeholders for the regional strategic plan and galvanizing commitment at the highest and broadest level of government for its successful implementation.

### **II. Background**

4. The civil registration system is an essential national resource as it meets the needs of individuals for legal documentation on identity, family relationships and life events. It is also the most efficient data source for the generation, on a permanent basis, of continuous and complete vital statistics, namely births, deaths, marriages, divorces and adoptions.

5. Well-functioning civil registration and vital statistics systems enhance the credibility of national and local administrators and their capacity to deliver services by helping them to identify what services are needed and by whom.

6. High-quality vital statistics enable governments and donors to consider the direction of resources to the areas of most need within a country, and allow citizens, governments and donors to evaluate the use of scarce resources.

#### **A. The need to improve civil registration and vital statistics systems**

7. CRVS systems in many countries of the Asia-Pacific region suffer from multiple deficiencies. Registration coverage is often incomplete, vital events are not recorded properly and registration records do not reach the vital statistics system in a timely manner.

8. Even when vital statistics are available, they are often not adequately used to guide decision-making. Many countries have therefore utilized alternative sources of data on vital events, such as population censuses, household sample surveys and surveillance on sentinel sites or sample registration systems, to generate vital statistics. Although these sources do provide important information on vital events, they cannot replace civil registration records as a source of data that is available on a continuous and universal basis, and that is disaggregated to a level that enables decision makers to identify marginalized groups and vulnerable areas. Moreover, these sources do not bring the legal and human rights benefits of civil registration.<sup>1</sup>

#### **B. Call for action by member States**

9. The Committee at its second session, which was held from 15 to 17 December 2010 in Bangkok, called for action to improve civil registration and vital statistics in Asia and the Pacific. Recognizing the importance of reliable civil registration and vital statistics systems for producing timely and accurate population estimates and other demographic and health statistics, including the Millennium Development Goals, the Committee supported the development of a regional programme for improving vital statistics in the Asian and Pacific region (see E/ESCAP/CST(2)/9, chap. I, sect. B, decisions 2/3 and 2/4).

10. The Commission in its resolution 67/12 of 25 May 2011 on the improvement of civil registration and vital statistics in Asia and the Pacific recognized that civil registration systems capable of generating reliable and timely vital statistics contribute significantly to improved evidence-based planning and increased efficiency in resource allocation, and noted the importance of CRVS systems for improving development outcomes. In addition, it stressed the significant role of civil registration within a country's legal system for recognizing the rights and privileges of individuals and enabling the progressive realization of those rights.

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<sup>1</sup> See Human Rights Council resolution 19/9.

11. The Commission, in the resolution, encouraged all members and associate members to review and assess the current functioning of the civil registration systems and the quality of the vital statistics produced internally within each country, and recommended that the results of country assessments be utilized by members and associate members and stakeholders to develop and implement comprehensive and costed national strategies and plans to strengthen civil registration and vital statistics systems.

12. The Commission, furthermore, called upon members and associate members to strengthen the capacities of relevant institutions to improve CRVS in their countries, and upon the organizations of the United Nations system, international financial institutions, other global, regional and subregional development partners and agencies, non-governmental organizations and private sector entities to increase their support to countries for the development and strengthening of CRVS systems.

13. The Commission requested the Executive Secretary, among other things, to convene a high-level meeting of decision makers from national statistical organizations, civil registration offices, ministries of health and other relevant stakeholders to raise awareness and foster increased commitment to improving civil registration and vital statistics, to facilitate the formation of a regional platform aimed at promoting the exchange of experiences and information on strategies and plans to strengthen CRVS systems, and to consider collaborating closely with relevant partner agencies, especially the World Health Organization (WHO), the Health Metrics Network, the United Nations Children's Fund, the United Nations Population Fund, the United Nations Development Programme, the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank and the Secretariat of the Pacific Community, to coordinate and harmonize support and mobilize global and country resources for CRVS.

### **C. Global developments**

14. Since the adoption of Commission resolution 67/12, a number of developments at the global, regional and national levels have provided added impetus to the drive to strengthen country CRVS systems.

15. The Commission on Information and Accountability for Women's and Children's Health (COIA), convened by WHO in November 2011 at the request of the Secretary-General, recommended that countries, as a priority, increase their efforts to strengthen CRVS.<sup>2</sup> The COIA is focusing its support on 74 high-priority countries globally, of which 20 are in the Asia-Pacific region.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> World Health Organization, *Keeping Promises, Measuring Results*, Commission on Information and Accountability for Women's and Children's Health (WHO, 2011).

<sup>3</sup> Afghanistan; Azerbaijan; Bangladesh; Cambodia; China; Democratic People's Republic of Korea; India; Indonesia; Kyrgyzstan; Lao People's Democratic Republic; Myanmar; Nepal; Pakistan; Papua New Guinea; Philippines; Solomon Islands; Tajikistan; Turkmenistan; Uzbekistan; and Viet Nam.

16. The Busan Action Plan for Statistics,<sup>4</sup> supported by the Fourth High-level Forum on Aid Effectiveness, which was held in Busan, Republic of Korea, from 29 November to 1 December 2011, called for action to “address weaknesses in vital registration systems and data critical for monitoring program performance – including administrative data, sex disaggregated data, and geospatial information.” The operational workplan currently under development with the support of the Health Metrics Network includes actions to strengthen CRVS systems.

17. Recognizing the importance of birth registration, the Human Rights Council in its resolution 19/9 of 22 March 2012 on birth registration and the right of everyone to recognition everywhere as a person before the law expressed concern at the high number of persons throughout the world whose birth was not registered and called upon States to ensure free birth registration by means of universal, accessible, simple, expeditious and effective registration procedures without discrimination of any kind.

18. Regional initiatives are being implemented in Africa and the Americas. In response to a landmark declaration<sup>5</sup> by African ministers responsible for civil registration issued on 14 August 2010, in which the ministers resolved to take appropriate policy measures to facilitate the implementation of plans, programmes and initiatives for the reform and improvement of CRVS systems, the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) is implementing a regional medium-term plan to improve CRVS systems in Africa<sup>6</sup> in collaboration with a number of partners, including the African Development Bank (AfDB). Meanwhile in the Americas, the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) has been implementing the Regional Plan of Action for Strengthening Vital and Health Statistics since 2008 as part of broader efforts to strengthen health information systems.<sup>7</sup>

### **III. Responding to Commission and Committee recommendations**

19. The secretariat has pursued a series of activities to identify the main challenges and explore concrete ways to accelerate the development of CRVS systems in the region.

20. The efforts have focused on (a) galvanizing support and collaboration from a wide range of national and international development partners for the improvement of CRVS systems, (b) coordinating support

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<sup>4</sup> PARIS21, *Statistics for Transparency, Accountability and Results: A Busan Action Plan for Statistics*, (Paris, 2011). Available from [www.paris21.org/sites/default/files/Busanactionplan\\_nov2011.pdf](http://www.paris21.org/sites/default/files/Busanactionplan_nov2011.pdf).

<sup>5</sup> See [http://new.uneca.org/Portals/crmc/2010/documents/Final\\_inisterialDeclaration.pdf](http://new.uneca.org/Portals/crmc/2010/documents/Final_inisterialDeclaration.pdf).

<sup>6</sup> ECA and AfDB, *Reforming and Improving Civil Registration and Vital Statistics Systems in Africa, Regional Medium-Term Plan: 2010-2015*, February 2011. Available from [www.unescap.org/stat/vital-stat/vs-May12/Reforming-improving-CRVS-in-Africa.pdf](http://www.unescap.org/stat/vital-stat/vs-May12/Reforming-improving-CRVS-in-Africa.pdf).

<sup>7</sup> See [www.paho.org/English/GOV/CD/cd48-09-e.pdf](http://www.paho.org/English/GOV/CD/cd48-09-e.pdf).

provided by relevant development partners to countries in assessing their CRVS systems and developing related improvement plans, (c) development of the regional strategic plan for the improvement of CRVS in Asia and the Pacific and (d) the organization of the High-level Meeting on the Improvement of Civil Registration and Vital Statistics in Asia and the Pacific, which entails inviting decision makers from national statistical organizations, civil registration offices, ministries of health and other relevant stakeholders to raise awareness and foster increased commitment to improving CRVS.

#### **A. Establishing a broad and strong regional partnership**

21. Subsequent to the Committee decision, an initial group of partners<sup>8</sup> met in Bangkok to reconfirm their commitment and discuss the further development of a regional programme. Following the Commission's adoption of resolution 67/12, the Statistics Division prepared a paper "Towards a regional programme for the improvement of civil registration and vital statistics in Asia and the Pacific"<sup>9</sup> for consultation with the United Nations Expert Group Meeting on International Standards for Civil Registration and Vital Statistics Systems, which was held in New York from 27 to 30 June 2011. The paper was prepared on the basis of the proposal for a regional programme considered by the Committee at its second session (E/ESCAP/CST(2)/3). In February 2012, the Partners for Statistics Development in Asia-Pacific, a regional network of international, regional and subregional organizations and bilateral donors concerned with the improvement of statistics in Asia and the Pacific set up in December 2010, discussed options for a joint drive to improve CRVS.<sup>10</sup>

22. During 2012, the secretariat convened a number of meetings of partners (in Bangkok or virtually) to coordinate support for assessments of CRVS systems in the region, develop the regional strategic plan, and organize a high-level meeting.

23. The partner meetings provided the impetus to significantly expand the scope and reach of the regional strategic plan by demonstrating the widespread stakeholder interest in improving CRVS, reflecting the multiple related development issues.

24. As at October 2012, twenty development partners (listed in the annex) had committed to contribute to the regional initiative.

#### **B. Assessing civil registration and vital statistics systems**

25. In response to the call by the Commission, a number of member States have conducted assessments of their CRVS and are developing national strategies and plans for accelerated improvement. The efforts have been supported by the ESCAP/United Nations Development Programme/Asian Development Bank programme, "Supporting the Achievement of the Millennium Development Goals in Asia and the

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<sup>8</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics, Asian Development Bank, ESCAP, Health Metrics Network, United Nations Population Fund, University of Queensland and the World Health Organization

<sup>9</sup> ESA/STAT/AC.233/22. Available from [unstats.un.org/unsd/demographic/meetings/egm/CRVS2011/EGM%20Papers/EGM%20Vital%20Stats.%20Paper%202022.pdf](http://unstats.un.org/unsd/demographic/meetings/egm/CRVS2011/EGM%20Papers/EGM%20Vital%20Stats.%20Paper%202022.pdf).

<sup>10</sup> See [www.unescap.org/stat/partnership/3rd-stat-dev/report-3rd-meeting.pdf](http://www.unescap.org/stat/partnership/3rd-stat-dev/report-3rd-meeting.pdf).

Pacific” including through the organization of a meeting in March 2011 of key officials of countries that had explicitly requested support to undertake a detailed evaluation of their CRVS system. The meeting introduced the WHO guidance tool<sup>11</sup> as a basis for conducting detailed assessments. In addition, as part of the Pacific Vital Statistics Action Plan 2011-2014,<sup>12</sup> several Pacific island States have initiated processes to assess their current CRVS systems and develop national improvement strategies.

26. As of November 2012, 34 countries in the Asia-Pacific region had conducted standardized rapid assessments using the rapid assessment tool developed by WHO and the Health Information Systems Knowledge Hub (HISHub).<sup>13,14</sup> Their total scores ranged from 7 per cent to 96 per cent, revealing the wide variations of CRVS in Asia and the Pacific, including the fact that fewer than one third of countries in the region have satisfactory systems that require only minor adjustments. On the basis of the assessment results, 4 countries had completed comprehensive assessments and another 12 had prepared or begun the process.

### C. Developing a regional strategic plan

27. In May 2012, partners met at an informal meeting to further flesh out a regional programme for the improvement of CRVS systems in Asia and the Pacific, using the above-mentioned paper “Towards a regional programme for the improvement of civil registration and vital statistics in Asia and the Pacific” together with the emerging results of country assessments as the starting point. The meeting agreed on the outcomes that an initiative should aim to achieve and decided that the document shall be called “Regional strategic plan for the improvement of civil registration and vital statistics in Asia and the Pacific”.

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<sup>11</sup> Health Information Systems Knowledge Hub and World Health Organization, *Improving the Quality and Use of Birth, Death and Cause-of-death Information: Guidance for a Standards-based Review of Country Practices* (Geneva, World Health Organization, 2010). Available from [http://whqlibdoc.who.int/publications/2010/9789241547970\\_eng.pdf](http://whqlibdoc.who.int/publications/2010/9789241547970_eng.pdf).

<sup>12</sup> An outline of the Pacific Vital Statistics Action Plan is available from [www.uq.edu.au/hishub/docs/Brisbane-Accord-Group/vital-stats-outline-final.pdf](http://www.uq.edu.au/hishub/docs/Brisbane-Accord-Group/vital-stats-outline-final.pdf).

<sup>13</sup> WHO and HISHub, “Rapid assessment methods for vital statistics systems”, University of Queensland: HISHub Working Paper Series, No. 2 (Geneva, WHO, 2010). Available from [www.uq.edu.au/hishub/docs/WP02/WP\\_02.pdf](http://www.uq.edu.au/hishub/docs/WP02/WP_02.pdf).

<sup>14</sup> *Comprehensive assessment tool: WHO and HISHub* (2010). “Improving the quality of birth, death and cause-of-death information: guidance for a standards-based review of country practices”, University of Queensland: HISHub Working Paper Series, No. 1. Available from [www.uq.edu.au/hishub/docs/WP01/WP\\_01.pdf](http://www.uq.edu.au/hishub/docs/WP01/WP_01.pdf).

28. A drafting group<sup>15</sup> was established to fully develop the strategic plan as the main document for discussion at the High-level Meeting on the Improvement of Civil Registration and Vital Statistics and for subsequent intergovernmental deliberation by the Committee in December 2012.

#### **D. Organizing a High-level Meeting**

29. The High-level Meeting on the Improvement of Civil Registration and Vital Statistics is scheduled to be held on 10 and 11 December 2012, immediately prior to the third session of the Committee.

30. The High-level Meeting will bring together senior decision makers from national statistics offices, civil registration authorities, ministries of health, civil society representatives, regional development banks, bilateral and multilateral development agencies, intergovernmental bodies and academic institutions.

31. The objective of the High-level Meeting is to reach consensus on the key actions needed to enhance CRVS systems in Asia and the Pacific. To this end, the High-level Meeting will discuss the regional strategic plan, including its guiding principles, proposed outcomes, implementation strategy and governance arrangements. It is expected to result in added multi-stakeholder support and awareness of the need to improve CRVS in the region and in concrete proposals for ensuring successful finalization and implementation of the regional strategic plan.

32. In preparation for the High-level Meeting, an organizing committee was formed in January 2012. By October 2012, some 20 partner organizations (listed in the annex) had joined the Committee, which is chaired by the Chief of the Statistics Division.

33. The Organizing Committee has focused its efforts on developing the programme for the event, ensuring that multiple relevant development perspectives are presented in a balanced manner, and on coordinating and mobilizing outreach and financial support for broad and high-level participation.

34. The outcomes of the High-level Meeting will be presented orally to the Committee at its third session.

#### **IV. Proposed next steps**

35. The regional initiative to improve CRVS is gaining momentum. The regional strategic plan is attracting support from countries and development partners as an appropriate vehicle for coordinated and effective channelling of expertise and other resources to accelerate country improvement efforts.

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<sup>15</sup> Members of the drafting group are Australian Bureau of Statistics, Asian Development Bank, ESCAP, Health Metrics Network the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, PARIS21, United Nations Development Programme, United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, United Nations Children's Fund, United Nations Population Fund, University of Queensland and the World Health Organization.



36. The High-level Meeting in December 2012 will bring together the highest level of practitioners from statistics offices, civil registration offices and ministries of health, representing the main stakeholders in the implementation of the improvement efforts. While focusing on establishing consensus on the regional plan, it also presents an important step towards creating awareness and galvanizing broad commitment to the implementation of the regional plan.

37. Considering that continuity in approaches and consistent resource flows are needed at the country level for establishing and managing well-functioning CRVS systems, and that multiple national stakeholders are involved in making such efforts successful, sustained broad and high-level commitment, reaching beyond the immediate implementing agents, is needed.

38. Furthermore, the scope of the regional strategic plan reaches beyond the mandate of the Committee, and the pursuit of some its outcomes at the country level may fall outside the scope of the official responsibilities of Committee members.

39. It is therefore proposed that a ministerial-level regional forum of decision makers be organized in 2013 to fully endorse the regional strategic plan, formally establish coordination, information-sharing, oversight and monitoring mechanisms and propose strategies for building capacities and raising public awareness across the region. Key outcomes of this meeting would be increased awareness of the value of CRVS among political leaders, and mobilization of political commitment and resources across sectors and among stakeholders with roles and responsibilities in CRVS.

40. Prior to the proposed ministerial-level meeting, the outcome of the Committee's deliberations would be incorporated into the regional strategic plan, which will also undergo further country and partner consultations.

## **V. Actions to be taken by the Committee**

41. Bearing in mind the outcome<sup>16</sup> of the High-level Meeting on the Improvement of Civil Registration and Vital Statistics, the Committee may wish to consider the regional strategic plan (E/ESCAP/CST(3)/6/Add.1) for the improvement of CRVS in Asia and the Pacific for endorsement.

42. The Committee may further wish to provide guidance on the implementation of the regional strategic plan. In this regard, the Committee may wish to make reference to the suggested approach to aligning the implementation with the governance arrangements and activities carried out under the pre-existing Pacific Vital Statistics Action Plan for 2011-2014.

43. Noting that the scope of the regional strategic plan reaches beyond the immediate mandate of the Committee, the Committee may also wish to provide guidance on approaches to ensuring successful implementation of the regional strategic plan, including recommending pathways for

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<sup>16</sup> To be presented orally to the Committee.

securing broad, ministerial-level commitment for improving CRVS in the Asia-Pacific region. In that regard, the Committee may wish to recommend and support the submission of a draft resolution to the Commission at its sixty-ninth session, calling for a ministerial-level meeting to be organized in 2013.

## **Annex**

### **List of partners**

#### **Member States**

Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS)

Government of Thailand (Ministry of Interior, Ministry of Public Health and National Statistical Office)

#### **United Nations entities**

Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP)

Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR)

Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)

Regional Coordination Mechanism Thematic Working Group on Gender Equality and Empowerment of Women

United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)

United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Asia-Pacific Regional Centre

United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Bangkok

United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women)

United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA)

United Nations Statistics Division

World Health Organization (WHO)

#### **Others**

Asian Development Bank (ADB)

Health Metrics Network (HMN)

International Organization for Migration (IOM) Asia and Pacific Regional Office

Partnership in Statistics for Development in the 21st Century (PARIS21)

Plan International

Secretariat of the Pacific Community (SPC)

University of Queensland: Health Information Systems Knowledge Hub (UQ-HISHub)