

The Benefits of Civil Registration Systems for Individuals and Governments

A well-functioning Civil Registration and Vital Statistics System benefits every aspect of a person's life from birth to death, and every aspect of society, from public health to economic development and national security.



The Benefits of Civil Registration

Civil registration is a passport for a person's life journey ...

Public Services and Benefits

For example going to school or seeing a doctor.



Protection from Exploitation

Including child marriage and child labor.



Financial Inclusion

Such as joining the formal job market or getting a bank loan.



Identity Documents

Including obtaining a driver's license, passport or national ID.

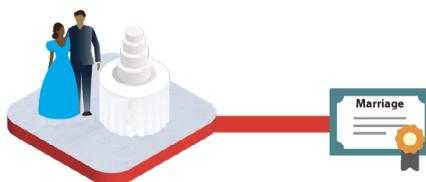
Citizen Rights and Participation in Society

Such as being able to vote.



Birth Registration

The principal way of establishing a legal identity which provides access to benefits throughout a person's life.



Marriage Registration

Important for parental rights, inheritance and dependent benefits

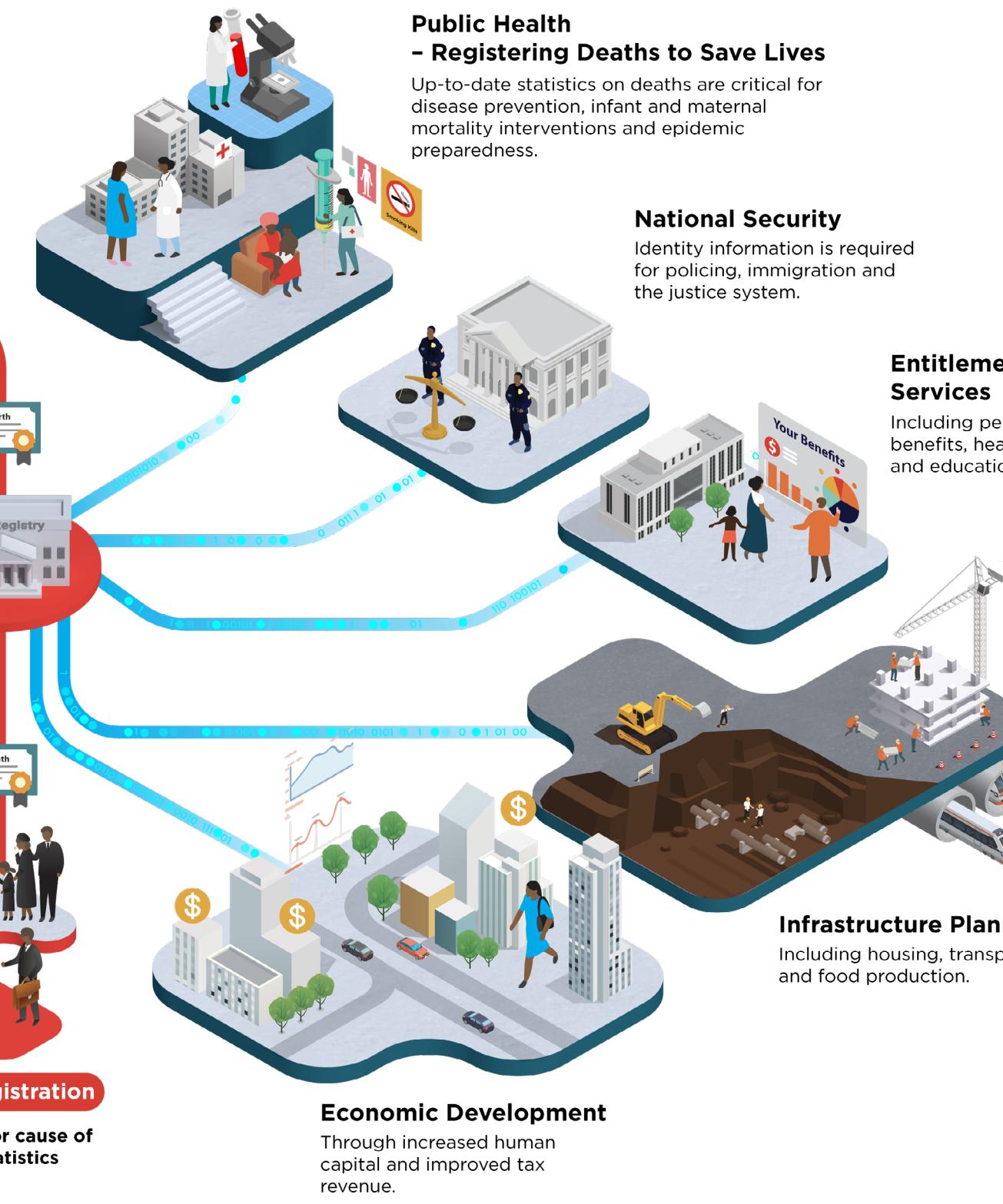


Death Registration

Important for death sta

to Individuals and Governments

... and provides population data essential for building a thriving society



Introduction

Civil registration is a system of continuously and officially recording people's life events (called vital events) and the key information about those events. Vital events include births, deaths and fetal deaths, marriages and divorces, and adoptions. The official records of those vital events are permanent, and certificates are provided to individuals (or their nearest relatives) as legal proof of those events.

Vital statistics is the process of using the data from these records to generate statistical information for various purposes. A well-functioning civil registration and vital statistics (CRVS) system ensures all vital events are registered and the resulting data is accurate, complete and timely.

These systems, and the benefits they bring, are foundational - allowing individuals to function in society and governments to operate effectively.

Establishing and maintaining a fully functioning civil registration system is therefore a basic and essential part of good governance and should be prioritized by politicians and decision makers.

Despite this essential and foundational nature, many low- and middle-income countries lack well-functioning civil registration systems - meaning that globally 25% of children under 5 have not had their births registered and 40% of deaths are unregistered, and many of the deaths that are registered do not have a clear cause of death recorded.

This briefing paper sets out the benefits of a well-functioning civil registration and vital statistics system for individuals and governments.

The Benefits of Civil Registration to Individuals

Birth registration: A passport to a person's life journey

Birth registration is the principal means of establishing a person's legal identity and should take place immediately after birth.¹



It provides a permanent, official and legal record of a person's existence.

A birth certificate acts as a life-long passport for the recognition of rights and protections, enabling a person to 'exist' in society through their legal identity.

Individuals without registration and legal documentation often remain invisible to the State, limiting their access to social protection and services, with profound implications for a person's life outcomes.^{2,3}

Most States have signed up to international treaties that guarantee all children have their births registered immediately after birth; and the UN SDGs include a target of free birth registration for all by 2030.⁴

Public Services and Benefits

A person's legal identity established through birth registration allows access to public services.

Without birth registration, parents often face barriers to enrolling their children in school or seeing a doctor.⁵ Later in life it can cause problems for receiving a pension or social services.

Governments require identity and age verification for:

- Education
- Health care
- Social protection programs and services
- Pensions



Exclusion from these vital services increases vulnerability and perpetuates cycles of poverty.

Studies show that people with birth registration:

- are significantly more likely to attend and complete school.⁶
- have increased health outcomes including life expectancy, child mortality rates and infant nutrition.⁷
- have increased take up of cash transfer programs.⁸

Protection from Exploitation

Proof of age is an essential element of government protection programs and for preventing child labor and child marriage through the enforcement of laws.⁹

Birth registration provides identity and age verification which helps protect against a range of issues:



- **Forced and underage marriage** – There are lower rates of child marriage in countries where birth registration rates are high.¹⁰
- **Child labor** – Regions with highest child labor rates also have low rates of birth registration.
- **Justice systems** – Proof of age is necessary to safeguard a child from being detained with adults and to protect children from prosecution as adults.¹¹
- **Child soldiers** – Birth registration is an important tool for preventing child recruitment.¹² In Mali, birth registration has played a role in facilitating children's release and reintegration.¹³
- **Protection from violence** – Registration helps achieve convictions against those who have abused a child.¹⁰

"If you don't have a birth certificate, and you are abused, no one will know if you are a child or not, so they can't help."

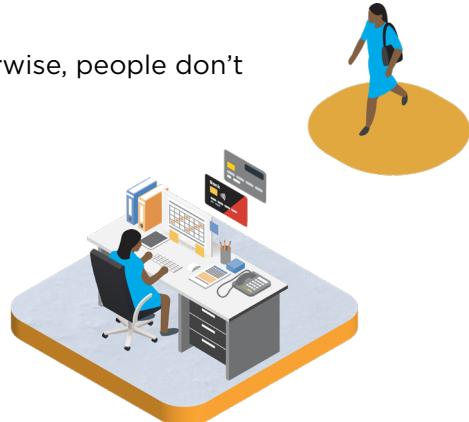
Plan program staff in urban Sierra Leone¹⁴

Financial Inclusion

The first step to formalizing an economy is registering births; otherwise, people don't exist administratively. Birth registrations enable access to formal employment, bank accounts and loans and ownership of property.

Registered citizens are more likely to be engaged in the formal economy and job market and to access social benefits.¹⁵

Legal identity is a prerequisite for accessing financial systems like bank accounts and loans. This also facilitates ownership of property.¹⁶



As lower- and middle-income countries' economies digitize, a digitally verified identity facilitates equal participation of populations in the digital economy through cash-less payments.¹⁷

Tanzania: research shows that citizens with birth registration are more likely to work in the formal economic sector, have higher education, have bank accounts and pay taxes.

Obtaining Identity Documents

Birth registration is the gateway to legal identity and the key that unlocks all other identity documents.



Birth registration provides the first and most fundamental proof of legal identity.¹⁸

A birth certificate is often considered a “breeder document” needed to obtain other identification documents¹⁹ including:

- driver's license
- passport
- national ID cards
- legal gender recognition

In India, a birth certificate has been mandated to be the only accepted proof of date of birth for new passport applicants born after 2023.²⁰ Kenya requires a birth certificate to issue a national identification card²¹ or passport.²²

UNICEF: Birth registration is “*the most foundational of all children’s rights – it gives them a name and a legal identity.*” Without it, children are “*invisible*” to the state. Birth certificates are “critical for acquiring nationality and preventing statelessness”.²³

Citizen’s rights

Right to Vote: A birth certificate proving identity and age is the gateway to democratic participation in civil society, enabling a person to vote and run for electoral office.²⁴



Since electoral rolls are often derived from the civil register, the accuracy of birth and death data is essential for ensuring transparent and credible voting processes and preventing electoral fraud.²⁵

World Economic Forum - “*effective electoral rolls are not possible without recording births and deaths*”, and there is “*no electoral legitimacy unless citizens are sure that everyone has only one vote*”²⁶

Access to Justice: Legal identity and proof of age established through birth registration is required for individuals to claim rights and legal protections, initiate legal proceedings and engage fully in civic and legal systems.

SDG 16 calls for inclusive societies with “access to justice for all”, and its Target 16.9 specifically aims to “provide legal identity for all, including birth registration” by 2030. The UN views birth registration and legal identity as critical to promoting the rule of law and equal access to rights.²⁷

Marriage & Divorce Registration

Marriage registration provides legal recognition of the union, critical for securing certain rights, legal protections and economic security. It can help governments prevent marriage fraud and bigamy.²⁸



- Women – Without marriage registration, widows may lose income, spousal pension and social insurance, and face complications in claiming property, inheritance, child custody and the right to remarry.²⁹
- Children – Marriage registration may allow a child the right to inherit property and status of “legitimacy.”³⁰ Compulsory registration also contributes to the prevention of child marriage.³¹

Divorce registration helps facilitate access to pensions, alimony, child support, child custody and a fair share of the assets and division of debt.³¹ Divorce can demonstrate a person’s right to remarry and can offer legal freedom from an abusive marriage.³²

Marriage registration provides access to:

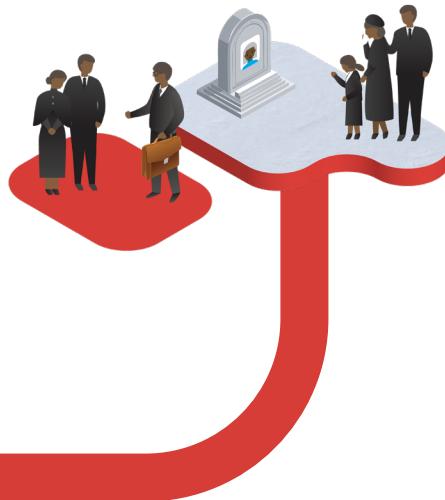
- the right to divorce
- adoption
- parental rights
- family/dependent benefits
- inheritance rights

Death Registration

Death registration is the legal proof that someone has died and is required for many administrative and legal purposes. It ensures that surviving families have legal, social and economic benefits and are not left vulnerable.

Documenting a family member’s death is essential for:

- survivors to access inheritance and property rights by proving their right to inherit the deceased’s assets.³³
- families to claim social benefits, such as pensions, life insurance or government support for widows, widowers or dependent children.³⁴
- legal procedures such as probate and determining guardianship of minor children.³⁵
- allowing the surviving spouse to remarry.



The Benefits of Civil Registration to Governments

Civil Registration provides data essential for building a thriving society

A government needs to know who it is governing.

Civil registration systems are the best source of timely **vital statistics, population data** and **individual identity data** needed across all parts of government.³⁶

Public Health - Registering Deaths to Save Lives



Public health interventions cannot be effectively planned without accurate, comprehensive and up to date information on births, deaths, stillbirths and causes of deaths.³⁷ The most effective means of getting that data is through a fully functioning CRVS system.³⁸

With that data, health authorities can identify disease patterns, monitor mortality rates and allocate resources effectively.³⁹

Without reliable civil registration data, public health planning risks being reactive, fragmented and misaligned with actual population health needs.

Death registration, stillbirth recording and cause of death data informs:

- mortality surveillance
- infant and maternal mortality interventions
- epidemic preparedness
- injury prevention - road deaths, drowning etc.
- environmental health
- non-communicable diseases prevention

National Security

A robust civil registration system provides certainty about who resides in a country which has implications for policing, border control, voter fraud and transnational crime.

Civil registration is the foundation of an accurate population register. Incomplete population registers and undocumented people pose challenges for policing and counter terrorism.

Police rely on identity records to identify suspects and ensure offenders do not assume false identities. Many police forces integrate national identification databases, based on civil registration, with criminal records.⁴⁰



Strong birth and death registration help prevent identity fraud, strengthen border control and combat transnational crimes.⁴¹

Effective electoral rolls “are not possible without recording births and deaths.” There is no electoral legitimacy unless citizens are sure everyone has only one vote.⁴²

These population and identity registers assist in monitoring citizenship and immigration status and preventing crimes like drug and human trafficking.⁴³

Prime Minister of Papua New Guinea: the new CRVS system will help address “*pressing law and order situations by way of properly identifying people...and assist in dealing with border security, transnational crime*”⁴⁴

Infrastructure and Development Planning

Accurate, up-to-date vital statistics and population data is indispensable for infrastructure and development planning decisions and resource allocation.

The data enables planners to identify high-density areas and understand fertility rates, population growth and other demographic information to predict future needs. Infrastructure planning influenced by population size, distribution and demographics include:



- Roads, bridges and public transport
- Utilities - energy, water and waste management⁴⁵
- Telecommunications and digital infrastructure⁴⁶
- Food supplies and agricultural needs⁴⁷
- Housing⁴⁸
- Public safety and emergency services⁴⁹
- Education provision⁵⁰

Infrastructure and development decisions taken without accurate and up-to-date population data risk large-scale, inappropriate allocation of resources and budgets.

Prime Minister of the Philippines: “*having a comprehensive database of people in the country can allow the government... to identify every person, thus allowing for proper allocation of funding and resources.*”⁵¹

Economic Development

Birth registration drives participation in the formal economy, increases human capital and increases tax revenue.

Formalizing the economy: Registration facilitates the inclusion of populations in the formal economy, improving participation of informal sector workers and enabling their access to legal and social security protections. Registered citizens are more likely to pay taxes.⁵²

Increasing Human Capital: Birth certificates act as a 'gateway document' to access education and healthcare in many countries.⁵³ Access to education and health are key indicators of human capital development which drive overall economic growth.

Cost savings: Accurate population data through a CRVS system improves governments' ability to develop national economic plans and allocate budgets.⁵⁴ CRVS systems enable cost savings on public service delivery by preventing costly duplication of population count across fragmented government branches.⁵⁵



World Bank - *"The first step to formalizing an economy is to register births. Without birth certificates, people do not exist from an administrative perspective."*⁵⁵

Entitlement to Services

Accurate identity information from birth and death registration enables governments to determine entitlement to benefits and services, enhance service delivery and prevent fraud.



Integrated Digital ID Systems: Governments increasingly utilize integrated digital identity systems, such as Unique Personal Identifiers (UPIs) generated at birth, using birth and death registration to ensure robust identity verification across multiple public services.⁵⁶

Social Services and Pensions Administration: Social protection programs rely on identity data to target beneficiaries. A unique identity from birth prevents duplicate or fraudulent claims.⁵⁷

Education and Healthcare: Reliable identity data helps governments deliver healthcare services more efficiently, manage vaccination programs effectively and minimize the risk of duplication or fraud within public health insurance systems.

In Argentina and Tunisia, enrollment in social protection programs is based on IDs verified through the civil registry.⁵⁸

India's Aadhaar unique ID system, linked to civil registration, has significantly curbed fraud and duplication, resulting in \$billions of cost savings.⁵⁹

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About the Global Health Advocacy Incubator:

The Global Health Advocacy Incubator (GHAI) uses the power of advocacy to reduce preventable deaths and to improve health at scale by changing policies and strengthening systems. We support civil society organizations and advocacy movements to pass public health policies that save lives, reduce disease and prevent injuries, increase investments in public health, and create a healthier and more equitable future for all.

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