Introduction
As the continent commemorates the Third Africa CRVS Day in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is imperative to examine the role that civil registration and vital statistics can play in providing real-time information for the monitoring and mitigating the impact of such emergencies.

Civil registration is defined, by UN standards as the universal, compulsory, continuous, permanent and confidential recording of the occurrence of all vital events. Civil registration provides individuals with special probatory instruments which allow them to prove, with incontrovertible certainty, the facts relating their existence, identity, and personal and family situation. Thus, it is an invaluable source for comprehensive, regular and detailed vital statistics. Consequently, continuous and universal civil registration and the production of vital statistics are critical functions of government, as civil registration establishes the existence of a person under law. As these systems are being tested by the current COVID-19 pandemic, critical questions need to be asked: (1) Are CRVS systems playing an active role in helping governments to address the pandemic? (2) What is needed to ensure that CRVS systems remain relevant in meeting the demands of the future statistical landscape?

Legal Identity as a Human Rights Issue
Everyone has the right to be recognized as a person before the law, as enshrined in Article 6 of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights and several other international human rights and humanitarian law instruments. Functioning civil registration systems provide people with legal identity documents starting with a birth certificate that prove their legal status and help to safeguard their rights throughout their lives. This right is non-derogable, meaning it is considered such a fundamental human right that it can never be restricted nor be suspended, even in an emergency.

In the context of international human rights law, all Member States have the obligation to ensure the legal recognition of individuals in their territory. However, emergencies such as the current COVID-19 pandemic, the Ebola crises, displacements caused by natural disasters and conflicts have left people without proof of legal identity and hence the affected people may not be able to acquire a nationality and become stateless. Consequently, women and children may also be forced to resort to participation in the informal labour market, and risk being subjected to extremely poor working conditions, trafficking, sexual exploitation, lack of access to justice, and more.

Lessons Learnt from the COVID-19 Pandemic
Emergencies like the current COVID-19 pandemic are disruptive for the provision of civil registration services. The current pandemic has shown the vulnerabilities of the civil registration system when actually the services are required the most.

The responses from the rapid assessment conducted by the United Nations Legal Identity Agenda Taskforce in April 2020 have shown that the reactions by governments differed across countries ranging from total shutdown, partial provision of services or “deprioritization” of registration of some vital events to uninterrupted services. Evidence is showing that access to civil registration is being hindered as a result of social distancing, restricted movement, and general apathy by the populace to go to registration centres and closure of local government services.

A fully-functional and complete CRVS system provides real-time data and is the gold standard for measurement of mortality in a population which is crucial during the pandemic. Data on new cases and deaths on a daily or weekly basis has been critical to show the trends and impact of the pandemic. Therefore, there have been heightened expectations of national statistical systems to provide data needed to manage the crisis including its socio-economic effects.

Civil Registration as an Essential Service
Civil registration should be classified as an essential service and strategies put into place to ensure business continuity during emergencies, including pandemics. Countries should have a “business continuity plan” on registration of vital events during disruptions such as pandemics, public health emergencies and disasters.
This plan should elaborate the requirements of minimum essential services during the special circumstances, including how to protect the workforce. Registration officials in countries where registration services have been disrupted or completely halted need support to minimize disruption and arrange for resumption of services and management of the backlog when normality returns.

Civil registration offices should prepare contingency plans to meet post-pandemic demand for registration services, working with the legislative branch to manage late and delayed registration penalties. Late registration fees can be waived for a given period of time even during the recovery phase or post-pandemic, in particular in those countries where CR is considered non-essential. Interventions to deal with backlog could include setting up temporary or mobile facilities and expanding staffing, creating awareness of availability of service and waiving fees for a specified period as incentive.

**Business Continuity for CR during Emergencies**

The United Nations Legal Identity Agenda Task Force (2020) recommends that “Civil registration should be considered an ‘essential service’ mandated to continue operations during a pandemic. Although some physical offices may need to be closed, or opening hours limited or staggered, operations should be maintained as far as possible, whether in-person, or virtual, during the crisis” - [United Nations guidelines on Maintaining Civil Registration and Vital Statistics during the COVID-19 pandemic are available at: https://unstats.un.org/legal-identity-agenda/COVID-19/].

The following recommendations that are drawn from the United Nations guidelines and learnings from country experiences are made:

- Establishing disaster resilient civil registration systems that can continue to function under precarious circumstances.
- During the crisis, the CR system should be able to adapt and make temporary changes to registration processes, for example, through revision of existing standard operating procedures, business processes or rules to expand eligibility regarding who can notify civil registrars of births and deaths and to establish special processes/waivers for persons who may not have the documents that are required for registration (particularly considering those who are stateless) etc.
- Planning for handling the expected backlog - peaks are to be expected especially for death registration during the pandemic; however, significant backlog in birth and marriage registration also needs to be addressed
- The vital statistics function needs to be maintained to enable production of timely, accurate and disaggregated small area data for administrative and statistical use.
- Given the nature of pandemics, epidemics and other emergencies, there need to accurately target interventions, it may be essential for civil registration data to be made available for integration with key population datasets e.g. physical addresses and migration data (through a population register) to facilitate communication between governments and individual members of the population.
- Automated methods of data collection that reduce face-face interactions should be used. Digital technology, with extensive use of devices such as mobile phones, tablets etc, has incomparable opportunity for driving the agenda for Africa Programme on Accelerated Improvement of CRVS systems (APAI_CRVS) and Legal Identity for All on the continent. Emergencies are the best time to fully embrace and implement online and automated systems of registration. If the CRVS systems already offers services remotely, those services should be augmented, and the public should be encouraged to use online registration.
- Privacy and confidentiality of individuals should be maintained. Particular attention should be paid to those groups which may already face discrimination such as hard to reach or marginalized communities (e.g. ethnic and language minorities, refugees and migrants).
- The need for partnership with the health sector and particularly linking Civil Registration to maternal and child health services provides continuity of registration of births during emergencies.

As we commemorate the Third African CRVS day on 10 August 2020, let us keep our vision for “Everyone visible in Africa”, even in times of pandemics by providing uninterrupted service to clients.
Civil Registration and Vital Statistics: An Essential Service for Monitoring and Mitigating the Impact of Emergencies