

Issues Paper

Civil registration and vital statistics and the demographic dividend

I. Introduction

According to a 2017 world population report, Africa is home to the youngest population among the regions in the world, with 60 per cent of it under the age of 25. This young population presents a powerful opportunity for accelerated economic growth and innovation, as the other regions of the world are faced with an ageing population and issues that accompany it, such as high health costs for elderly care and large demand for skilled and qualified labour.

The advantage of a youthful population is its contribution to economic growth, which results in increased incomes and employment. The downside risk is the inability to provide enough gainful employment, which is a potential source of instability. Accordingly, in Africa, policymakers should focus on taking advantage of the demographic dividend, which potentially can play a significant role in advancing the continent's development agenda.

The demographic dividend is the process by which countries benefit from the acceleration in economic growth as a result of a shift in the age structure to more economically active people. According to economists David Bloom and David Canning of Harvard University, as fertility rates decrease, a country's working-age population grows larger relative to the young dependent population. With more people in the labour force and fewer children to support, a country has a window of opportunity for rapid economic growth if the right kinds of investments and policies related to health, education, governance and the economy are in place.

Agenda 2063: The Africa We Want and its first ten-year implementation plan, and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development focus on issues affecting youth. The central importance of the demographic dividend in the context of development in Africa is well recognized by African leaders as indicated by the endorsement by member States of the African Union of the African Youth Charter in 2006 and the development of the African Youth Decade 2009-2018 Plan of Action to facilitate the implementation of the Charter and the African Union road map on harnessing the demographic dividend through investments in youth.

Whether the youth bulge will benefit Africa or be a hindrance depends on the extent to which the Governments of Africa implement sound policies and invest in human capital such as in tertiary education, vocational training, skills development, agriculture and food

security and health, and in activities aimed at creating labour-intensive jobs and encouraging entrepreneurship. In addition, another determining factor is whether peace and security are maintained. Effective policies and measures are critical for harnessing the benefits of the demographic dividend.

To monitor and report on progress in implementing the demographic dividend priorities identified in African Union road map and related initiatives and strategies at the national, regional and continental levels, a robust performance monitoring and accountability mechanism and timely and quality data are required. .

The present report, therefore, focuses on the importance of reliable and well -functioning Civil Registration and Vital Statistics (CRVS) in understanding and reaping the benefits associated with the demographic dividend.

The importance of establishing a functioning civil registration and vital statistics system in Africa

A well-functioning civil registration and vital statistics serves as a source of continuous, timely and quality data related to births and deaths and other life events. It is a fundamental function of Governments and has multiple uses, including for administrative, legal, statistical and demographic purposes.

Civil registration and vital statistics implies a system of registering vital events, such as births and deaths, and the production of reliable population data. A well-functioning CRVS system has various implications for individuals and governments. For individuals, copies of registration records can be used as legal documents to provide evidence. A CRVS system enables governments to formulate programmes for the provision of services, develop an integrated legal and statistical population database that meets national and international standards, and establish an efficient public administration system. Information compiled from registration records are also needed for administrative applications, such as public health programmes and the electoral roll. A CRVS system also serves as the starting point for a number of operational programmes related to, for example, family planning, medical research, maternal and child care, historical demography and genetic studies. Many developing countries have a normative and institutional framework for their CRVS system, but they are struggling to maintain the efficiency or improve programmes to make it operate more effectively. In general, the CRVS systems in Africa remain incomplete and inadequate. Reports show that the percentage of countries with CRVS coverage that exceeds 90 per cent is only of 22 per

cent for birth and 13 per cent for death,¹ 55 per cent of children under the age of five are not registered at birth in most African Countries,²; and only six countries can provide high, medium or low quality cause of death data.³

The international statistical community recognizes that a CRVS system is a crucial source of vital statistics. Universal civil registration can provide the necessary data to determine the size and structure of the population not only at the national level but also at community levels. Data from civil registration are also essential for socioeconomic planning, estimating fertility and mortality rates on a continuous basis and providing data on causes of death. Birth registration for instance, in addition to providing documentary proof of identity and civil status (such as age, nationality, and parentage), can also be used as evidence of proof to benefit from various others activities. For example, proof of identity is required in many countries to own property, to be employed in the civil service and to participate in politics. Also, proof of age may be required to enrol in schools or to seek regular employment in some countries. Moreover, for the efficient implementation and evaluation of health projects in many African countries, vital records. such as birth registration, are needed. Those records are used to monitor progress in public health programmes in such areas as the control of communicable diseases and maternal and child health. As already noted, birth registration information is used to determine fertility rates. Accordingly, figures collected through birth registration over a period of time, can be used to estimate the growth, structure and geographic distribution of the population. In the period between decennial censuses, those estimates are needed in formulating and implementing programme related to social and economic development.

At this historical juncture, having a well-functioning CRVS will be essential for African countries to meet the commitments they are in the process of making, including, for example, ensuring free movement of people and the establishment of a continental free trade area. To benefit from those commitments, people need to have a legal identity, which can also be used for planning for changes in populations, and the infrastructure and services those populations will require.

With a particular focus on enhancing birth registration systems in member States, it is important that reference is made to the contents of the General Comment on Article 6 of the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child: “Right to Birth Registration

¹United Nations Statistics Division, Coverage of birth and death registration. Available at: http://unstats.un.org/unsd/demographic/CRVS/CR_coverage.htm (accessed 9 November 2017)

² United Nations Children’s Fund, UNICEF data, monitoring the situation of children and women. Available at: <https://data.unicef.org/topic/child-protection/birth-registration/> (accessed 9 November 2017)..

³ World Health Statistics, 2012.

Name and Nationality” issued by the African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child. In the Comment, the Committee spells out the obligations of State Parties in implementing the provision of Article 6, which is to establish a well-functioning birth registration system. Article 6 (2) of the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, it is stated that “every child shall be registered immediately after birth”⁴. The Committee expands on the interpretation of this provision and states that “for the right to birth registration to be effective, the Committee holds that it must be universal, free and accessible and made immediately after the birth of a child.”⁵ Referring to State obligations under Article 6(4), “the Committee regards the existence of up to date, comprehensive and international law-compliant legislation underpinning civil registration as fundamental to the fulfillment of the child’s right to a name, and to registration of birth”.⁶

II. The role of civil registration and vital statistics in attaining Africa’s demographic dividend

As stated above, demographic dividend is the process by which countries benefit from the acceleration in economic growth as a result of the shifting age structure of the population to more economically active people. It occurs during the demographic transition from a high to low fertility rate, which results in a high proportion of the working-age population relative to the young and aged dependent population. With more people in the labour force and fewer children to support, a country has a window of opportunity for economic growth if the right kinds of investments and policies related to health, education, governance, and the economy are in place. Preparation of national demographic profiles required to harness the demographic dividend requires timely and accurate vital statistics data and evidence-based development planning processes in order to define country-specific responses. Accurate projections of fertility and mortality using vital statistics from civil registration records contributes towards gaining a better understanding of population dynamics in terms of size and age structure and projecting opportunities associated with the demographic dividend opportunity, and can be used to inform policymakers for proper economic and social development planning.

In addition to informing planning and decision-making, timely and quality data can be used in developing critical advocacy tools for investment and also for monitoring indicators that advance prospects for the demographic dividend at all levels. Africa has the potential to reap its demographic dividend if effective systems are in place and fully functional.

⁴ African Union, African Charter on the Right and Welfare of the Child. (adopted July 1990) Available at: <http://www.acerwc.org/download/african-charter-on-the-rights-and-welfare-of-the-child/?wpdmdl=9406>.

⁵ African Union, General Comment on Article 6 of the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child; “Right to birth registration, name and nationality”. Available at http://www.acerwc.org/download/general_comment_article_6_name_and_nationality/?wpdmdl=8606.

⁶ Ibid.

In recent years, many African countries have undergone profound changes in their population structure. Sharp declines in death rates, particularly of children, have contributed to a rapidly growing population. Many African countries have also started to experience lower fertility, particularly among women with access to services. Those demographic changes promise to significantly affect a country's economic performance. However, in some countries, child mortality rates have declined, but the fertility rates have remained high, leading to high youth dependency.

In that regard, many countries in Africa face significant challenges in harnessing their demographic dividends. One the key actions that needs to be undertaken is to strengthen capacity to monitor and report on progress in implementing key steps to harness the demographic dividend. One such action is to strengthen national data systems to ensure timely and quality data for planning and decision-making. This may include the establishment of a multisectoral demographic dividend observatory under the leadership of the national statistics, planning or population agencies, as appropriate. In addition, countries need to set complimentary policies; the number of policies and how they are prioritized depends on the status of the demographic transition in a country and its economic environment. An increase in the working-age population of Africa is inevitable. With the right policies, Africa can transition more rapidly to smaller families, ensure that the labour markets provide productive work for the rapidly growing workforce and reap the tremendous benefits of the demographic dividend to propel sustainable economic development.

In that regard, listed below are some suggested issues to be discussed in the context of the link between CRVS and the demographic dividend:

1. What role does CRVS play in ensuring the future of young people in the light of what is required to harness the demographic dividend?
2. How can a country respond to the demands for basic services? What role does CRVS data play in facilitating access to basic services?
3. How can population data and CRVS be fully used to compile statistics to be used for monitoring and measuring efforts towards achieving sustainable development?

III. Progress to date

The African Union Commission, with the support of key partners, has held consultations with ministers in charge of civil registration and other relevant stakeholders. A general consensus from the meeting was the need to strengthen the CRVS systems in Africa and ensure coordination among relevant national institutions. In the outcome documents of those meetings, steps are laid out for member States to set up sustainable and effective civil registration systems, and to generate vital statistics, which are to be complemented by data from other sources organized by relevant agencies, such as national statistics offices.

It must be noted, that all efforts to set up effective CRVS programmes should also have at its core the continent's agenda on achieving sustainable development. This can come to pass by ensuring that the policies put in place respond to the demands of the population dynamics of Africa today. The ever-growing youth population is asking policymakers for access to sustainable and quality health services, education and employment opportunities, both formal and informal, and that their rights be ensured at every step of their development. None of this can be provided without reliable data on the continent's population dynamics.

IV. Way forward

Member States need to accelerate the implementation of key African policy instruments, such as the 2017 African Union road map on harnessing the demographic dividend through investments in youth, the ministerial declarations on CRVS systems and the Addis Ababa Declaration on Population and Development. Member States are further encouraged to strengthen their national statistical capacity and ability to conduct sound monitoring and evaluation of their CRVS systems. Furthermore, it should be noted that a functional system for civil registration needs to be established at national and community levels to ensure the availability of relevant and accurate data for analysing population dynamics and the opportunities associated with the demographic dividend.