Fact Sheet:
Civil registration and vital statistics in Zanzibar
Making the invisible visible

Background

A robust and fully-functioning civil registration and vital statistics (CRVS) system is fundamental to rights-based inclusive development, good governance and the realization of human rights. Achieving the goals of the 2030 Agenda to eradicate poverty and 'leave no one behind' is only possible if everyone is visible.

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A well-functioning CRVS system records information on vital events in a person’s life, such as birth and death, marriage and divorce, and issues relevant certificates as proof of such registration. Vital statistics is the data produced through these routine collections on births, deaths and causes of death. Where a CRVS has a high level of coverage and completeness, it is the preferred, and least expensive, source of vital statistics due to the ongoing and timely collection of data.

In 2010, UNFPA, the United Nations sexual and reproductive health agency, Tanzania provided financial support to the Zanzibar Civil Status Registration Agency (ZCRSA) to create an electronic and modern civil registration system. Prior to its launch civil registration was completed manually in Zanzibar. On April 25, 2016 the first electronic birth certificate was issued in Zanzibar.

The electronic birth registration system is currently operational in three out of 11 districts of Zanzibar: Urban District, West District A and West District B of Zanzibar’s Urban West Region. To date 40,957 births have been registered in Urban District and 6,747 births have been registered in West Districts (both A and B), a total of 47,704. The electronic system has issued 39,089 birth certificates.

<table>
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<th>2016 - 2019 Births registered</th>
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<tr>
<td>Total</td>
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<tr>
<td>47,704</td>
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<tr>
<td>Urban District</td>
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<td>40,957</td>
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<tr>
<td>West Districts (both A and B)</td>
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<tr>
<td>6,747</td>
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<tr>
<td>Birth certificates issued</td>
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<tr>
<td>39,098</td>
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The benefits and beneficiaries of a civil registration and vital statistics system

Zanzibaris

• **Registration of births:** The official recording of a child’s birth by a government agency is one of the most important events in a child’s life. It is a gateway to registering other vital events throughout the child’s life, and to securing a legal identity that facilitates social, economic and political inclusion and supports individuals in exercising their rights.

• **Registration of marriage/divorce:** Marriage and divorce registration are effective tools for women’s empowerment and for facilitating access to social benefits and social protection. A marriage certificate is evidence of a woman’s ability to legally claim her inheritance rights in the event of a spouse’s death, while a divorce certificate facilitates access to a pension, alimony, child support, and a fair share of the assets acquired in the marriage union.

• **Registration of deaths:** This closes an individual’s legal identity. When deaths are not registered, the dead remain legally alive, making it impossible for spouses, children, and families to inherit, or for the surviving spouse to legally remarry – depriving them of assets, reducing family income, and increasing poverty. It also artificially inflates a country’s population, compromising effective governance and policy planning.

• **Registration of stillbirths:** This is the registration of a stillborn child at or after 20 to 28 weeks of pregnancy (depending on the source). A stillbirth is where a baby is born without signs of life. Improved data on stillbirths provide a tool for targeted maternal health interventions, and will also assist the Revolutionary Government of Zanzibar (RGoZ) to monitor its progress against the Every Newborn Action Plan, which sets out a clear vision to end preventable newborn deaths and stillbirths by 2035.

Evidence-based data to inform policy, planning and performance and to enhance accountability

• Recording every life event is an opportunity to produce the most accurate, complete and timely statistics on the health and demographics of the population, and to maintain a national civil registry or population database.

• Knowing how many people live in Zanzibar and its subdivisions, the leading causes of death, the fertility rates and life expectancy, enhances public administration and provides decision-makers with information to better respond to the needs of society through more targeted, efficient and directed policies and programmes at national and local levels.
Because everybody counts

A robust CRVS system will play an important role in assisting the RGoZ to measure, monitor and meet its Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) targets. The strengthening of CRVS systems is also a specific SDG outcome in and of itself.

• SDG Target 16.9 states that by 2030 countries will provide ‘legal identity for all, including birth registration’. SDG Target 17.19 calls on the international community to support ‘effective and targeted capacity building in developing countries’ and is monitored by ‘the proportion of countries that have achieved 100 per cent birth registration, and 80 per cent death registration by 2030’.

• CRVS systems are the only source of data to monitor many of the SDG targets and associated indicators. As of March 2017, 67 indicators of the final list of proposed SDG indicators can be measured effectively by using data derived from CRVS systems. These indicators cover 12 of the 17 SDGs. Some targets and indicators are directly related to CRVS, such as measuring the ‘proportion of children under five years whose births have been registered with a civil authority’ or ‘by 2030, reduce the global maternal mortality ratio to less than 70 per 100,000 live births’.

Scaling-up the civil registration and vital statistics system in Zanzibar

In 2019, with UNFPA’s technical assistance, the ZCRSA developed a five-year costed plan to scale-up the electronic CRVS system beyond Urban District, West District A and West District B of Zanzibar’s Urban West Region to all districts of Zanzibar, with the goal of establishing a complete CRVS system and electronically recording all births and vital events by 2024/25.

ZCSRA has already opened offices in all of the districts and has requested UNFPA to continue with the initiative of registration points at hospitals and health facilities that provide maternity services. All hospitals and health centres with registration points will be able to send birth registration information directly to district offices who will then send it to headquarters, fast-tracking registration and the issuing of birth certificates.

The legal documentation of identity through the CRVS system facilitates social, economic and political inclusion and supports individuals in exercising their rights. The electronic CRVS system also provides timely information about the size and composition of the population in Zanzibar and will assist the RGoZ to design evidence-based policies and programmes tailored to the specific needs of the population. The RGoZ is also now better placed to monitor its progress against national and international targets and goals, including the SDGs.

Success story from the field

Enjoying the right to an identity in Zanzibar

Getting her child registered as quickly as possible was Leyla’s priority as her pregnancy progressed. She did not want her child to face any of the difficulties caused by the lack of a birth certificate. “I know that a birth certificate is everything…we need it for National IDs, for school registration, for passports and visas and for employment,” she said, adding that she did not want to deny her child any of these rights.

Getting a birth certificate as quickly as possible was one of Leyla’s motivations for delivering in hospital as she had heard that the birth registration process was faster for hospital deliveries than home births. However, contrary to her expectations even delivering in hospital did not expedite the process to get a birth certificate for her first-born, Suleiman. “It took me almost five months to get the birth certificate for Suleiman”, she said, adding that it involved a lot of toing and froing from the birth registration office. In the end she was grateful that it didn’t take up to seven months, as was the case for other mothers that she knew.

Suleiman is now 10-years-old, and the situation has improved. Leyla gave birth to her third child, Asrar, in 2018, and received a birth certificate for her daughter in just 17 days. All as a result of the electronic birth registration system introduced by the Zanzibar Civil Status Registration Agency (ZCSRA), with the support of UNFPA, in 2016.

This time around after giving birth to her child, Leyla was asked to go to the ZCSRA’s (formerly the Registration of Births and Deaths) offices with proof of identity to verify the information that had been recorded at the hospital. A day after she went to the offices, Leyla obtained the birth certificate for Asrar. “This has made me a proud mother” she says. She is happy because she now has birth certificates for all of her three children and also because this time around: “I did not spend so much time waiting!”

Leyla’s daughter is among the 39,000 children in Zanzibar that has benefited from the electronic birth registration system, which also issues a birth certificate. The registration system, currently operational in three out of 11 districts of Zanzibar, has reduced the waiting time for birth certificates from an average of three months to less than two weeks.

Commenting on the reduced waiting time for birth certificates Mr. Shaaban Abdalla, Deputy Director of ZCSRA, said that with the new electronic registration system birth certificates can be issued within a day if all of the required information is provided. “It takes more than a week sometimes because we have to wait for parents to come to the offices and verify the registration information, otherwise the time to issue a birth certificate is even shorter,” he said.

ZCSRA is now working with UNFPA to scale-up the system to all districts of Zanzibar. “With well-connected systems, mothers will be able to collect the birth certificate for their child from any district of Zanzibar, because with just one click the child’s information will be available in the system,” said Ali Simbamba, IT Officer, ZCSRA.

The RGoZ is on track to register all births by 2024/25, meaning that in the not too distant future there will be more proud mothers like Leyla in Zanzibar who have a birth certificate for all of their children.