



Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific**Seventy-sixth session**

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Item 5 (j) of the provisional agenda*

Review of the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in Asia and the Pacific: statistics**Report of the 5th meeting of the Regional Steering Group for Civil Registration and Vital Statistics in Asia and the Pacific****Note by the secretariat***Summary*

The present report on the work of the Regional Steering Group for Civil Registration and Vital Statistics in Asia and the Pacific contains an outline of its discussions and recommendations regarding the midterm review of the Asian and Pacific Civil Registration and Vital Statistics Decade, 2015–2024, preparations for the Second Ministerial Conference on Civil Registration and Vital Statistics in Asia and the Pacific, to be held from 6 to 9 October 2020, and working arrangements for the Steering Group.

At the Ministerial Conference, progress made toward meeting the goals of the Decade will be reviewed; civil registration systems will be promoted as the foundation for legal identity management; and the integration of civil registration and vital statistics into national and international development agendas, including the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, will be considered.

To facilitate preparations for the Ministerial Conference, the Steering Group, at its 5th meeting, held from 17 to 19 September 2019, made specific recommendations to member States, development partners and the secretariat. The Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific may wish to take note of the recommendations.

* ESCAP/76/L.1/Rev.1.

I. Background

1. The Asian and Pacific Civil Registration and Vital Statistics Decade, 2015–2024, was proclaimed at the Ministerial Conference on Civil Registration and Vital Statistics in Asia and the Pacific held in Bangkok in November 2014. Ministers and representatives gathered at the Ministerial Conference also proclaimed a shared vision that all people in Asia and the Pacific would benefit from universal and responsive civil registration and vital statistics systems by 2024, which would facilitate the realization of their rights and support good governance, health and development. In addition, they endorsed the Regional Action Framework on Civil Registration and Vital Statistics in Asia and the Pacific.

2. Since then, many Governments have made significant progress towards the goals and targets of the Regional Action Framework. At its seventy-fourth session, the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) adopted resolution 74/8, in which it decided to convene in 2020 a second Ministerial Conference on Civil Registration and Vital Statistics in Asia and the Pacific to review the midterm progress in the implementation of the Regional Action Framework, noting that despite considerable progress, many members and associate members still faced challenges in achieving the goals of the Decade and that there was an urgent need to improve civil registration and vital statistics systems for sustainable and inclusive development in the region.¹

3. At the Second Ministerial Conference, representatives will consider the future direction of efforts, including the promotion of civil registration as the foundation for legal identity and the alignment of the commitments of the Decade with the current global development context. They will also reiterate the commitment of members and associate members to the Regional Action Framework.

4. Since the proclamation of the Decade and the endorsement of the Regional Action Framework at the Ministerial Conference held in 2014, developments in the area of civil registration and vital statistics, in particular with regard to identity management, have gained increased momentum, and further clarity on the interaction between identity management and civil registration and vital statistics is needed.

II. Report on the 5th meeting of the Steering Group

5. At its 5th meeting, held from 17 to 19 September 2019, the Steering Group provided guidance to the secretariat and development partners on ensuring country responses to a midterm review questionnaire and continued preparatory work for the Ministerial Conference. The 5th meeting was the final meeting of the Steering Group as constituted for the period 2015–2019. At its 5th plenary meeting, on 31 May 2019, the Commission approved the list of Steering Group members for the period 2020–2024.²

¹ An extraordinary additional meeting was held by the Regional Steering Group for Civil Registration and Vital Statistics in Asia and the Pacific on 24 April 2020 in response to the evolving coronavirus disease (COVID-19) crisis and its implications for the Ministerial Conference. The annex to the present document contains an outline of the key discussions and recommendations of that meeting.

² See ESCAP/75/22.

6. Members of the Steering Group identified key thematic areas for the Ministerial Conference, provided guidance on its format, selected the Chair, Vice-Chairs and Rapporteur for the second half of the Decade (2020–2024) and decided on its direction of work.

7. The meeting was attended by representatives of the following members and associate members: Afghanistan; Armenia; Australia; Bangladesh; Bhutan; Cambodia; Fiji; Georgia; India; Indonesia; Iran (Islamic Republic of); Kazakhstan; Kiribati; Lao People’s Democratic Republic; Malaysia; Mongolia; New Zealand; Pakistan; Philippines; Sri Lanka; Thailand; United States of America; Uzbekistan; and Vanuatu. The meeting was also attended by representatives of the following development partners: the Data for Health Initiative of Bloomberg Philanthropies; Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR); Pacific Community (on behalf of the Brisbane Accord Group); Plan International; United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF); Vital Strategies; World Bank Group; World Health Organization (WHO); and World Vision International. Representatives of the following entities attended as observers: International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies; United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women); and United Nations Population Fund.

8. Representatives of the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA), the Centre of Excellence for Civil Registration and Vital Statistics Systems, and the Statistics Division of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the Secretariat gave presentations at the meeting via weblink.

A. Preparatory process for the midterm review of the Asian and Pacific Civil Registration and Vital Statistics Decade, 2015–2024: national midterm progress report

9. The Steering Group was briefed on the arrangements for assessing progress in the region as part of the midterm review of the Decade.

10. Representatives of Armenia, Fiji and Afghanistan gave presentations in which they highlighted lessons learned from their work to complete their midterm questionnaires. Strong collaboration under the guidance of a national civil registration and vital statistics coordination committee was an important factor in verifying data and finalizing the questionnaire, and in civil registration and vital statistics improvement efforts in general.

11. Following the presentations, the Steering Group discussed and identified mechanisms for providing Governments with continued support to increase the number and quality of responses.

Recommendations

12. The Steering Group recommended that the secretariat add a section on frequently asked questions about the midterm questionnaire and review process to the Civil Registration and Vital Statistics in Asia and the Pacific website (www.getinthepicture.org), and that it host a series of webinar support sessions for national focal points to assist Governments in completing their midterm questionnaires.

13. The difficulties that Governments faced in collecting and submitting responses to the baseline and midterm questionnaire were highlighted, and Governments were encouraged to share draft responses with the secretariat and development partners prior to finalization as a means of increasing quality.

14. The Steering Group highlighted the critical role of the Asia-Pacific Civil Registration and Vital Statistics Partnership in supporting country responses to the midterm questionnaire. The Steering Group specifically called on the Partnership to work closely with Governments and address data gaps which may prevent midterm questionnaires from being completed in full.

B. Preparations for the Second Ministerial Conference on Civil Registration and Vital Statistics in Asia and the Pacific: format and organization

1. Discussion

15. The secretariat briefed the Steering Group on opportunities for key themes, ideas for country and civil society engagement, possible special topic sessions, opportunities for showcasing regional and national achievements, and a proposed format for the Ministerial Conference.

16. The representative of New Zealand gave a presentation on the opportunities, challenges and modalities for engaging the private sector in the development of national civil registration systems, in which the important role of the private sector in supporting civil registrars in the Pacific was highlighted and possible opportunities for private sector companies to support the Ministerial Conference were outlined.

17. Following the presentations, the Steering Group discussed the proposed format for the Ministerial Conference and suggested key elements that should be included in order to ensure ministerial attendance, including a ministerial round table, high-level keynote speakers and opportunities to learn from other member States about improvements to civil registration and vital statistics.

2. Recommendations

18. The Steering Group recommended that the Ministerial Conference be held over a four-day period, from 6 to 9 October 2020, and that it comprise a three-day senior officials segment followed by a one-day ministerial segment.³

19. The Steering Group, noting the importance of civil society organizations in supporting civil registration and vital statistics, also recommended holding a two-day civil society forum to precede the Ministerial Conference, from 4 to 5 October 2020, possibly with a focus on youth.

20. The Steering Group agreed to invite companies working on civil registration and vital statistics to participate in the exhibition space but not in the formal deliberations at the Ministerial Conference.

21. The Steering Group encouraged member States to showcase their progress in improving civil registration and vital statistics at the Ministerial Conference, with a view to inspiring other countries to strengthen their systems and facilitating peer-to-peer learning and knowledge exchange. Development partners were also encouraged to use the exhibition space to highlight their work and achievements.

³ At the extraordinary meeting (see annex), the Steering Group recommended that the Ministerial Conference be postponed to the second half of 2021.

C. Key topics for plenary sessions at the Ministerial Conference

22. At its meeting in 2018, the Steering Group identified two elements as essential for aligning the commitments of the Decade with the current global development context: (a) the integration of civil registration and vital statistics into international and national development agendas and (b) the promotion of civil registration as a foundation for legal identity for all. It therefore agreed that further consideration should be given to those topics in the preparatory process for the Ministerial Conference.

1. Importance of civil registration and vital statistics in the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals and inclusive development

23. The secretariat underscored the relevance of voluntary national reviews and the 2030 Agenda to the development and strengthening of national civil registration and vital statistics systems and noted how voluntary national reviews could be used to highlight developments in civil registration and vital statistics systems at the national, regional and global levels.

24. The representative of Bangladesh gave a presentation on the experience of linking the development of national civil registration systems with the implementation of the 2030 Agenda in that country. The development and integration of a service delivery platform into the civil registration and vital statistics systems served as the foundation for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals there. It was important to establish a universal identity for use across multiple government services to streamline service delivery.

25. The representative of UNICEF gave a presentation on global data availability for measuring progress towards target 16.9 on providing legal identity for all, including birth registration. Collecting civil registration data and publishing vital statistics reports were necessary to monitor progress towards achieving Sustainable Development Goal 16 and good governance in general.

26. The representative of Malaysia gave a presentation on the national experience of using the civil registration and vital statistics systems to streamline the delivery of government services. The national coordination mechanism had played an important role in facilitating collaboration among ministries, and the integration of systems had enhanced the collection of data relevant to monitoring the Sustainable Development Goals.

27. The representative of Kiribati gave a presentation on national efforts aimed at improving the accessibility of civil-registration-related services, highlighting issues in overcoming geographical challenges in that country and current mechanisms for ensuring a national reach for registration services, as well as improved data collection efforts and more accessible services.

28. The representative of UNHCR gave a presentation on the recent high-level segment on statelessness and the subregional consultations on the midway point of the global campaign to end statelessness within a decade. Both birth registration and the issuance of national identity documents were crucial factors in the global efforts to prevent children from being born stateless. Strengthening civil registration systems in an effort to end statelessness would support the improved collection of quantitative and qualitative data on vulnerable and marginalized groups, including stateless populations.

29. The representative of Australia gave a presentation on national efforts to ensure complete registration for all and the outreach programmes specifically designed to reach that country's indigenous populations. Working in partnership

with other government agencies and key stakeholders including community-based organizations had been critical to the success of outreach efforts.

30. The representative of the Centre of Excellence for Civil Registration and Vital Statistics Systems gave a presentation on gender equality and the ways in which civil registration and vital statistics supported efforts to reduce gender inequalities, noting that women were less likely than men to have legal identities.

31. The representative of the Islamic Republic of Iran gave a presentation on the national civil registration and vital statistics coordination mechanism, describing how the development of a national civil registration and vital statistics strategy was instrumental in promoting cross-sectoral cooperation.

Discussion

32. The Steering Group agreed that well-functioning civil registration and vital statistics systems were essential for planning and achieving the Sustainable Development Goals related to social inclusion, health, education, gender equality and good governance. It also agreed that civil registration was the best source of continuous and timely data to monitor the Goals related to many health indicators such as maternal mortality and non-communicable diseases.

33. The Steering Group discussed specific topics warranting a spotlight during the Ministerial Conference, including civil registration and vital statistics as a tool for inclusion and demand- and supply-side barriers to achieving complete and universal civil registration. The Steering Group agreed that civil registration and vital statistics were an accelerator for the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals and for ensuring no one would be left behind.

2. Civil registration as the foundation for legal identity

34. The representative of UNICEF gave a presentation on the role of legal identity and birth registration in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. Birth registration bolstered child rights by allowing children to prove their age, define their family connections, exercise civil responsibilities and access social services. Civil registration services were foundational to the creation and sustainability of additional civil identification systems.

35. The representative of ECA said that the United Nations Legal Identity Expert Group had reached a consensus on defining the term “legal identity”. The representative also noted the importance of using civil registration and vital statistics systems as the foundation for national identity management systems and described a holistic approach to linking the separate functions.

36. The representative of the World Bank Group gave a presentation on legal identity, digital identity and the link between identity and civil registration systems. It was estimated that 1 billion people globally lacked any foundational identity credential to prove their legal identity, such as a national identity credential or birth certificate. Civil registration systems were important in linking the flow of population to the stock of population in identity systems.

37. The representative of Indonesia gave a presentation on experiences with linking the country’s national identity system to the civil registration system. The Government was on track to meet its 2019 target of registering and issuing birth certificates for 85 per cent of children under the age of 18. Registration completeness varied widely depending on geographical location, and some accessibility and institutional challenges had emerged with regard to achieving universal coverage. The task force charged with overseeing the national strategy

on population administration and the acceleration of vital statistics was making progress in its coordination efforts. The three objectives of the national strategy were aligned with the three goals of the Regional Action Framework.

38. The representative of Thailand gave a presentation on the national identity card and its link with the country's civil registration system. Integrating the civil registration and the national identity systems were considered the foundation for successfully achieving universal health coverage. The representative said that vital statistics production had improved once the civil registry had begun providing birth and death registration data to the national statistical office.

39. The representative of the Islamic Republic of Iran gave a presentation on the country's issues with the widespread use of identity information and personally identifiable information and how the issues were being addressed. Challenges in computerizing paper documents, records and identity services were highlighted.

40. The representative of Mongolia gave a presentation on the national integration of civil registration and vital statistics with identity systems. The development of a national vision for digitizing the registration process, including its "one-citizen, one-registration" goals, overlapped with the Decade. The representative also detailed the process for integrating government-managed databases in Mongolia and the improvements that had been made in recording vital statistics information.

41. The representative of Cambodia gave a presentation on the programme strategy for implementing the National Strategic Plan of Identification 2017–2026, which was aimed at guiding the acceleration of government efforts to increase the birth registration rate and identification in the country. The representative noted the existing civil registration and vital statistics systems landscape as well as the objectives for addressing challenges in ensuring registration for all, including the development of an integrated system.

(a) Discussion

42. The Steering Group discussed the challenges and opportunities for national civil registration and vital statistics stakeholders due to the growing momentum in developing identity management systems. It also discussed the possible inclusion of identity management agencies in the Ministerial Conference and methods for narrowing the scope and definitions of legal identity, digital identity, identity management and civil identification. It further discussed the importance of confidentiality and privacy protection and whether the use of biometrics in identity management should be addressed during the Ministerial Conference.

(b) Recommendations

43. The Steering Group recommended the following three topics as necessary for inclusion in the Ministerial Conference and its outcome document: (a) the integration of civil registration and vital statistics into national and international development agendas, including the 2030 Agenda; (b) the promotion of civil registration and vital statistics as the foundation for national legal identity initiatives; and (c) a report on progress since the inception of the Decade in 2015, based on the midterm review questionnaires.

44. The Steering Group recommended the production of background papers for the Ministerial Conference on the three key topics and encouraged development partners to support those efforts.

D. Additional topics for plenary sessions at the Ministerial Conference

45. The Steering Group examined the relevance of current issues for the implementation of the Regional Action Framework, including goals and targets, implementation steps and action areas, with a view to defining additional topics for deliberation and decision at the Ministerial Conference.

46. The representatives of New Zealand and the Philippines and the secretariat gave presentations on financing measures, public-private partnerships and the need to enhance human resource capabilities to establish and maintain well-functioning civil registration and vital statistics systems.

47. The representative of Plan International gave a presentation on the transformation of traditional models of civil registration through innovative technologies and tools. Both smaller and larger problems with implementing technological innovations were noted, including flexibility within administrations and financial or legal constraints on progress.

48. The representatives of Australia, Georgia and Kazakhstan gave presentations on their countries' respective national efforts to use civil registration records to produce vital statistics reports. The representative of Georgia highlighted a process for digitizing records and the creation of an electronic system, and the resulting benefit for data quality and the production of complete and timely vital statistics reports in that country. The representative of Australia noted the importance of the process for data sharing, including the memorandums of understanding between agencies to support data flow as well as the role of the national civil registration and vital statistics committee in establishing a national minimum data set for births, deaths and causes of death. The representative of Kazakhstan outlined underlying improvements to national birth and death registration processes, including the use of e-registration as a means of addressing coverage gaps.

49. The representative of India gave a presentation on present challenges and national progress towards capturing and registering every vital event. Several improvements had been made, including the creation of a nationwide database for monitoring births and deaths occurring in medical institutions, the development of uniform software for use by civil registrars when registering births and deaths, the translation of training manuals into 13 separate languages to assist registration officials, and efforts made to integrate technical applications at the national level for data consolidation.

50. The representative of WHO gave a presentation on the International Classification of Diseases, 11th Revision, which is the organization's tool for reporting and monitoring diseases. The latest revision improved the tool's user interface, updated scientific content, included links to other relevant classifications and terminologies, and provided multilingual support for translation. The representative also described the development and provided an outline of a curriculum on death certificates for the education of undergraduate medical students and noted the importance of cause of death certification for legal, statistical and epidemiological considerations.

51. The representative of Vital Strategies gave a presentation on the use of verbal autopsy within the context of the Regional Action Framework. Cause of death information was important for monitoring progress on the Sustainable

Development Goals and targets, for example target 3.1 on reducing maternal mortality, target 3.3 on ending epidemics and target 11.5 on reducing deaths from disasters. Given that the majority of the 60 million annual global deaths occurred outside health facilities and without the attention of medical practitioners, the use of verbal autopsy was very important.

1. Discussion

52. The Steering Group discussed the most urgent and important issues to be addressed during sessions of the Ministerial Conference. The discussion was focused on the role of the health sector and national statistical offices and the necessity of emphasizing the policy link among vital statistics information, death registration and cause of death information.

53. The Steering Group also discussed whether there was a need to reformulate target 3.E on verbal autopsy of the Regional Action Framework to further align it with the Sustainable Development Goals and practices on the use of verbal autopsy.

54. The Steering Group noted that the Sustainable Development Goals set an ambitious agenda for member States to produce a large quantity of relevant, reliable and timely data. One of the strategies to deal with that challenge was to make the best of existing sources of data, such as civil registration data, that were already being generated for other purposes. Since the inception of the Decade, several member States had produced their first vital statistics reports based on civil registration data.

55. The Steering Group discussed issues concerning the appropriate type and amount of information appearing on birth certificates issued to parents following the registration of a birth of a child. It also reviewed the draft of a background note, shared in advance of the 5th meeting, in which considerations of privacy and data confidentiality were addressed in the context of civil registration and vital statistics, including data sharing among agencies and organizations, data storage and the issue of consent.

56. The Steering Group discussed the best method for showcasing innovations at the Ministerial Conference and the need for a session focused on innovations to highlight new developments and practices.

57. The Steering Group discussed the importance of gender in civil registration and vital statistics improvement efforts and highlighted case studies on the nexus between civil registration and vital statistics, on the one hand, and gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls, on the other, including how those case studies could be beneficial for the Ministerial Conference.

58. The Steering Group highlighted the need to discuss costing and financing of civil registration and vital statistics and to weigh the costs and benefits of using civil registration and vital statistics systems in the delivery of government services, as well as to ensure the sustainability and accuracy of national identity systems.

59. The Steering Group highlighted the critical role of the Asia-Pacific Civil Registration and Vital Statistics Partnership in supporting improvement efforts in countries.

2. Recommendations

60. The Steering Group considered the following topics to be most relevant to the action areas of the Regional Action Framework and suggested them for inclusion in the plenary sessions of the Ministerial Conference: the role of the health sector and the benefits to it from civil registration and vital statistics systems; the role of civil registration and vital statistics data for good governance; innovation for civil registration and vital statistics; gender and civil registration and vital statistics; costing and financing of civil registration and vital statistics; and development partner support for civil registration and vital statistics.⁴

E. Other issues for consideration at the Ministerial Conference

61. The representative of the Pacific Community gave a presentation on the use of tools and guidelines developed by WHO to assess improvement frameworks in the context of the Pacific island nations. The adoption of a process-centric approach to analysing civil registration and vital statistics systems had led to the development of recommendations and ideas for system redesign and improvement. The use of business process mapping could be a means of advancing improvement analysis.

62. The representative of the Data for Health Initiative of Bloomberg Philanthropies gave a presentation on the legal review tools available to Governments for use in examining legal frameworks for civil registration and vital statistics systems.

63. The representative of the Lao People's Democratic Republic gave a presentation on the national legal framework in the country, noting the progress that had been made since the development of a national action plan for improving civil registration and a detailed action plan outlining key implementation steps to occur between 2020 and 2030.

1. Discussion

64. The Steering Group considered the following topics to be relevant for possible inclusion in special sessions or side events at the Ministerial Conference: the business process mapping approach to analysing civil registration and vital statistics systems; national and regional cross-border collaboration among relevant stakeholders; the process and tools for conducting legislative reviews, including with regard to the issues of privacy and data confidentiality; how well-functioning civil registration and vital statistics systems strengthen efforts to end statelessness; the use of the International Classification of Diseases, 11th Revision; financing mechanisms available for developing and strengthening civil registration and vital statistics systems; the role of biometrics in identification measures; the use of verbal autopsy for collecting death data; the use of digital certificates; and systems integration, including data integration and data sharing among agencies and ministries.

2. Recommendations

65. The Steering Group recommended that the Ministerial Conference include multiple side events and an exhibition space to allow for additional topics to be covered. It encouraged member States to showcase their achievements of the first half of the Decade, including success stories and best practices.

⁴ At the extraordinary meeting (see annex), the Steering Group recommended that an additional session on civil registration and vital statistics and COVID-19 be added to the Ministerial Conference.

F. Ministerial Conference outcome document

66. The secretariat gave a presentation on the development of the Second Ministerial Conference outcome document. It noted lessons learned from the Ministerial Conference held in 2014 and described the main purposes of the outcome document, including its use in advocacy, in emphasizing high-level commitments and in highlighting accountability in the context of the Regional Action Framework, as well as its use as a referential document by civil society organizations.

67. Following the presentations, the Steering Group discussed the best way for the outcome document to reflect the connection between civil registration and vital statistics and key global or regional compacts made since 2014. It also discussed how the outcome document could reflect priority areas of support for the remainder of the Decade and which specific language, ideas and elements should be used in its drafting

Recommendations

68. The Steering Group recommended that the following key elements be reflected in the outcome document of the Second Ministerial Conference: political commitment to continued improvement of civil registration and vital statistics in Asia and the Pacific; regional progress and remaining challenges in meeting national targets; the integration of civil registration and vital statistics into the implementation of the 2030 Agenda; the promotion of civil registration and vital statistics as the foundation for legal identity; the link between civil registration, the health sector and public health outcomes; the need for civil registration and vital statistics systems in delivering services; the promotion of South-South cooperation; a commitment to the monitoring and evaluation of civil registration and vital statistics system outcomes; and subregional developments and strategies for civil registration and vital statistics.

G. Facilitating participation at the Ministerial Conference to support accelerated progress

69. The Steering Group held a brainstorming session to identify methods for ensuring that the Ministerial Conference would attract a suitable audience to achieve the objective of accelerating action towards improving civil registration and vital statistics in the region.

1. Discussion

70. The Steering Group highlighted the need to develop short briefings for ministerial-level participants on pertinent issues. It also highlighted how background documentation for sessions would be key in the preparation of participants.

71. Multiple creative ideas emerged for involving prominent keynote speakers, identifying civil registration and vital statistics champions and showcasing individual stories to highlight the importance of civil registration and vital statistics.

72. The Steering Group emphasized the need for country delegations to the Ministerial Conference to reflect the diversity and multisectoral nature of the issue and to include participants from multiple agencies, as civil registration and vital statistics were a critical function of Government with profound impacts on the daily lives of people and the future development of countries.

2. Recommendations

73. The Steering Group stressed the importance of forming appropriate country delegations in line with the whole-of-government approach to civil registration and vital statistics improvements and noted its joint responsibility with development partners and the secretariat to facilitate that outcome, including through targeted outreach and follow-up on invitations.

74. The Steering Group sought the support of the Asia-Pacific Civil Registration and Vital Statistics Partnership in outreach efforts to boost government participation in the Ministerial Conference, including by liaising with the country offices of the members of the Partnership and by funding travel and other measures.

75. In light of the multisectoral nature of civil registration and vital statistics, members and associate members of ESCAP were encouraged to include in their national delegations ministers and senior officials responsible for civil registration, statistics, health and planning, as well as participants from other pertinent ministries, such as education or social development, local government, and non-governmental organizations and civil society, depending on the country context.

H. Working arrangements of the Steering Group

76. Following the selection and approval of its list of members for the second half of the Decade (2020–2024) in 2019, the Steering Group selected the following leadership bureau for the period:

Chair: Fiji, Ms. Kamni Naidu, Administrator-General, Ministry of Justice

Vice-Chair: Afghanistan, Mr. Hasibullah Mowahed, Deputy Director General on Professional Affairs, Central Statistics Organization

Vice-Chair: Armenia, Ms. Ani Mkhitarian, Head, Civil Status Acts Registration Agency, Ministry of Justice

Vice-Chair: Malaysia, Ms. Nazaria Baharudin, Deputy Chief Statistician (Technical Development and Social), Department of Statistics

Rapporteur: New Zealand, Mr. Jeff Montgomery, Registrar-General, Department of Internal Affairs

Annex

Report of the extraordinary meeting of the Regional Steering Group for Civil Registration and Vital Statistics in Asia and the Pacific, held on 24 April 2020

1. The Regional Steering Group for Civil Registration and Vital Statistics in Asia and the Pacific and the 15 co-organizers of the Second Ministerial Conference on Civil Registration and Vital Statistics in Asia and the Pacific held an extraordinary virtual meeting on 24 April 2020 to discuss the impact of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic in Asia, the Pacific and globally on the organization of the Ministerial Conference and its possible postponement. The Steering Group considered three scenarios: holding the Ministerial Conference as planned from 6 to 9 October in a face-to-face event; holding the Ministerial Conference as planned from 6 to 9 October but virtually; and postponing the Ministerial Conference to 2021.

2. Considering the uncertainties regarding travel restrictions and bans on large public gatherings as well as the strain the COVID-19 pandemic has placed on many of the key stakeholders involved in civil registration and vital statistics systems, the Steering Group recommends postponing the Ministerial Conference to 2021, with a strong preference for the second half of 2021.

3. The co-organizers of the Ministerial Conference concurred, raising concerns that the communications efforts and preparations for the Conference could suffer, as some key partners (namely, the United Nations Children's Fund; the United Nations Development Programme; the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women); the United Nations Population Fund; the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees; the World Health Organization; the World Bank; the Pacific Community; the Centre of Excellence for Civil Registration and Vital Statistics Systems; World Vision International; the CDC Foundation; Vital Strategies; the Data for Health Initiative of Bloomberg Philanthropies; Plan International; and the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific) are preoccupied with the COVID-19 crisis.

4. The three main stakeholder groups in civil registration and vital statistics systems are the health sector, civil registrars and national statistical offices. The response to the COVID-19 crisis requires additional work from ministries of health, preventing them from fully engaging in preparations for the Ministerial Conference, and most likely from participating in the Conference, should it take place in 2020. Additionally, given the high importance currently accorded to mortality statistics as well as other statistics during the COVID-19 response, civil registrars and national statistical offices are also under pressure and will have to catch up with delayed and postponed work as soon as the situation stabilizes. Postponement of the Conference until 2021 will hopefully be sufficiently past the critical phase of the pandemic to ensure that government officials will have time to devote to intergovernmental work. The participation of many ministers is expected, but they are unlikely to be able to join, even virtually, if COVID-19 is still active in their countries.

5. The main reason for holding the Ministerial Conference is to ensure that the substantial momentum with regard to improving civil registration and vital statistics, based on the agreements made in 2014, is maintained and accelerated. For this to happen, interest needs to be generated not just regarding the Conference itself, but also for the events organized in conjunction with the Conference. The substantial interest from partners, civil society organizations

and countries in exhibition space and presenting side events during the Conference underlines the need for a forum where countries can share experiences and learn from each other.

6. Indeed, the Steering Group, at its 5th meeting, made clear its recommendations for highly interactive sessions, site visits to the Thai registration authority (that is, the Bureau of Registration Administration), ministerial roundtables and opportunities for ministers to speak about their achievements in the first half of the Asian and Pacific Civil Registration and Vital Statistics Decade, 2015–2024. Holding the Ministerial Conference as planned from 6 to 9 October 2020 as a virtual event would severely curtail or even invalidate these recommendations.

7. A postponement of the Ministerial Conference would also allow for sufficient time for civil registration and vital statistics systems to formalize the lessons learned from the COVID-19 situation. It is clear that in countries where death registration coverage is low and cause-of-death reporting of poor quality, Governments will struggle to understand the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the important lessons for the future. The Steering Group suggests that these issues be addressed in a dedicated session at the Conference.

Recommendations

8. The Steering Group therefore recommends postponing the Ministerial Conference to the second half of 2021 for the following reasons:

(a) It will enable participation at a higher level and volume, as key participants – both governmental and development partners – are currently occupied with COVID-19 responses;

(b) It will increase the value of the meeting to Governments as their representatives will be able to fully engage in the Conference through participation in interactive sessions, networking, tours and side events;

(c) It will allow issues which have arisen due to COVID-19 or that are relevant to the response to be addressed.
