

Regional strategy for the improvement of civil registration and vital statistics systems

2014–2019

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**World Health
Organization**

Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean

WHO Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

WHO. Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean

Regional strategy for the improvement of civil registration and vital statistics system 2014 – 2019 / World Health Organization. Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean

p.

WHO-EM/HST/216/E

1. Vital Statistics 2. Data Collection - standards 3. Regional Health Planning 4. Health Plan Implementation 5. Population Characteristics I. Title II. Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean

(NLM Classification: WA 950)

World Health Organization 2014

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Document WHO-EM/HST/216/E

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Foreword

In 2012, strengthening health information became one of the key priorities of the work of WHO in the Eastern Mediterranean Region. Civil registration and vital statistics are among the key components of effective health information systems. Reliable mortality statistics for monitoring health status require a strong and effective civil registration and vital statistics system, where all births and deaths are registered and causes of death are certified and reported. Progress in health development cannot be measured without adequate information about births, deaths and causes of death. The work initiated in 2012 led to a resolution by the 59th session of the WHO Regional Committee for the Eastern Mediterranean (EM/RC59/R.3) calling upon Member States to strengthen health information systems including civil registration and vital statistics.

Accurate information on the current status of civil registration and vital statistics systems in countries of the Region was not widely available until recently. A rapid assessment was carried out by stakeholders from the health, statistical and registration sectors using a standard assessment tool in all countries during the period from November 2012 to January 2013. This was followed by an in-depth review of civil registration and vital statistics systems in most countries. The assessment confirmed major gaps in most countries and highlighted significant areas of concern for the Region. Based on this assessment, only one quarter of countries, representing just 5% of the regional population, were considered to have well-functioning systems. More than half of the population in the Region live in countries where civil registration is weak and dysfunctional. More than 6 million births, representing approximately 40% of total annual births in the Region, are not legally recognized or captured by registration systems and around two thirds of all annual deaths are not being registered.

Based on extensive work done by WHO in collaboration with Member States and other stakeholders, a strategy on improving civil registration and vital statistics was developed and endorsed by the WHO Regional Committee in 2013 (EM/RC60/R.7). This publication presents the regional strategy, which is aimed at improving civil registration and vital statistics systems in the Region in close collaboration with partners and national counterparts. It was developed against a backdrop of growing global and regional momentum for improving civil registration and vital statistics, as reflected in the recommendations of the Commission on Information and Accountability for Women's and Children's Health, the regional Framework for Action to implement the United Nation Political Declaration on Noncommunicable Diseases and the 2013 Report of the High-Level Panel on the Post-2015 Development Agenda.

The strategy is built around seven strategic domains and interventions. It outlines country actions and supportive activities at regional level, and includes a framework for monitoring and evaluation of implementation of strategic actions taken at country and regional levels. The challenge now for every country of the Region is to mobilize high-level political commitment and engage the relevant sectors in developing and implementing a national action plan based on the directions of the regional strategy. For global and regional partners, the next step is to secure long term and sustainable support to Member States and in mobilizing countries to recognize the importance of improved civil registration and vital statistics system.

Dr Ala Alwan
Regional Director, WHO Eastern Mediterranean Region

1. Introduction

1.1 The importance of civil registration and vital statistics

Civil registration is defined as the compulsory, permanent, continuous and universal recording of the occurrence and characteristics of vital events pertaining to the population as provided through decree or regulation in accordance with the legal requirements of a country (1). Civil registration is carried out primarily for the purpose of establishing the legal documents provided for by the law. These records are also a main source of vital statistics. Complete coverage, accuracy and timeliness of civil registration are essential for quality vital statistics. Vital events that are typically recorded include live births, deaths, fetal deaths, marriages, divorces, adoptions and recognitions or legitimizations.

From the perspective of individuals, civil registration provides a unique and crucial service. Through the official recording of births, deaths, marriages, divorces and adoption, individuals have the documentary evidence often required to secure recognition of their legal identity, their family relationships, their nationality and their ensuing rights. In turn, access to public services, such as health, education, welfare and social protection, is strengthened and statelessness may be prevented. Legal proof of identity is necessary for individuals to participate in the modern economy, by enabling them to seek employment, exercise electoral rights, claim inheritance, transmit property, open bank accounts, access credit, obtain passports and driving licenses (2). Universal civil registration is recommended by many United Nations resolutions as it helps safeguard human rights "...the human right of everyone to be recognized everywhere as a person before the law..."(3) and enables individuals to access benefits, inter alia, in the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, (4) the United Nations Millennium Declaration (5) and the Declaration on the Right to Development (6).

For countries and governments, the value of civil registration and vital statistics systems resides in their contribution to multiple aspects of public administration, governance, identity management, democratic processes, vital statistics and legal and social protection. Within governments, civil registration systems are the responsibility of a number of ministries or departments, including ministries of health, ministries of interior, ministries of justice and national statistical offices.

Civil registration is a fundamental function of government. Civil registration and vital statistics systems generate crucial evidence for economic decision-making. For example, a functioning civil registration system is essential to a country's ability to generate income through tax. The recording of age is also essential for citizens to be able to access their pensions.

Civil registration systems generate administrative data that can be compiled to produce vital statistics that serve the needs of multiple sectors. Indeed, a well-functioning civil registration system is the most effective and efficient data source of vital statistics (7). Unlike other sources of vital statistics, such as censuses or household surveys, civil registration systems generate statistics on population dynamics and health on a continuous basis for the country as a whole and at a local level for its administrative subdivisions (8).

The global commitment to the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) has highlighted the urgent need for reliable, continuous and comparable vital statistics. Progress cannot be measured without adequate information about births, deaths and causes of death. As attention broadens to understanding and addressing the challenges posed by the post-2015 agenda – including disease control, prevention and management of noncommunicable diseases, human rights, equity, sustainable development and access to basic services – it is becoming ever more apparent that weak civil registration and vital statistics systems impair the ability of countries to monitor and strengthen targeted development policies, particularly for health (9).

High-quality vital statistics make it possible for governments and donors to target resources to the areas of most need within a country, and allow citizens, governments and donors to evaluate the use of scarce resources. For instance, gender statistics, including sex-disaggregated data, assist in the formulation of evidence-based health policy and in addressing issues related to gender equality and equal opportunities.

The health sector is greatly reliant on well-functioning civil registration and vital statistics systems in order to monitor epidemiological change. The pace of change in fertility and mortality patterns has never been faster than in recent decades. Estimates based on statistical models cannot keep up with these changes and are no substitutes for country-based empirical data tracking such trends at national and subnational levels.

In addition to being a beneficiary and major user of vital statistics, the health sector plays an important role in contributing to the functioning of civil registration systems. Ministries of health have an extensive network of health care facilities, including hospitals, health centres and health posts, and outreach clinics. This stable and functional network provides a mechanism for reaching individuals and families in the community, thus enabling health authorities to provide notification of births and deaths to family members as well as to the civil registration authorities. Moreover, the health sector has the mandate and expertise to certify deaths and their causes to the relevant authorities.

WHO's mandate as defined in its Constitution of 1948 relates to the attainment of the highest standard of health for all peoples and "the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health as one of the fundamental rights of every human being

without distinction of race, religion, political belief, economic or social conditions.” These cherished goals cannot be achieved unless every individual is counted and the health needs of all individuals are factored in national and local health plans. For example, universal coverage with essential services such as immunization will only be possible when every person is identified and registered. Through the formal registration process, individuals are made visible and become eligible to benefit from social interventions, in relation to both the economic and social determinants of health and the proximate causes of poor health outcomes.

The importance of civil registration in enabling the definition of accurate numerators and denominators for population health indicators is not limited to child and maternal health or infectious diseases programmes. It is equally important in relation to the emerging challenge of noncommunicable diseases. The civil registration and vital statistics system generates statistics on population change and demographic factors that play an important role in noncommunicable disease prevalence and that enable targeted screening and intervention programmes. Well-functioning civil registration and vital statistics systems are also crucial for identifying inequities in health and developing strategies to achieve universal health coverage and equitable health financing policies.

1.2 The multistakeholder nature of civil registration and vital statistics systems

Civil registration and vital statistics systems involve a wide range of stakeholders including individuals who need to register vital events, the broader society that supports civil registration, and government ministries such as departments of the interior, legal affairs, health, planning and social development as well as the office responsible for national statistics. The health and population statistics generated by civil registration and vital statistics systems are used across sectors and at all levels, as well as by donors, the private and business sectors and civil society organizations.

The multistakeholder nature of civil registration and vital statistics requires robust mechanisms for coordination and collective action. A high degree of collaboration is also essential in the light of increasing population diversity in countries of the Eastern Mediterranean Region, for reasons including internal and external migration, statelessness and population displacement resulting from natural disasters and armed conflict. Actions to ensure that civil registration and vital statistics systems are functional and inclusive are essential for guiding national responses with evidence-based policy-making and for the progressive realization of the basic human rights of all individuals in the Region.

2. Regional situation review

2.1 Evidence of need

Knowledge about the importance of civil registration and vital statistics systems in ministries of health in the Region was not widely available until recently. The reasons for this knowledge gap include the fact that these systems function largely outside the governance of the ministries of health, the weakness of health information systems within Member States, and low awareness about the role and importance of civil registration and vital statistics in the Region. Following a 2012 resolution of the WHO Regional Committee for the Eastern Mediterranean (EM/RC59/R.3) calling upon Member States to strengthen health information systems including civil registration, the Regional Office started concerted efforts to address civil registration and vital statistics systems. Information on the status of these systems was generated from several sources.

- A rapid assessment carried out by stakeholders from the health, statistical and registration sectors using a standard assessment tool (WHO and University of Queensland) conducted in all countries during the period from November 2012 to January 2013.
- An in-depth review of civil registration and vital statistics systems conducted in 2013 in eight countries representing categories at vastly different stages of civil registration and vital statistics development.
- Qualitative information obtained from discussions in two meetings in which a range of stakeholders from almost all countries in the Region were represented together with representatives of development agencies. The first of these meetings was held in Dubai in January 2013 and the second in May 2013 in Cairo.

The results indicate substantial weaknesses in civil registration and vital statistics systems in most countries and highlight significant areas of concern for the Region.

- Only 26% of countries of the Region (6 countries) describe their civil registration and vital statistics systems as satisfactory. These six countries comprise only 5% of the regional population (Fig.1).
- Another 8 countries, comprising 42% of the Region's population, have civil registration and vital statistics systems described as functional but with limitations with regard to quality.
- 53% of the population of the Region (316 million) live in 8 countries where civil registration and vital statistics systems are described as weak or dysfunctional.
- More than 6 million births, representing approximately 40% of total annual births in the Region, are not legally recognized or captured by registration systems.

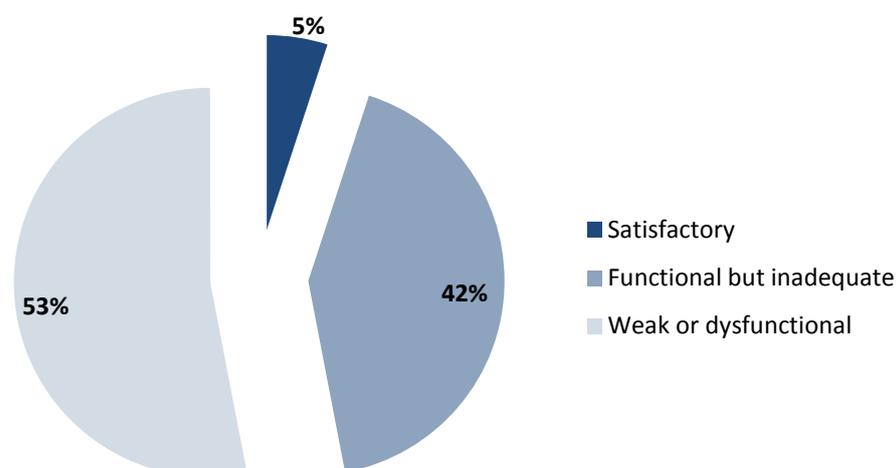


Fig.1. Distribution of regional population in relation to functionality of civil registration and vital statistics systems

- There is considerable heterogeneity in the performance of civil registration and vital statistics systems across the Region (Fig.2). For example, birth registration completeness was reported to range from 0% in Somalia to 100% in Egypt, Kuwait, Qatar and United Arab Emirates, with a regional weighted average of 62%. Death registration was reported to range from 0% in Somalia to 100% in Kuwait, Qatar and United Arab Emirates with a weighted regional average of 23%.
- At least 3 million deaths, or two thirds of all annual deaths in the Region, are not being registered (Fig.3). Of the deaths that are registered annually, it is estimated that 56% were medically certified and coded according to the International Classification of Diseases (ICD). However, the assessment of the quality of coding in a number of countries has shown that a substantial proportion of deaths are coded to inappropriate or ill-defined causes.

Further comprehensive assessments are needed to accurately estimate the levels of completeness of birth and death registration and to design appropriate and effective interventions. Unless the issues relating to the poor performance of civil registration and vital statistics systems receive immediate and concerted attention by global, regional and national stakeholders, the continued neglect of such systems will impede individual, economic and social development.

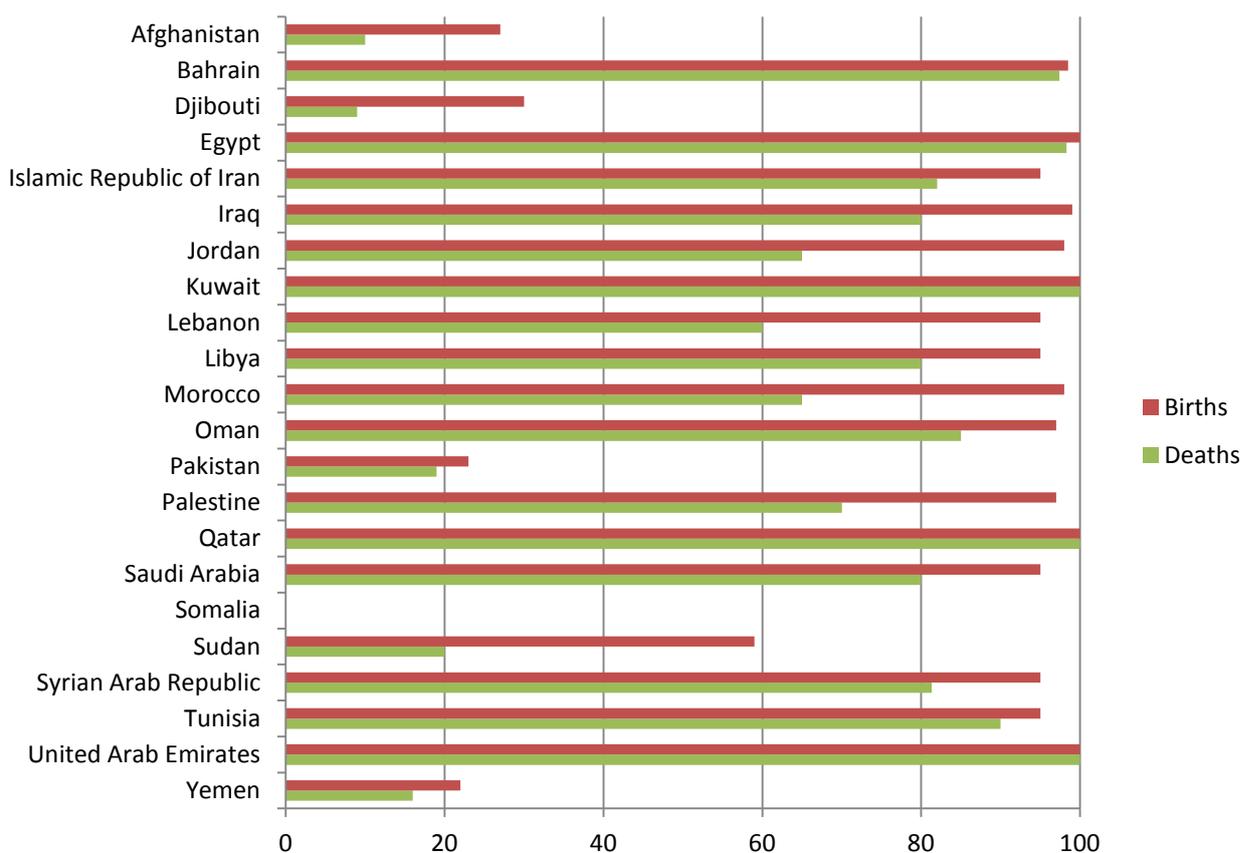


Fig.2. Percentage of births and deaths registered in countries, 2012–2013

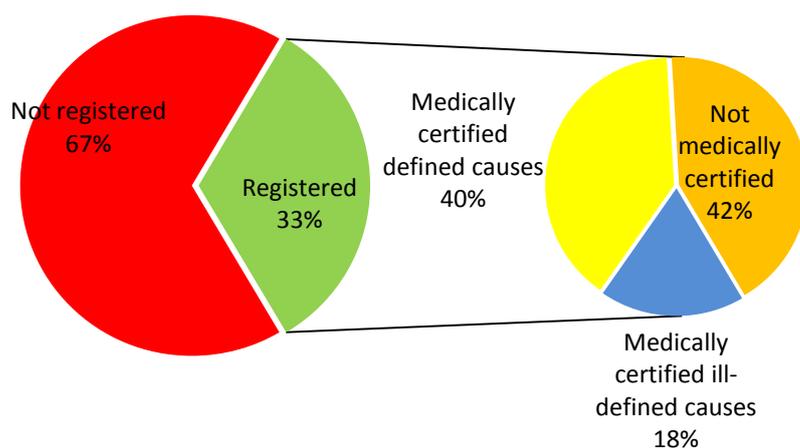


Fig.3. Distribution of registered deaths in the Region, 2012–2013

2.2 Major challenges

The underlying causes of the weaknesses of civil registration and vital statistics systems in the Region include both internal shortcomings within the systems and challenges in the broader contexts within which the systems function. The following is a summary of the challenges.

Awareness and appreciation of the importance of civil registration and vital statistics: Whereas in many settings the potential of civil registration and vital statistics systems for security and legal purposes is understood, there is little appreciation of their role for health planning and social development, even within ministries of health and other social and economic sectors. There is also lack of awareness among the general public of the importance and potential benefits of registration. Moreover, the cross-sectoral nature of civil registration and vital statistics systems complicates governance and creates uncertainty about allocation of primary responsibility for strengthening such systems.

Legal framework: 55% of the countries in the Region reported having in place adequate legislation with enforcement procedures in place with regard to the compulsory nature of civil registration and vital statistics. At the same time, the remaining countries reported either inadequate legislation or failure to enforce existing legislation. A strong legal foundation for these systems is critical for their functionality and for compliance by both the public and official circles in government. The strengthening of legal frameworks and the disaggregation of data to reflect the inclusivity of civil registration and vital statistics, including for stateless persons, migrants, asylum seekers and refugees, will contribute to the progressive realization of the basic human rights of all individuals.

Registration infrastructure: Although 77% of the countries reported sufficient registration offices for citizens to register births and deaths, 9 countries reported that only the capital city has registration offices. Only 18% of the countries reported that necessary supplies and equipment are generally available, with other countries reporting widespread shortages of equipment and evident need for training of staff. Such inadequacies limit the ability of the civil registration and vital statistics system to deal with all vital events for all persons and to assure quality of the entire process of registration, certification, storage, retrieval and transmission of legal and statistical information. The availability of adequate infrastructure that is readily accessible is essential for system functionality. Special measures are needed to protect vital records from loss or damage due to conflict or natural disasters.

Governance, coordination and organization of civil registration and vital statistics systems: In most countries, multiple governmental entities are involved in aspects of civil registration and vital statistics, as well as the private sector. Only 32% of countries reported good levels of collaboration; interagency committees or coordinating bodies are not generally in existence or functional. There is a need to create effective

governance bodies and/or coordination mechanisms to ensure complementarity of inputs and actions and avoid duplication and fragmentation and to ascertain the close coordination with the international and national humanitarian actors in addressing an inclusive civil registration and vital statistics in migrants and refugee hosting communities.

Quality of registration: The inadequate quality of civil registration is reflected in the low figures of birth and death registration. However, quality problems are widespread even where civil registration and vital statistics systems are functional. Thus the quality of data capture, storage, retrieval and transmission varies greatly. In many settings, paper-based systems are the norm, with all the ensuing constraints in terms of timeliness and data quality assurance. Only 27% of countries reported fully electronic civil registration and vital statistics systems. The quality of registration is also reflected in the quality of the legal documentation provided to individuals and in their ability to obtain validated copies of birth and death certificates for administrative purposes. Moreover, many countries in the Region are or have recently been subject to conflict and civil unrest during which the challenges to universal birth and death registration are severely increased. Registration records may be destroyed and fighting may impede access to the civil registry.

Certification of death: Almost all countries in the Region report that certification of deaths and causes of death are problematic. While 36% of countries report always using the standard international form of medical certificate as defined by WHO for registering cause of death, in the remaining countries this is limited to settings such as hospitals (10). The use of the ICD death certification and coding rules is inadequate in all countries. This is mainly due to limited exposure to cause of death certification during medical training and insufficient training and supervision of statistical coders.

Conflict and humanitarian emergencies: Several countries of the Region are affected by conflict and civil strife, resulting in population displacement, migration, family separation, increased risk of mortality and threats to public health. Countries affected by conflict are less likely to have working civil registration systems that register births and deaths and record conflict-related deaths. Even where registration systems continue to function, physical destruction may damage or destroy vital records. Special measures need to be put in place to overcome barriers to registration in situations of displacement and conflict and to ensure that migrants and refugees are able to access documentation relating to births, deaths, identity and family relationships. The availability of disaggregated data on migrants and refugees in hosting countries is essential for the progressive realization of the basic human rights of all individuals living under the jurisdiction of countries of the Region.

3. Regional strategy for improvement of civil registration and vital statistics

3.1 Background and rationale

The regional strategy was developed against a backdrop of growing global and regional momentum for civil registration and vital statistics. For example, the 2013 Report of the High-Level Panel on the Post-2015 Development Agenda identified, as part of good governance and effective institutions, the need to provide “free and universal legal identity, such as birth registrations.” (11) By making birth registration a central indicator of sustainable development goals, birth registration is now clearly high on the post-2015 development agenda.

The first Global Summit on Civil Registration and Vital Statistics, held in April 2013, was organized by WHO and the Health Metrics Network in collaboration with the United Nations Economic Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP), United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), other United Nations partners and Plan International, and was attended by governments, United Nations agencies, development banks and nongovernmental organizations. The Call to Partner Action calls on all relevant actors – states, United Nations agencies, development banks, nongovernmental organizations and donors to join in a global alliance to strengthen civil registration and vital statistics systems and to align actions behind country and regional leadership.

Important developments have taken place at a regional level where regional United Nations agencies, in particular, the United Nations Economic Commissions for Africa (UNECA) (12) and the UNESCAP (13) and development banks including the Islamic Development Bank, the African Development Bank (AfDB) and Asian Development Bank (ADB), have led coordination and funding efforts to improve civil registration and vital statistics systems from social inclusion, equity and economic development perspectives.

Bearing these broader developments in mind, the regional strategy is positioned as the vehicle for the medium term (2014–2019) improvement of civil registration and vital statistics systems within the countries of the Region. It is being formulated at an opportune time when there is an increased global recognition of the value of such systems as an important national resource for individuals and society in every country. There is also heightened commitment by a wide range of development

partners for the cause of civil registration, promising an array of resources available for promoting the development and improvement of civil registration and vital statistics systems both globally and regionally.

3.2 Purpose and scope

The main elements of the regional strategy were formulated based on the deliberations of the Cairo stakeholders meeting and other inputs and initiatives from key regional partners. The strategy is intended to represent a commitment by countries and development partners to make sustained and coordinated efforts to improve the coverage and completeness of civil registration and the availability of timely, accurate and quality vital statistics in all countries in the Region by 2019.

The goal of the regional strategic plan is, through improved civil registration and the increased availability and use of reliable vital statistics derived therefrom, to contribute to the improvement of evidence-based policymaking, efficiency in resource allocation and good governance, as well as the progressive realization of the basic rights of all individuals.

The strategy was formulated to guide improvement in civil registration and vital statistics systems in the Region over the period 2014–2019. It is built around seven strategic domains under which the work on improvement of the systems is to be focused. Each of these seven domains serves as a thematic area or an umbrella under which significant improvement efforts could be undertaken. Within each of the seven domains it is possible to set objectives appropriate for the country context. A list of proposed interventions under each of the domains offers options from which countries can select to achieve the targeted improvement.

The strategy was developed with clear recognition of the wide diversity among countries as far as the status of development of their civil registration and vital statistics system. The strategic directions and the potential actions under them are to be adapted and adopted according to the context and capacities of the country and the needs of its civil registration and vital statistics system as revealed by the rapid and in-depth assessments.

3.3 Strategic directions and proposed country actions

Ensure sound legal and regulatory framework for civil registration and vital statistics systems

Ensuring that appropriate legislation is in place is a critical first step in the overall plan for strengthening a country's civil registration system. The legal framework needs to reflect the national system of birth and death registration in place, the local

practices for certifying deaths and disposing of deceased persons, the method by which the information is compiled into vital statistics and who is responsible for disseminating them.

Legislation is essential to ensure the universality and continuity of the civil registration system, the regular dissemination of data, the confidentiality of individual information and to clarify the functions and responsibilities of the different government agencies involved.

Proposed country actions

- Establish or strengthen national committees to review current civil registration and vital statistics legal frameworks and take into account policy and programme needs, social change, and technology developments. The role of the committee is to introduce improved rules and regulations for registering vital events and generating vital statistics taking in consideration security and confidentiality policies.
- Put in place or strengthen the national Civil Registration Act as a fundamental requirement for a sustainable and functioning civil registration system. The Act must be associated with rules and regulations that specify what information is to be collected, by whom, from whom and by when; who is responsible for compiling the information and transforming it into statistics and who is tasked with management and dissemination of the data, and who is responsible for the long-term archiving and safekeeping of registration records. An inclusive civil registration and vital statistics system must also address issues of statelessness and displacement among migrants and refugees in countries.
- Legal systems and practices vary from country to country, which means that legislation will also vary. However, the basic statutes should be similar and should, if possible, align with the UN principles and international standards for civil registration and vital statistics while acknowledging prevailing cultural practices.
- Utilize UN guidelines for establishing the legal basis for civil registration for strengthening country legal frameworks and developing relevant regulations covering all important aspects of a national civil registration system. Examples of comprehensive, organic civil registration laws are available can be used for guidance (14,15).

Strengthen the registration infrastructure and capacities

High quality, standards-based registration of vital events enables the production of reliable and complete vital statistics, which support national and local decision-making across a range of social and economic sectors to facilitate evidence-based policy (1). To function effectively, civil registration systems depend on adequate annual budgets from government, to pay staff and to create and maintain sufficient registration facilities.

Proposed country actions

- Analyse the business processes within civil registration and vital statistics systems with a view to identifying options for enhanced cost-effectiveness as well as resource gaps.
- Allocate sufficient and sustainable investments towards incremental improvements in civil registration systems.
- Link civil registration and vital statistics strengthening to important country strategies such as personal identification, population registers and other relevant national plans related to vital events and vital statistics.
- Enhance capacities and skills of staff that register events and compile the data into statistics, and ensure the provision of the tools and supplies needed to carry out their work.
- Introduce computerized systems, ensuring provision of budgets for equipment, maintenance and continuing staff training.
- Seize the opportunities offered by innovation to accelerate progress in civil registration and vital statistics systems, and achieve cost-effective and sustainable solutions and new approaches to facilitate registration
- Utilize computerization and use of information and communication technology (ICT) to promote timeliness of different processes, including data production and management; ICT also facilitates the verification, validation and sharing of vital statistics data and to shift registration processes from paper to electronic.
- Integrate registration points into hospitals is an effective way to improve the number of registrations.
- Establish collaboration with religious authorities and cemetery officials to improve coverage of death registration.
- Improve coverage of birth and death registration through the use of other public facilities such as schools and health clinics for notification and registration.
- Ensure adequate annual funds are allocated for operation of the vital statistics and civil registration systems. In this context, adequate means sufficient to carry out the intended functions within specified time limits and to the satisfaction of users, particularly government planning departments.
- Introduce mobile registration facilities especially in remote and hard-to-reach sectors of the population.
- Learning from good practice and seek international collaboration (technical and financial assistance).

Remove the barriers to registration and legal identity

Develop strategies to identify and remove barriers to registration and the acquisition of legal identity for everyone, in particular those that impede access by persons from marginalized groups including migrants, stateless persons, asylum seekers, refugees and other people of concern to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner on Human Rights (UNHCR).

Proposed country actions

- Foster enhanced public awareness of the importance and benefit of civil registration and vital statistics to individuals and communities.
- Adopt policies for obligatory free registration identity, such as national identity number.
- Introduce inclusive civil registration and vital statistics systems that do not discourage registration of abandoned children or children of under-aged or unmarried mothers.
- Reduce distances to registration points through the use of public facilities such as schools and health clinics
- Utilize the outreach of the immunization programme to conduct registration activities for children.
- Develop communications strategies and outreach to women and underserved groups.
- Remove charges associated with births and deaths registration.
- Provide free government cemeteries and enforce compulsory burial permits.
- Advocate for enhanced public awareness of the importance of civil registration and vital statistics.
- Examine options for improving the interactions between registration officials and the public, for example by allocating to the Ministry of Health responsibility for initial notification of events to the registration authorities.
- Apply lessons learnt from voter registration to civil registration.
- Provide incentives to people to register, to civil registrars and to the civil registry. Incentives to registration can be achieved indirectly through the social protection programmes. Consider the use of penalties for non-registration or late registration but with due attention to the possible negative impact of penalties on marginalized groups.

Improve cause of death certification and coding practices

In properly functioning civil registration and vital statistics systems, all births and deaths in the population are recorded. Best practice in cause of death registration means having a cause of death for every death. The deceased is examined by a qualified medical practitioner who certifies the cause of death using the WHO standard death certificate. The underlying cause is coded by trained statistical coders in line with rules and principles of the International Classification of Diseases (ICD).

Proposed country actions

- Enact legal provisions to enforce death registration as a compulsory requirement, and include the legal requirement that doctors have to certify deaths including the cause of death.

- Introduce regulations and procedures to ensure that medical certification and coding of cause of death are done correctly. Include relevant training as part of the medical training curricula and within continuing education.
- Develop skills and capacities among certifying physicians to ensure that information provided by doctors on death certificates is accurate and reliable.
- Formally establish the use of the international form of medical certificate of cause of death so that the global guidelines and standards for mortality certification principles are applied uniformly in all settings and the resulting cause-of-death statistics are comparable across time and place. This form should be issued free-of-charge by the office with authority for collecting cause-of-death data.
- Introduce advocacy campaigns directed at main health professional associations such as medical syndicates and health statisticians associations to ensure that the concepts on the international form of medical certificate of cause of death and the reasons for collecting the data, are well understood.
- Prepare written materials (booklets and brochures) that provide a low-cost way to help doctors to correctly fill in the death certificate, using reference materials provided by WHO and other technical experts (16,17,18,19).
- When medical certification is not possible, introduce “verbal autopsy” as a viable way of obtaining public health information on causes of death. The purpose of a verbal autopsy is to obtain information on cause of death at the community or population level where medical certification of cause of death is limited or absent. Use the WHO standard verbal autopsy instruments to ensure comparability of data (20).
- Introduce into the death certificate a checkbox prompting the certifying doctor to indicate whether a woman of reproductive age who died was pregnant at the time of death or had recently been pregnant, and ask for additional information that is frequently omitted.
- Conduct regular evaluations of quality of death certificates as well as of the quality of medical records upon which the death certificate is based.
- Develop skills and capacities for statistical coders on correctly selecting the underlying cause of death in accordance with ICD rules and procedures. Application of the ICD principles and correct use of the selection rules by all coders is crucial to accurately identify the main causes of death in populations and allow international comparisons.
- Consider centralized coding of cause of death to facilitate the application of common standards and procedures, and make error detection and correction easier.
- Periodically evaluate the work of coders to identify and correct any systematic errors or problems with coding practices.
- Ensure feedback of local outcomes of causes of death to allow all involved parties to review their data as part of a quality assurance mechanism.

Improve production, use and dissemination of vital statistics

The contribution of vital statistics to evidence-based decision-making is dependent upon timely dissemination to and appropriate uptake by the relevant decision-makers. Data quality, access and use are critical components of any statistical system, but are often neglected. The result is that the information on births and deaths collected at great expense is not used as well as it could be, and those collecting the data are not fully rewarded for their efforts.

Proposed country actions

- Use the international standards for aggregating and tabulating data. For example, the United Nations provides a minimal list of recommended characteristics for tabulating birth and death statistics (1).
- Ensure that transparent and well-documented procedures are used to calculate vital rates and other indicators, and that this information is included with the data.
- Develop skills and capacities for statisticians on data evaluation and critical assessment as well as statistical analytical methods and the calculation of health indicators (21,22).
- As part of quality control, use other sources of vital statistics, such as the census, as a check on the completeness of the civil registration and vital statistics system.
- Reduce the proportion of deaths that have been assigned to ill-defined cause-of-death categories by improving statistics coding and introducing plausibility and consistency checks.
- Ensure that data are accessible to as many legitimate users as possible, preferably in both print and electronic form.
- Ensure that data are available to users at minimal cost. Official vital statistics should be published annually by a trustworthy government source.

Improve intersectoral coordination and alignment among stakeholders

The many steps between the occurrence of vital events and their registration and consolidation into national statistics require good coordination between the different components of the system. Most countries have separate agencies responsible for the collection of information on vital events (e.g. civil registration) and the production of vital statistics (e.g. a national statistical office or ministry of health). Unclear or overlapping responsibilities between agencies can be a major impediment to the smooth functioning of the system and often lead to waste of resources.

Proposed country actions

- Establish national multistakeholder civil registration and vital statistics coordination committees to ensure smooth coordination and cooperation and interoperability. Cooperation committees should meet regularly and include

representatives from the health department, hospitals, coroners, police, funeral agencies and religious authorities. Such meetings are particularly important when there is a need to change procedures.

- Ensure that all subnational entities collect information in a standard format; this will allow comparable national figures to be compiled. This generally requires that a specific national entity be given the task of setting standards and coordinating data collection. In countries where there are separate data collection systems at the state or provincial levels, coordination will be needed.
- The establishment of a “population register” has been a natural extension of the computerization of civil registration and a desire to streamline government agencies and reduce duplication. The population register is derived from the data collected by the civil registration system, and integrates all information on individuals into one record per person, identifiable by a personal identification number.
- Strengthen the role of the health system in the notification of vital events through institutionalization and capacity building.

Strengthen and harmonize regional and global partnerships in support of country strategies

The regional assessments and strategy show there will be an ongoing need to coordinate, align and sustain support from the different partners to countries to achieve well-functioning civil registration and vital statistics systems. The work and outputs of these systems are relevant and of interest to many agencies within country, and a variety of international partners also support aspects of the civil registration and vital statistics system. Agencies such as UNESCWA, UNESCAP, UNECA, UNICEF, United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), UNHCR, League of Arab States (LAS), United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) and International Organization for Migration (IOM) were active in this effort, which preceded and laid the ground for strategy development.

Proposed actions

- Encourage and support high-level leadership, regional coordination and political mobilization for strategic engagement of partners to support strengthening of civil registration and vital statistics for countries in the Region in order to avoid duplication and isolated efforts.
- Promote and engage in strategic communication and advocacy about civil registration and vital statistics system improvement as a broad development and governance issue, with the aim of placing improvement of civil registration and vital statistics at the forefront of the post-2015 and other development agendas.
- Advocate to senior policy-makers the benefits for governance emanating from functional reliable civil registration and vital statistics systems, including improved administrative functions, better policy and planning.

- Advocate for increased political commitment and public awareness and communicate the benefits of civil registration and vital statistics for individuals and communities, administrative systems and statistics for policy-making.
- Increase and sustain investment and resource allocation, based on consensus about priorities for the Region identified by development and humanitarian partners, to rapidly and purposefully improve institutional and human capacity for strengthening civil registration and vital statistics systems.
- Adopt a stepwise but strategic approach to strengthening civil registration and vital statistics systems, given the current state of such systems within countries, political stability and specific country challenges in administration, geography, migration and particular sub-population issues.
- Contribute to capacity and institutional development and national ownership through carefully targeted technical assistance and training; and actively sharing experiences of other countries on all aspects of civil registration and vital statistics systems, including legal frameworks, registration practices, certification of deaths, ICD-10 coding, quality checks, production, use and dissemination of vital statistics and information technology.
- Identify regional centres of excellence, focused on different aspects of civil registration and vital statistics systems, including legal frameworks, registration practices, certification of deaths, ICD-10 coding, production, use and dissemination of vital statistics and information technology.
- Use the opportunities of innovation and information technology, which has vast potential to accelerate progress in civil registration and vital statistics systems, and achieve cost-effective and sustainable solutions.
- Give immediate priority to developing analytical capacity to critically appraise vital statistics quality in all countries of the region and to increase and sustain investments and resource allocation to improve institutional and human capacity for civil registration and vital statistics systems.
- Ensure that the prioritized multisectoral national action plan detailing organizational, capital, financial and human resource requirements is the basis for partner support to countries; taking into consideration national capacities and innovative approaches and the role of emerging technologies and the contribution of all national and international civil registration and vital statistics partners.
- Provide clear and agreed leadership for as well as actively and purposefully encourage and support regional and country civil registration and vital statistics improvement activities, including resourcing, advocacy and exchange of knowledge about best practices and priorities between countries.
- Advocate for and participate in national, regional and global mechanisms for enhanced coordination and collaboration among development and humanitarian partners to strengthen civil registration and vital statistics systems coordination and collaboration among development partners and align their support around country plans to strengthen so that both improved registration and counting of vital life events, and issuing of good quality legal documentation to all, can be achieved.

4. Implementation of the strategy

4.1 Development of national plans

Implementation of the strategy at regional level was initiated with its endorsement by the WHO Regional Committee for the Eastern Mediterranean in resolution EM/RC60/R.7 (Annex 1). Other regional activities will be organized for mobilization of technical and other resources by WHO and its partners to support country implementation of the strategy. Coordination between Member States and exchange of experiences and good practices will also be facilitated at the regional level. However, implementation of the strategy will take place primarily at the country level. Countries will be able to draw on rapid and in-depth assessments to develop strategic plans for improvement of civil registration and vital statistics. Given the comprehensive approach used to assess country needs, these plans will facilitate political commitment and the allocation of prioritized, sustainable investments in country civil registration and vital statistics systems – including donor investments – to enable implementation of activities.

The regional strategy provides the framework for the development of national plans based on the findings of the in-depth assessment in the country. Each country has its unique challenges and administrative and governance context which will determine the priorities adopted in the national plan for improving the system. Key indicators are outlined to be adapted to each setting and used to follow up the implementation of the regional strategy and national plan. The strategy also provides a framework for evaluating the progress and overall outcomes of the national plan.

4.2 Advocacy for political commitment and alignment of stakeholders

Civil registration and vital statistics systems have long suffered from neglect at national, regional and global levels despite the clear benefits they can bring to countries and individuals. In part, this is due to the intersectoral nature of such systems. At the national level, entities responsible for planning and development, justice and identity management, civil registration, national statistics and health must each contribute to improving civil registration and vital statistics through a combination of appropriate and effective policies, and programmes designed to raise awareness and strengthen intersectoral coordination and the engagement of civil society.

Before embarking on the development and implementation of a national plan it is advisable to conduct a concerted advocacy campaign in the country to prioritize civil registration and vital statistics and mobilize support from all parts of government, as well as from health and statistical professionals and the public at large. The advocacy campaign should be professionally designed, using all feasible communication channels, and be supported by the development and humanitarian partners in the country. A successful advocacy campaign will help generate political commitment and mobilization of resources for strengthening civil registration and vital statistics systems.

4.3 Monitoring and evaluation

Implementation of the strategy and associated country plans needs to be monitored and evaluated throughout the lifetime of the strategy, 2014–2019. The framework for evaluation has two components: monitoring of the progress made in successfully undertaking key activities and tasks and country and regional level; and assessment of the status and performance of civil registration and vital statistics systems using objectively verifiable indicators.

The activities to be monitored in any given country or point are dependent on each country plan. Each country is likely to have its own country-led evaluation system to monitor progress in the implementation of priority activities, including, but not limited to the following:

- The completion of an in-depth assessment of the national civil registration and vital statistics system;
- Establishment of national stakeholder coordination body or entity;
- Development of national civil registration and vital statistics improvement plans;
- Adoption of new or revised legal instruments;
- Infrastructure strengthening activities;
- Capacity building activities such as training;
- Outputs compared to targets laid in the national plan.

In addition, an overall accountability framework for monitoring progress regionally will help track progress and reassure governments and partners that progress is being made, and identify areas requiring particular attention in terms of technical support and follow-up. The rapid assessment tool used to assess the status of civil registration and vital statistics in countries is comprehensive, well tested and simple to administer (23). Its initial use in the 22 countries provides baselines for individual countries and the Region which will facilitate the appraisal of future progress. Repeated administration of the tool will help ascertain the extent to which identified bottlenecks and constraints have been addressed.

Table 1. Key indicators

Aspect	Areas covered
Inputs	Budgets of the civil registration and vital statistics systems Human resource component of these budgets Number of staff doing registration duties
Processes	Access to civil registration Availability of civil registration Number and percentage of hospitals with registrars in situ Completeness of birth registration, nationally and by region Completeness of death registration, nationally and by region Medically certified deaths as a percentage of total deaths annually Number and percentage of civil registration points that report late (i.e. after scheduled date) Percentage of all registration offices linked by computer to central level
Outputs	Time lag between data collection and publication (years) Number of tables provided to the UN Demographic Yearbook (the UN asks countries to provide 30 tables on fertility and mortality for this publication) Ill-defined causes of death as a percentage of all deaths annually Cancer deaths assigned to ill-defined causes as a percentage of all cancer deaths annually Cardiovascular deaths assigned to ill-defined causes as a percentage of all cardiovascular deaths annually Injury deaths assigned to undetermined causes as a percentage of all injury deaths Infections and parasitic disease deaths assigned to septicaemia as a percentage of all infectious and parasitic disease deaths

Source: Improving the quality and use of birth, death and cause-of-death information: guidance for a standards-based review of country practices. Geneva: World Health Organization; 2010.

The rapid assessment tool generates results that are to a degree subjective in nature. It should, therefore, be accompanied by tracking of verifiable indicators of civil registration and vital statistics system performance including inputs, processes and outputs. The key indicators to be assessed are shown in Table 1.

4.4 Role of WHO and regional partners

The Regional Office is pioneering the work for the improvement of the civil registration and vital statistics systems as part of its focus on specific identified priorities for its work in the Region over the coming years. At the top of these priorities is the strengthening of health systems and the building of regional information capacities.

WHO and participating agencies intend to sustain and strengthen the partnership approach at the regional level and extend the approach to support for countries. The Regional Office is taking steps to strengthen its own capacities and is establishing a network of regional experts to respond to technical support needs from Member States. The roles of WHO and its partners in support of this strategy can be summarized in three functions: a) advocacy to mobilize political, technical and material support; b) coordination to harmonize inputs and support from different international agencies and development partners (each according to its mandate) at

regional and country levels; and c) technical support and capacity-building in line with each country's priorities.

Technical support and capacity-building will be provided by each agency according to its expertise and mandate. Of particular importance will be joint action on the part of regional partners to support capacity building activities including hands-on training in registration procedures, data collection and compilation, and data analysis, dissemination and use for policy and programming. In situations of conflict and humanitarian emergencies, collaboration with national civil registration and vital statistics systems can help ensure protection for all persons, both nationals and non-nationals, of concern to UNHCR living under the jurisdiction of Member States.

In order to provide overall strategic guidance and oversight to the implementation of the regional strategic plan, the relevant partners agreed during a meeting in Cairo in September 2013 to the establishment of a regional coordination group, which would function within the framework defined by the regional strategic plan, consistent with mandates of involved governments and national and international development partners. The group will bring together country implementing agencies, development partners, training and research institutions and nongovernmental organizations in order to foster coordination and integration of the implementation of the regional strategic plan with other relevant capacity development activities with a view to synergy, complementarity and greater impact.

The partners also agreed that WHO would host a regional repository that will promote and facilitate the exchange of expertise, experiences, resources and other information on improving civil registration and vital statistics systems. Such a body will report on accomplishments, compile lessons learnt and foster South–South and peer-to-peer cooperation to improve civil registration and vital statistics systems. The repository will manage a web-based information forum, organize knowledge exchange seminars and facilitate exchange visits. It will develop a directory of stakeholders, such as development partners and experts, and a resource base, comprising training and advocacy materials, computer-based resource kits, and assessment and analysis tools. It will also maintain a database of completed assessments of civil registration and vital statistics systems and national action plans.

5. The way forward

Civil registration and vital statistics systems are essential and serve as the foundation for a well-governed modern state, wherein individual human rights are protected and public services are delivered effectively and efficiently (24). Access to reliable vital statistics enables effective governance through data-driven planning, resource allocation, monitoring and evaluation in all sectors of development and in settings requiring humanitarian assistance. Civil registration is the only data source from which complete and continuous demographic statistics on population dynamics and causes of death can be generated. Other sources of data are infrequent or irregular and less effective and unsustainable in the long run. The establishment and strengthening of civil registration and vital statistics systems is not simply a by-product of development, but actually contributes directly to development. Moreover, an inclusive civil registration and vital statistics system is necessary for the progressive realization of human rights for all individuals in countries with migrant and refugee populations.

The regional strategy launches a collective intervention across the Region to improve civil registration and vital statistics systems in ways that are efficient and evidence-based. It offers a systematic approach to address widespread fragmentation, weak infrastructure and poor quality outputs of civil registration and vital statistics systems in the Region. Partnership between stakeholders and development and humanitarian partners is a key prerequisite for the successful implementation of this strategy at both country and regional levels.

Ministries of health in the Region will need to support national entities responsible for civil registration and vital statistics and assume stewardship, brokering and interlocutor roles in partnership with other actors within their respective governments. It is essential that a collaborative multi-agency approach be adopted, emphasizing the roles of different stakeholders and the particular responsibilities of the public health sector in terms of the notification of vital events and the certification of causes of death and the production of vital statistics. Overall, the strategy provides a framework of action for the period of 2014–2019, illustrating the roles and responsibilities of all pertinent stakeholders nationally and regionally, including countries and WHO.

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Annex 1. Resolution EM/RC60/R.7

**REGIONAL COMMITTEE FOR THE
EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN**

**EM/RC60/R.7
October 2013**

Sixtieth Session

Regional strategy for the improvement of civil registration and vital statistics systems 2014–2019

The Regional Committee,

Having discussed the technical paper on the regional strategy for the improvement of civil registration and vital statistics systems¹;

Recalling resolution EM/RC59/R.3 on health systems strengthening, which urged Member States to strengthen national health information systems, including registration of births, deaths and causes of death;

Acknowledging that the call for universal civil registration is sanctioned in many United Nations resolutions, including the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and Optional Protocol to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (A/RES/2200(XXI)), the Millennium Declaration (A/RES/55/2), and the Declaration on the Right to Development (A/RES/41/128);

Recalling also the recommendation of the United Nations Commission on Information and Accountability for Women's and Children's Health calling on all countries to undertake significant steps to establish a system for registration of births, deaths and causes of death and have well functioning health information systems by 2015;

Acknowledging also the importance of civil registration and vital statistics systems in providing information which secures the basic right of identity for individuals and which support human development sectors, including health;

Recognizing the importance of intersectoral collaboration to support civil registration and vital statistics systems;

1. **ENDORSES** the regional strategy for the improvement of civil registration and vital statistics systems 2014–2019;

¹ Document No: EM/RC60/10

2. **URGES** Member States to give priority to the strengthening of their civil registration and vital statistics systems;
3. **CALLS ON** Member States to:
 - 3.1 Develop or further strengthen a national multisectoral strategic plan to improve the civil registration and vital statistics system, based on the findings of an in-depth assessment and guided by the regional strategy;
 - 3.2 Strengthen infrastructure and capacities within the Ministry of Health and develop regulations and procedures to assure quality standards for medical certification and coding of cause of death using the International Classification of Diseases;
 - 3.3 Raise awareness on, and mobilize support for, civil registration systems in the community and relevant sectors;
4. **REQUESTS** the Regional Director to:
 - 4.1 Provide technical support to Member States to adapt and implement the regional strategy for the improvement of civil registration and vital statistics systems;
 - 4.2 Build partnerships with United Nations organizations and other relevant regional stakeholders to facilitate implementation of the strategy;
 - 4.3 Monitor and report to the Regional Committee the progress achieved in the implementation of the strategy every two years until 2019.



The intercountry workshop on civil registration and vital statistics was organized in January 2013 by WHO in collaboration with the Health Metrics Network and University of Queensland. This workshop was the entry point for the development of the regional strategy for the improvement of civil registration and vital statistics.

The *Regional strategy for the improvement of civil registration and vital statistics systems* is intended to guide and support Member States in improving national civil registration and vital statistics systems in the Eastern Mediterranean Region over the period 2014–2019. It is built around a set of strategic domains and describes possible interventions from which countries can draw based on the level of development of their civil registration and vital statistics systems, country contexts, resources and capacities. The strategy was endorsed by the WHO Regional Committee for the Eastern Mediterranean in 2013. It provides a framework for action by Member States and partners up to 2019, illustrating the roles and responsibilities of all pertinent stakeholders nationally and regionally, including countries and WHO.