

**Progress report on covering every
birth and death: improving
civil registration and vital statistics
in the WHO South-East Asia Region:
2021 update**



REGIONAL OFFICE FOR

**World Health
Organization**
South-East Asia

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Foreword

The civil registration of birth and death provides legal documentation of an individual's identity, civil status, and family relations. It facilitates access to services, benefits, entitlements and protections that are central to health and well-being. The ongoing registration of vital events as and where they occur, in particular the certification of cause of death, also generates a continuous flow of vital statistics and disease burden that underpin policy-making across multiple sectors.



Weak civil registration and vital statistics (CRVS) systems leave many births and deaths unregistered and uncounted, leading to a “scandal of invisibility” with increased risks of poverty, vulnerability, statelessness, marginalization and exclusion from health, social, economic and political development. Low rates of civil registration are the result of many factors, such as inadequate civil registration laws and regulations, inaccessibility of registration offices, high direct and indirect costs, complex forms and procedures, and lack of awareness of the importance and benefits of civil registration. Social and cultural factors make it especially difficult for vulnerable groups, such as women and girls, the poor, migrants and stateless persons, to access civil registration.

Limited availability and poor quality of cause of death data stifles efforts towards achieving objectives of national health policies, strategies and plans. These data are also essential to monitor cause-specific mortality for targets listed under the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals as well as under the results monitoring framework of the WHO Thirteenth General Programme of Work 13 (GPW13). The cause specific mortality data will help prioritise interventions to address those disease conditions and modifiable risk factors that contribute most to the disease burden.

Several SEA countries acknowledge persistent systemic weaknesses in their CRVS systems, including incomplete or inaccurate official documentation of births and deaths, inadequacies in ascertainment of causes of death, and inefficient data management processes – resulting in poor quality fertility and mortality statistics. The COVID-19 pandemic has further exposed long-standing data gaps, especially in tracking mortality and causes of death.

The “WHO South-East Asia Regional strategy for strengthening the role of the health sector for improving civil registration and vital statistics 2015-2024” was designed to support countries in the region in developing and implementing coordinated and multisectoral CRVS improvement plans. This mid-point in the strategy is an opportune moment to assess progress and consider aspects that require further effort in order to attain complete birth and death registration and accurate ascertainment of causes of death. Almost all SEA countries have nominated CRVS focal points, established coordinating committees, conducted assessments and agreed on targets and reporting plans. However, intensified efforts are needed to deliver results in national CRVS improvements in birth and death and cause of death registration coverage and analysis and use of reliable vital statistics.

The health sector can play a key role in contributing to faster progress. This follows because health workers are in contact with people throughout the life course; they are often present at a birth, provide care during hospitalization and through community-based programmes, offer health support throughout childhood, adulthood and into old age and

therefore are well-placed to record the circumstances of a birth or a death. At the same time, CRVS systems are a cornerstone of a strong health system for the future. By providing governments with reliable and up-to-date fertility and mortality statistics, including causes of death, authorities and policy-makers can effectively design, target and deliver stronger, evidence-based health programming.

This document provides an overview of CRVS strengthening progress in SEA countries over the past years. It draws on country reporting and on broader regional and global strategies developed within the international development system. The SEA Regional Office of WHO looks forward to working with all countries and partners to bring new energies to this joint endeavour and realize our shared vision of stronger civil registration systems that inform policies to yield better health outcomes for people around the region.



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