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Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA)

Advancing civil registration and vital statistics in the service of Syrian refugees

First steps

As a preliminary step, ESCWA will host a round-table meeting in Beirut in February 2017. The meeting will bring together key stakeholders from international agencies to evaluate the current situation of civil registration and vital statistics (CRVS) systems and data on refugee populations. This will provide more effective support to host Governments and facilitate the eventual return of refugees to their countries of origin. The needs of different stakeholders will also be discussed to identify next steps in improving CRVS systems for refugee populations and explore opportunities for collaboration.

ESCWA work on the refugee crisis and the Syria conflict

This project complements and builds upon the work of several other ESCWA initiatives, such as The National Agenda for the Future of Syria, which has undertaken extensive research on Syrian sectors and reconstruction scenarios since 2012. Research on CVRS will feed into a project aimed at planning the voluntary and safe return of Syrian refugees in a post-agreement phase. The project will also draw upon the extensive research ESCWA has undertaken on migration and displacement in the Arab region, and will supplement an upcoming project by ESCWA and the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) to build the capacity of the Syrian Central Bureau of Statistics.



Photo: United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

Overview

The outbreak of the Syrian conflict and the internal and external displacement of Syrians have obstructed the complete and accurate registration of vital events for an increasing number of Syrians. For individuals, civil registration procedures facilitate access to official documentation needed to establish legal identity and family relationships. Such documentation is necessary for individuals to prevent statelessness, exercise their human rights, access public services, and participate in modern society and economic life. Inability to register, and ultimately to obtain official documentation of such vital events as births, marriages, divorces, adoptions and deaths, may have severe implications, such as statelessness, lack of access to health, social and economic assistance, and hindrances to legal, voluntary and safe return in a post-agreement phase.

Vital statistics are also essential to the programming efforts of humanitarian actors and to the public policymaking and social planning efforts of countries hosting refugees, given that the data provides insight into population size, structure, composition and dynamics. Reliable and timely vital statistics are essential for evidence-based policy formulation, effective economic and social planning, and accountability in public resource management. Responding to the emerging needs of Syrian refugees in the field of civil registration and vital statistics (CRVS), ESCWA is developing a project to **map and assess current registration practices and vital statistics systems**. The project also aims to **enhance these practices and systems through knowledge sharing and improved coordination** between national authorities and international agencies, with a view to influencing **the design of more effective and targeted interventions in support of refugee and host communities**.

The proposed project reflects the importance of vital registration and legal identity as recognized in the recently-adopted 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, **explicitly identified as critical enablers of sustainable development** in targets and indicators (Goal 16.9) and more generally in the call for a data revolution to underpin the objective to 'leave no one behind'.

Interdisciplinary innovation

The project's design recognizes the multifaceted nature of civil registration, the contextual complexity of different refugee settings, the heavy burden shouldered by refugee host countries, and the importance of systematic assessment, coordinated consultation, and evidence-based responses to humanitarian challenges. In that vein, **this project integrates international humanitarian experience with legal and protection expertise and with technical expertise in civil registration and vital statistics.** It also aims to **advance technical innovations** to customize techniques for sampling hard-to-reach populations, survey methodologies and indirect demographic estimations to contemporary refugee settings.

Implementing partners

ESCWA is seeking to build strategic partnerships with a number of key partners to implement this interdisciplinary programme of work.

Key domestic partners include the Department of Statistics and the Department of Civil Status in the Jordanian Ministry of Interior, and the Lebanese Central Administration of Statistics and the Ministry of Health.

Key international partners include UNHCR, which has a central role in refugee response; the Norwegian Refugee Council, which provides active information, counseling, and legal assistance to Syrian refugees in Jordan and Lebanon; Statistics Norway, which has undertaken research in the area of refugee statistics; and researchers on statistics methodology and social statistics on conflict-affected populations from the Catholic University of Louvain, Belgium.

Project strategy

The purpose of the project is to support and guide improvements to CRVS policy, procedure and practice. It is designed to capitalize on the renewed global commitment to improve CRVS systems and to support the rights, welfare, and livelihoods of Syrian refugees. In particular, the project's outputs are designed to equip policymakers and practitioners with empirical evidence and practical guidance to ensure that CRVS systems in host countries are responsive and accessible to the needs of Syrian refugees.

The project proposes a **three-part assessment of birth and death registration practices for Syrian refugees in Jordan and Lebanon over the course of a 30 month period, followed by consultations to assess the policy and programming implications of the quality and availability of data and identify opportunities for improving existing processes and practices.**

The assessment will map the current procedures for birth, marriage and death registration of Syrian refugees; assess stakeholder knowledge, attitudes and perceptions of these processes; and evaluate the completeness of birth and death registration data.

The first component of this project entails an update to the recent reports published by the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) on CRVS systems in Lebanon and Jordan regarding Syrian refugees. ESCWA will provide a brief update on changes in laws, procedures and processes of vital registration regarding refugees in these two countries. This will include a **mapping of death registration processes for Syrian refugees in Lebanon** – an area that has not yet been addressed in recent NRC reports. These mapping reports will provide an important reference for the research team and, more generally, for CRVS policymakers and practitioners.

The second component of this project involves a **technical assessment of the completeness and quality of birth registration and death registration for Syrian refugees.** The level of completeness of such birth and death registration is currently unknown, and there have not been any formal assessments of the data quality of these administrative data systems. The project will undertake such an assessment through population-based surveys to independently estimate the number of births and deaths of Syrian refugees. These surveys will involve the collection of full pregnancy, sibling survival and migration histories to identify and locate (both within calendar time and geographic space) the reported birth and death events. The survey data will then be used to validate the official registration data for respective refugee populations.

The third component comprises a series of **detailed interviews and focus groups to assess the knowledge, attitudes and perceptions of stakeholders regarding the importance, accessibility and performance of civil registration processes for Syrian refugees.** Participants will include Syrian refugees, humanitarian workers and government officials at the local and national levels. The purpose of this component is to understand the similarities and differences in knowledge, attitudes and perceptions of CRVS processes for Syrian refugees amongst different stakeholders.

The fourth component consists of the dissemination of findings to key stakeholders and of bilateral and multilateral **consultations to engage policymakers and practitioners in discussions regarding the policy and programming implications of the findings and to identify opportunities for improving existing processes and practices.** Key stakeholders will include the Lebanese and Jordanian authorities responsible for civil registration and vital statistics, international agencies and non-governmental humanitarian organizations.

Expected outcome

The project findings will provide a **basis to enhance the ability of host Governments and the international humanitarian community** to support civil registration processes and the production of vital statistics for Syrian refugees. Improved civil registration is a **critical protection tool against statelessness and social exclusion.** Improved vital statistics of refugees helps to ensure that CRVS systems in countries hosting refugees are calibrated in a way that is inclusive of some of the most vulnerable residents. They can also **guide improvements in the provision of health and social services to the refugee population in Lebanon and Jordan,** and inform similar registration practices and policies in other refugee settings.