Advancing Civil Registration and Vital Statistics in the Service of Syrian Refugees

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**The Motivation**

In order to make people count, we need to count people. Civil registration entails the continuous recording of information on all relevant vital events, such as births, marriages, divorces, adoptions, and deaths, occurring within the boundaries of a country or a well-defined area territory (United Nations, 2014). Civil registration is critical for individual human rights reasons as well as public policy and social planning purposes. For the individual person, civil registration procedures facilitate the official documentation needed to establish legal identity and family relationships. Such documentation is necessary for individuals to exercise their human rights, access public services and participate in modern society and economic life (Powell, 1980; United Nations, 1998). At the aggregate population-level, an important by-product of civil registration data is vital statistics – which provide 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 (Moriyama, 1982; Powell, 1982).

Civil registration data are widely recognized as the preferred source of vital statistics (United Nations, 2014). Vital statistics can provide critical insight into the population dynamics, health status and development progress of populations. Timely and reliable information about the social, demographic and health situation of refugees and populations affected by conflict is important for the advancement of evidence-based policy and practice in humanitarian settings (Brunborg, 2014). This has been recognized in the recently-adopted 2030 development agenda’s objective to ‘leave no one behind’ and calls for a data revolution to underpin this agenda. Vital registration and legal identity have been explicitly identified as critical enablers of sustainable development in targets and indicators associated with Goal 16.9 (United Nations, 2015).

There is an emerging appreciation of and commitment to the importance of improving civil registration and vital statistics systems for refugees. The 46th session of the United Nations Statistical Commission acknowledged ‘the urgent need to build more efficient information systems against the backdrop of a rapidly growing volume of forcibly displaced persons owing to new humanitarian crises’ (United Nations, 2016). The UNHCR Executive Committee has recognized that civil registration and vital statistics contribute to protection of and durable solutions for refugees and encouraged “states to request technical [..] from other States, UNHCR and other United Nations agencies, funds and programmes, as well as civil society and regional organizations” in the area of CRVS (UNHCR, 2013). Member States from the Arab region have requested that ESCWA provide technical assistance to member states to improve official statistics on refugee populations in the region.

**The Situation**

Numerous challenges –for individuals, families, and public authorities – arise during armed conflict and conflict-induced migration, due to the security environment itself and the breakdown in social processes, economic systems, administrative services and transportation infrastructure.

There are a number of impediments to ensuring complete and accurate registration of vital events of Syrian refugees in Lebanon and Jordan. First, there is a general lack of understanding of the importance of vital registration and of how to access and navigate vital registration processes (Norwegian Refugee Council, 2015). Second, in response to the complexity of birth and death registration processes, some refugees have resorted to risky practices such as purchasing fake documents (Norwegian Refugee Council, 2013). Third, some persons are unable to provide the supporting documents required to register a vital event.[[2]](#footnote-2) Fourth, large numbers of refugees can overwhelm public authorities and the functioning of their administrative systems. Hence, those who are born and/or die during times of conflict or during periods of displacement, may not be able to have their vital events officially registered. This increases the risk of statelessness, can impede their ability to access health, social and economic assistance, and distorts our understanding of refugee population dynamics. Further, the lack of birth registration of Syrian refugees may impede the eventual return to Syria of Syrians born in Lebanon and Jordan through official border crossing (Norwegian Refugee Council, 2013).

Informal and temporary birth and death registration measures can offer feasible and flexible solutions to the challenges (Unicef, 2007). However, they are also vulnerable to shortcomings and to perpetuating systematic exclusion of particular subpopulations. In recent times there have been a few country case studies on vital registration in conflict and refugee settings, but there have not been any large-scale evaluations (Plan International, 2014; Unicef, 2007). To our best knowledge, we know of no population-based assessment of vital registration processes for Syrian refugees in Lebanon or Jordan.[[3]](#footnote-3) Thus there are a number of knowledge gaps that inhibit our ability to evaluate and improve civil registration and vital statistics performance for some of the most vulnerable subpopulations in Lebanon and Jordan.

**Project Objective**

The purpose of this proposed project is two-fold. The first objective is to evaluate the completeness, strengths and weaknesses of vital registration for Syrian refugees in Lebanon and Jordan and to guide policy and practice. Such evaluation is important to identify gaps, blockages and weaknesses of existing civil registration practices and subpopulations of Syrian refugees that are currently invisible to these systems. This kind of systematic evaluation is a critical input to improve plans civil registration and vital statistics systems for Syrian refugees in Lebanon and Jordan. The second objective is to enhance knowledge sharing and coordinated efforts amongst national authorities and international agencies seeking to improve the responsiveness of civil registration and vital statistics systems in Lebanon and Jordan to refugee needs.

**Project Strategy**

We propose a four-part assessment of birth and death registration practices for Syrian refugees in Jordan and Lebanon over the course of a 2.5 year project period.[[4]](#footnote-4) The assessment will map the current procedures of birth and death registration of Syrian refugees, assess stakeholder knowledge, attitudes, and perceptions of these processes, and evaluate the completeness of the resultant birth and death registration data. The purpose of this three-part assessment is to support and guide improvements to CRVS policy, procedure and practice. The project is designed to capitalize on the renewed commitment globally to improve CRVS systems and the increased international commitments to support the rights, welfare, and livelihoods of Syrian refugees.[[5]](#footnote-5) In particular, the project’s outputs are designed to equip policy makers 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 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 and Syrian refugees. We will provide a brief update on changes in laws, procedures and processes of vital registration vis-à-vis refugees in Lebanon and Jordan. 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 this research team and, more generally, for CRVS policy-makers 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. Completeness and quality of vital event registration data are critical indicators of civil registration and vital statistics (United Nations, 2014). However, we currently do not know the level of completeness of birth and death registration for Syrian refugees, nor have there been any formal demographic assessments of the data quality of these administrative data systems. In order to assess completeness and quality of vital registration in these refugee settings, we plan to use country-specific approaches. In Jordan, we hope to use the recently collected data from the 2015 Jordanian Population Census (including the household register data, household deaths in the last 24 months, and migration data collected on refugees) as well as supplementary data on vital event registration collected during UNHCR’s refugee registration procedures. In Lebanon, we will carry out population-based surveys to independently estimate the number of births and deaths to Syrian refugees that have occurred. This survey will involve the collection of full pregnancy histories, sibling survival histories and migration histories to identify and locate (both within calendar time and geographic space) the reported birth and death events. The sample of respondents will be drawn using probability-based random sampling. These data will then be used to validate the official registration data for the respective refugee populations.[[6]](#footnote-6)

The third component involves a series of in-depth interviews and focus groups to assess knowledge, attitude, and perceptions of the importance, accessibility and performance of civil registration processes for Syrian refugees. Participants will include Syrian refugees, humanitarian workers, and government officials (both at the local and national level). 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 comprises consultation and dissemination of findings with key stakeholders. These consultations will involve sharing the study’s findings with key stakeholders via bilateral discussions and multilateral forums. The key stakeholders will include the Lebanese and Jordanian authorities responsible for civil registration and vital statistics (e.g. civil registrar, ministry of health, national statistics office, etc.), international agencies (e.g. UNHCR, Unicef, OHCHR), non-governmental humanitarian organizations (e.g. PLAN International, Danish Refugee Council, etc.). The purpose of these consultations is to engage policy makers and practitioners with the study findings and discuss their policy and practice implications.

**Interdisciplinary Innovation**

The design of this project 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 response to humanitarian challenges. In that vein, this project integrates international humanitarian experience, with legal and protection expertise, and technical expertise in civil registration and vital statistics. It will also advance technical innovations in customize techniques for sampling hard-to-reach populations, survey methodology and indirect demographic estimation to contemporary refugee settings.

**Expected Outputs**

The mapping of current procedures and practices will provide a detailed overview of how current vital registration practices have evolved for both camp and non-camp Syrian refugees in Jordan. This mapping will provide an update to recent mappings of birth and marriage registration procedures for Syrian refugees in Lebanon and Jordan. It will also extend these mappings by covering death registration processes and procedures in Lebanon. Such mappings are a critical public resource as updated information products based on such mapping exercises can be used for public information campaigns and as important resources for policy makers and practitioners.

Quantitative assessment of officially registered births and deaths will document the size, nature and profile of registered vital events to Syrian refugees. The survey-based assessment of completeness, quality and timeliness will provide independent validation of reported birth and death events over the last five years as a basis to measure the completeness and quality of vital registration processes over the last 5 years. This will help to fill a critical knowledge gap on the current situation of civil registration and vital statistics of refugee communities in Lebanon and Jordan.

The in-depth interviews and focus groups on knowledge, attitudes and perceptions of vital registration laws, procedures and practices will provide insight about the perceptions of policy-makers and practitioners on current vital registration processes. This will provide a range of perspectives from those responsible for the CRVS systems, those who can potentially benefit from it, and those whose activities can support and strengthen the systems.

**Expected Outcome**

The project outputs will provide a basis to guide policy discussions and practice improvements to enhance the ability of both host governments and the international humanitarian community to support civil registration processes and the production of vital statistics for Syrian refugees in Jordan and Lebanon. In turn, this will ensure a strong evidence base to ensure that CRVS systems are calibrated in a way that is inclusive of some of the most vulnerable residents currently inside Jordan and Lebanon – Syrian refugees. Such an evidence base can guide improvements in health and social services provisions to the refugee population in Lebanon and Jordan, and also inform CRVS practices and policies in other refugee settings.

**Implementing Partners**

The United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia is seeking to build strategic partnerships with a number of key partners to implement this interdisciplinary program of work. Key domestic partners in Jordan include the Department of Statistics and Department of Civil Status in the Ministry of Interior – the lead government agencies for civil registration and vital statistics in Jordan. In Lebanon, the key partners will be the Central Administration of Statistics, the Personal Status Department, Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Health – the Lebanese state institutions that support the Lebanese civil registration system.

The international partners will include the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), Unicef, the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), Statistics Norway, and the Catholic University of Louvain. The UNHCR has a central role in refugee response and has recognized the importance of vital registration for conflict-affected populations and refugees (UNHCR, 2013). Unicerf is the lead agency of the United Nations in advancing the rights and livelihoods of children. Through their child protection cluster, Unicef monitors, advocates for, and improves birth registration around the world. The NRC has an active information, counseling, and legal assistance to Syrian refugees in Jordan and Lebanon about access to essential services and legal issues. Statistics Norway has undertaken research in the area of refugee statistics and also provided technical assistance to low- and middle-income countries on strengthening CRVS systems. Researchers from the Catholic University of Louvain have been active in research on improving vital statistics methodology and the collection, analysis, and dissemination of population, health and social statistics on conflict-affected populations.

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2. For example in Lebanon birth registration requires legal entry and stay documentation, a valid passport and marriage certificate of those registering the birth, and sometimes a family booklet (Norwegian Refugee Council, 2014). Whereas in Jordan the supporting documents required for birth registration include a hospital birth notification, passport of the person registering the birth, and proof of marriage of the parents (Norwegian Refugee Council, 2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. There are some small, related projects on vulnerable populations and civil registration. For example, UNHCR and Statistics Norway recently undertook a pilot survey in Kenya to examine statelessness amongst the Pemba community of Kenya. See Boateng et al. (2016) for details. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The policy recommendations outlined in Norwegian Refugee Council (2014) emphasized that “[c]onsistent monitoring and data collection on birth registration is needed by protection actors”. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. For information about the increasing momentum of global CRVS improvement plans, see World Bank (2014). For information about the renewed commitment from the international community to support Syrian refugees, see Supporting Syria & the Region 2016 Conference Hosts (2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. We will undertake macro-level aggregate validation and assessment of birth and death registration completeness. For a small subsample of registration events (defined by temporal and spatial characteristics), we will pilot micro-level validation and assessment by employing record-linkage methods. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)