



UNITED NATIONS
ECONOMIC
AND
SOCIAL COUNCIL



LIMITED

ST/ECIA/CONF.19/L.15
26 November 1964

ENGLISH
ORIGINAL: SPANISH

SECOND INTER-AMERICAN SEMINAR ON CIVIL REGISTRATION

Organized by the United Nations, through its Statistical Office, the Bureau of Technical Assistance Operations, the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Latin American Demographic Centre, in co-operation with the Government of Peru, the Inter-American Statistical Institute, the Inter-American Children's Institute, the Pan American Health Organization and the Inter-American Civil Registration Association

Lima, Peru, 30 November to 11 December 1964

CIVIL REGISTRATION AND SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Presented by

the secretariat of the Economic
Commission for Latin America

1. Background and objectives

Every day demographic statistics as basic data for the formulation of government policy become more widely used in the field of economic development as well as in the social field. The increased demand for demographic statistics provides, to a certain extent, a measure of the progress achieved in the development programme, that is to say, of the progress achieved in replacing subjective opinions by objective observations, based on the statistics of social events. The figures thereby provided are necessary to define the problems, decide their solution and measure the progress achieved. The measurement of the standard of living and the establishment of the essential services, like housing, education, health and others, depend, to a large extent, on the availability of information of a demographic nature.

Demographic statistics for Latin America suffer from many defects the most important of which is their incompleteness and the fact that they are not always readily available. For instance, in 1956, it was estimated that in the preceding five years in Central America and the Caribbean 95 per cent of births had been registered, in South America 81 per cent, and with regard to the registration of deaths in these two areas the figures were 62 per cent and 39 per cent respectively. Serious fears are harboured that this situation has not changed appreciably in more recent years. Therefore, it would seem urgent that measures be taken to improve the quality of registration.

Admitting that the problem of the quality of the statistics is many-sided, one of the contributing factors seems to be the generalized aversion and sometimes incapacity of Civil Registration functionaries - and especially of the Registrar - which is common to other technicians and professionals - to project their problems and the effects of their actions outside a limited technical sphere. Large amounts of technicality would seem to correspond with a greater tendency towards isolation. In this way, the functionary may become the possessor and user of a technical method absolutely unrelated to the economic, social and cultural reality which surrounds him. Nevertheless, reality is not found divided into independent sections nor does it accept artificial fragmentation. This establishes the necessity for the civil registration services to recognize the fact that they form part of a group of institutions which, in the national scheme, ought to collaborate among themselves and work harmoniously, with defined aims and with the final objective of improving the standard of living in every way. Such is the essence of the planning that is considered so important these days. It is not an easy undertaking because it requires that technical departments which have worked independently up to now should find a language in common and a reciprocal understanding which is sufficiently wide as to enable them to harmonize their plans and actions.

The present document proposes to indicate the relations between civil registration and some other fields of economic and social activity.

2. Civil registration and demography

Demographic data is collected by two principle methods: enumeration and registration. In the first, if the enumeration is complete it is referred to as a population census and if it is partial it is referred to as a sample. The collection of the information by registration is generally in the hands of the civil registration services. There are besides, other administrative registers, much less used, which can provide certain demographic information, like hospital and educational registers.

The population censuses are usually conducted every ten years and therefore can only provide a static picture of the population. This is their chief limitation. Censal statistics therefore do not satisfy all the demographic needs. On the other hand, the vital statistics which are collected by registration provide demographic figures for the periods between the censuses and allow a study of population trends. Besides, some important indicators, for instance the rate of infant mortality, emanate solely from the figures obtained from the registration method.

From another point of view, both types of statistics - censal and vital - complement each other, as in the calculation of the birth rates, mortality rates, marriage rates, etc. Besides, as their sources are different, it is possible to evaluate the quality of each by comparison. Demographic studies can refer to three particular aspects: population calculations (number of inhabitants, its composition and distribution for programmes relating to transport, labour, housing, public health, agricultural production and distribution and the production and distribution of commercial and consumption articles, etc.), population forecasts (number of inhabitants, its composition and distribution at a future date to determine the material needs of housing, schooling, workers, etc.) and special analytical studies (knowledge of situations and trends relating to marriage, legitimacy, fertility, the absolute and relative importance of the causes of death, etc.).

The above seem to indicate that there is no substitution for the participation of civil registration in the assembling of data for demographic studies, which in their turn, serve as bases for development programmes.

3. Civil registration and public health

Vital statistics provided by civil registration, being the only statistics capable of providing information of a continuing nature while the events are happening, find in public health their widest field of application. Those bodies responsible for the protection, restoration and improvement of the health of the population use this information in the local sphere as soon as it is collected as data regarding the individual in mother-child programmes, in the timely control of outbreaks of epidemics and in various other ways. Later, arranged and summarized in statistical

/tables and

tables and graphs, the data is used in the planning, execution and evaluation of all public health programmes. Actually there is no study relating to public health which is not based on statistics.

A recent study ^{1/} illustrates these points and concludes that the rate of infant mortality is closely related to economic and social factors. From this study the following paragraphs are extracts:

"As with the majority of the countries in Latin America, Chile is a country where children predominate. They form about 40 per cent of the population and in 1961 it is estimated that there are 500,000 nursing babies, 1,117,000 pre-scholar and 1,419,000 scholars. We know that this structure is the result of the persistence of a high birth rate and an excessive and precocious mortality rate." (Ibid, page 120.)

"It is not at all new to say that the rate of infant mortality of a population has a close relationship with its degree of economic, social and cultural development. This is such an accepted fact that the rate of mortality is precisely one of the indicators internationally used to define the standard of living of a community. The problem consists in translating this relationship into figures and in balancing it with the influence of the direct medical measures of infant mortality, because that would define the limitations of these measures and would be a base for an integral development programme in a country." (Ibid, page 86.)

"The figures show that the illness and death of an infant in the first year of its life is closely associated with the standard of living of the family group in which it is born." Thus for example, in the working class infant mortality shows an excess of 88 per cent over the "non-working" group. (Ibid, page 121.)

"In agreement with our figures - and with all the reservations that must be applied to them - 6,700 deaths would have been prevented over one year if the actual medical attention had been given to the total population of that age: on the other hand, 11,400 deaths would have been prevented if, with the actual medical attention, the standard of living of the working class had improved to approximately that of the middle class of the country."

"The figures also illustrate another important aspect of the problem. The terrible mortality of our children at an early age consists in the greater part of deaths which could be avoided. Imperfect as the statistics are they illustrate the definite prevalence of infection, basically digestive and respiratory, together with unsuitable and insufficient alimentation." (Ibid, page 123.)

^{1/} Hugo Behm Rosas "The Rate of Infant Mortality and the Standard of Living". Editions of the University of Chile, 1962.

"The abundant statistical information which has been presented reaffirms - in a quantitative and actual form - the absolute dependence of the life, illnesses and death of the infant on the degree of economic development of the whole community. The rate of infant mortality, therefore, is as a result, an indication of the high price in lives that the people pay for their economically inefficient and socially unjust forms of organization. This is the real crux of the argument concerning the problem." (*Ibid*, page 124.) The author adds, finally, that as "the problem is many-sided in form and the health of the infant is so interconnected with medical attention just as with the quality of the housing, the distribution of income, the production of milk and other aspects, it is evident that the solution must also be multidimensional and of necessity co-ordinated". (*Ibid*, page 126.)

These figures fully illustrate the importance of the statistical function of Civil Registration and the size of its possible contribution to society if excellent functioning conditions exist.

4. Civil Registration and housing

The need for houses to be in continuous construction arises from the fact that demographic changes are also continuous and increasing. Annually a certain number of families are created which demand housing and as a result it is necessary for the construction industry to produce such dwelling units. It is certain that not only legally formed new families, that is to say, families who have their marriage registered with the civil registrar, demand housing. There are also permanent consensual unions and other groups of persons who join together to form private households and these also demand housing accommodation. But the newly wedded couples constitute the most stable and regular index of demand for housing and it is for this reason that countries in a more advanced state of social and cultural development are accustomed to calculating an index which comes from relating new houses constructed in the urban centres with marriages occurring annually, an index which, for a determined society, should present a stable rate.

The need for new housing stems from three primary factors:

- (a) The formation of new private households.
- (b) The necessity for regular replacement of existing houses which must be replaced and which have been destroyed by fire or other causes, etc., and
- (c) The need to construct a surplus of houses over the demand indicated in (a) and (b) in order to assure the operation of the market (which requires the existence of a certain number of temporarily unoccupied houses) and to allow a slow improvement in housing conditions during the gradual absorption of the existing deficit and the consequent reduction in the degree of accumulation.

/Of these

Of these factors the formation of new households, i.e., without doubt, the most dynamic and the one which can be best subject to a more efficient statistical control.

With regard to the execution of the housing programme, it must be remembered that there are two factors which carry considerable weight in the assignment of houses to certain families:

(a) The legal constitution of the family is considered a fundamental requirement under the government programmes and

(b) In general a house is considered as part of the family estate and as a result state loans for mortgages are granted usually to the family and not to the individual. When it is remembered that actually between 30 and 50 per cent of the houses constructed annually receive state help in the Latin American countries, the importance will be understood of the existence of a well-organized civil registration service that can provide the kind of legal proof that is required for the granting of such loans.

On the other hand, in practically every country less houses than the necessary minimum are being built and governments are studying ways for widening their housing programmes which in many countries are considered fundamental to the policy of development. Therefore, it can be expected that the widening of these programmes will signify an increasing necessity for civil registration documents in the course of the next few years.

Another important fact is that this region is characterized by the high proportion of its population which is not legally married. As social and economic progress tends towards the formation of legal family units it is also to be expected that the proportion of the population which is married will increase. As a result of this the civil registration services ought to prepare themselves to deal with this increase in their activities which involves not only the registration of marriages but also the maintenance of the corresponding registers and the production of certificates covering vital events which are indispensable to those who actively participate in society.

It must also be taken into consideration that Latin America is being "urbanized" very rapidly; urban centres are increasing 5 per cent per year which signifies that the urban population is doubling every 14 years. On the other hand, the rural population is increasing more slowly. The gradual displacement of the rural population to the urban centres implies a new way of life for the immigrants with new requirements and in many cases their incorporation into life in society makes it necessary for them to possess civil registration certificates which were perhaps dispensed with in their rural location.

/Summarizing, it

Summarizing, it can be stated without exaggeration that if the widening and perfectioning of the civil registration services are not consistent with the large modifications in the social structure that are forecast for this region, the incapacity of these services to deal with the new requirements will constitute an obstacle to the success of the essential aims of economic and social development.

5. Civil Registration and the social assistance services

Of all the technical services the one which perhaps confers most importance on the family is that of social assistance. Its ultimate aim is human welfare, which it has in common with all the organizations which form the public administration of a country, because this also is the final objective of the state. In dealing with individuals, it seeks the complete development of their potential capacities, a desire it shares with the educational services. But its fundamental characteristic is that it regards the individual as a member of the family and the family as the way to obtain the wellbeing of the individual. From this it can be inferred that the strengthening of the family is one of its most important immediate aims.

This task demands certain basic conditions, one of which is the legal recognition of the family as the basic social unit and the recognition of the civil status corresponding to each of its members. Both of these are obtained through civil registration. In this way, the social welfare services while they need the civil registration services, are also their most effective collaborators as they contribute to the legal organization of the family when they use it as a base for the granting of the majority of their loans.

In particular, from the point of view of these services, the registration of births, marriages and deaths facilitates the determination of the rights and obligations of all the members of a family with respect to the other members and of the family with respect to the society of which it forms part. It is also important in cases of family dissension, of maintenance, of desertion, of unmarried mothers, and of other problems which relate to marital relations and to the relations between parents and children. It is also useful for the promotion of individual welfare. The registration of births gives legal recognition to the existence of an individual and grants him the rights of a member of a family and in a certain sense the rights of a citizen. It determines his legal status and, which in some societies is of greater importance, his social status. Where social assistance and social security exists by right and not through charity the legal determination of the existence of a person constitutes a necessary requisite for the receipt of loans and benefits. Also it possesses an enormous psychological effect on the role of the individual in the sight of his family, his group and his country, which is an important factor in the development of his potentialities and the attainment of satisfactory human relationships.

/With regard

With regard to protection of the infant, legal proof of the age of the child, which corresponds almost exclusively to civil registration, is important in order to avoid all those forms of exploitation which originate at an early age, as infant labour, etc.

Adoption is one of the methods of rehabilitating the child in the centre of the family thus assuring him the care, protection, rights and privileges of family life. The registration of adoption clarifies the position of the natural parents and of the adopting parents with respect to the child and is a necessary instrument for the social services in regard to infant protection.

Finally, civil registration is also necessary for the protection of the rights of the woman in her personal and conjugal relations.

6. Civil Registration and the community

The term social science includes all those subjects which follow upon the scientific examination of man's conduct. Among these is sociology which studies man "as a component of a mass, of a group of individuals in order to determine the way in which the groups behave and the manner in which this conduct can be modified".^{2/}

The enormous study of man requires tools which will provide quantitative measures of the problems. Such tools are precisely demographic statistics.

On its part, civil registration is not indifferent to the conduct of man as an isolated entity or as a group, because in order that the statistics which it collects may be representative of the truth and serve therefore the ends to which they are directed they must be integrated and as accurate and as opportune as possible. This implies that civil registration depends on the community and on its behaviour. Therefore, it can be said that the availability of complete, accurate and opportune demographic data provides more than a measure of demographic events but also measures the degree in which the population has become effectively incorporated in the life of society.

In fact, the practice of civil registration, like every other civic responsibility, is a typical act of participation by the people in the duties and responsibilities of public administration. For this reason it should be promoted and organized and it should be accepted as the deliberate and conscientious responsibility of the community.

^{2/} Robin F. Badgley, Social Sciences and Public Health "Canadian Journal of Public Health", Vol. 54, April 1963, pages 147-153.

For the performance of its work, civil registration should not depend exclusively on the amount of civic responsibility and spontaneous co-operation of society as a whole or of any of its members. Neither should it be dependent on compulsory devices such as fines or other kinds of impositions, because experience has shown that such devices have little effect in countries like these where the citizen is passive and public administration lacks sufficient operating capacity to obtain the most effective results from these devices.

In these circumstances, civil registration ought to be regarded as an "understood necessity" by all the community in order to be able to rely on the co-operation of every citizen and to a large extent the apathy and the indifference and the natural resistance to the providing of information especially of an individual, family or confidential nature would disappear.

To obtain such results, in the first place, an investigation should be made in order to determine the real position of the community with regard to civil registration and its motives, and in order to establish the level of culture of the community together with its feeling of responsibility towards its civic obligations, its specific knowledge regarding the rules and practices of civil registration and the possible difficulties which would have to be overcome in their practice and then suitable educational methods ought to be applied to permit a favourable exchange of the views, motivations and ideas of the community on the subject of civil registration.

It would be considered inappropriate if such an effort constituted an isolated act focused only on civil registration. Such an effort should be one of many designed to promote and institutionalize the practice of the conscientious and organized participation of the public in the acceleration of development.

7. Conclusions

Although the civil registration services were created to perform an essential legal function, the importance of which still persists, this does not mean to say that they can isolate themselves and refuse to assume other functions which according to the process of evolution may be indispensable to the State for the achievement of its ends. One of these is the statistical function which is to be recommended for the majority of the American countries. Civil Registration, in order to carry out fully its statistical function and its social role in this contemporary age, ought to provide complete, accurate, opportune and comparable data on all vital events. This means that the promotion of the completeness of its records and their high quality must be considered as among its most important obligations.

Vital statistics, towards the production of which the civil registration services make a considerable contribution, are of increasing

/importance as

importance as a result of the planning of recent years. This fact not only relates civil registration with various institutions but also, or less directly, brings about its participation in public economic and social development activities.

The completeness of the registration of vital events, which is essential if the statistics are to reflect reality, depends in part on the community as the daily practice of civil registration is a typical act of public participation. In this sense, action must be taken which is conducive to changing the image and motivation of the community with regard to civil registration and efforts must be made to establish the conscientious and organized participation of the public in every act implying fulfilment of civic responsibility.

