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SECOND INTER-AMERICAN SEMINAR ON CIVIL REGISTRATION

Organized by the United Nations, through its Statistical Office, the Bureau of Technical Assistance Operations and the Economic Commission for Latin America, 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

APPLICATION OF THE RESOLUTIONS OF THE FIRST INTER-AMERICAN
SEMINAR ON CIVIL REGISTRATION

Presented by

the secretariat of the Economic Commission for Latin America

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1. Background data and purpose

The First Inter-American Seminar on Civil Registration was held at Santiago, Chile, in 1954. It was attended by forty-eight representatives of fifteen countries, who adopted many resolutions on the organization and functioning of the American civil registration services. It has been considered both useful and opportune to present to the Second Inter-American Seminar on Civil Registration an evaluation of the possibilities and difficulties relating to the implementation of the resolutions by the countries concerned. To that end, the ECLA secretariat prepared a special questionnaire and requested the American countries to reply to it as fully and promptly as possible.

This document presents a summary of the replies received and some comments thereon.

2. Scope and limitations

The questionnaire was sent to twenty-five countries or territories, and thirteen replies were received (Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Guatemala, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Trinidad and Tobago, United States and Venezuela). Other sources of information have permitted comments to be included on three more countries (Dominican Republic, El Salvador and Mexico). ^{1/} The replies were not always complete and to the point. Some countries did not answer the question, and others were not specific enough. In spite of those limitations, the survey has made it possible to formulate a number of comments of general interest and to draw some useful conclusions.

3. Comments on the resolutions adopted

A series of brief comments follows on resolutions, or groups of related resolutions, in the order in which they are set out in the questionnaire. In each case, the number of the resolution, as specified in the Final Report of the First Inter-American Seminar on Civil Registration ^{2/} is given in brackets.

(a) Structure of civil registration (1.1)

In six countries (Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Mexico, Peru and Venezuela) civil registration does not operate on the basis of local agencies directly dependent on a central national office. The reasons

^{1/} Replies have since been received from Canada and Haiti.

^{2/} United Nations, Statistical Papers, series M, No. 23, New York, 1955.

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that have presented the adoption of this system of organization include, firstly, the federal type of political and administrative organization in the country concerned and, secondly, the impossibility of modifying existing laws. All these countries, except Brazil, said they would be able to adopt the structure recommended and some of them are studying the necessary legal reforms. Three of them considered that it would be useful to receive technical assistance from an international expert for the purpose.

In this connexion, the United States, which is a federal country, provides a good example of how co-ordination can be obtained at a national level by surmounting the difficulties inherent in its political and administrative organization. Its national civil registration system can be described as a confederation of State systems and the Federal Government. Under this arrangement, the Federal Government serves as a focal point, and helps establish standard and uniform practices through model laws, standard certificate forms, handbooks of recommended practice, national committees that can serve to articulate and co-ordinate the system, etc.

The individual State systems carry out the task of promoting and registering vital events, forward copies to the national office for the compilation of statistics, participate fully with committees established to develop national policy and standards, use the national office as a clearing-house on inter-State and national problems of concern, etc.

(b) Attitude of Governments to civil registration and civil registration officials (1.2, 1.4, 1.5, 4.3 and 4.4)

Six countries (Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Costa Rica, Trinidad and Tobago and the United States) said they had fully implemented this set of resolutions, but the method of applying them varies from one country to another. Two countries (Mexico and Peru) have made appreciable advances in the training of officials and the selection of registrars in rural areas. Among the difficulties mentioned are legal problems, shortage of funds and defective co-ordination of the system. It is generally considered that the possibility of adopting the system recommended would improve if technical and financial assistance were available.

(c) Civil registration registers or records to be kept in duplicate (1.3)

Only three countries (Colombia, Costa Rica and Panama) fail to keep their civil registration registers or records in duplicate, by reason of legal and structural problems.

(d) National vital and health statistics committees (2.1)

All the countries which replied to the questionnaire have established such committees, but in most cases they are inoperative. Hence, an

/operational problem

operational problem is involved. Some legal difficulties were mentioned, although it is considered that the situation might improve if adequate technical assistance were made available. Why do these committees not operate smoothly? In view of Latin America's administrative immaturity, and the feeling of these committees that their work is ineffectual, should they not be given the powers to enforce their decisions?

(e) Relationship between civil registration offices and hospital services (2.2)

In ten countries an effective relationship exists between civil registration offices and hospital and related services. The so-called "subsidiary offices" - subordinate agencies of civil registration offices which are installed in clinics and hospitals for the collection of vital events occurring therein - represent at once a practical and highly useful form of that relationship. It does not exist in all countries, however. In general, it is considered that additional financial resources would help to promote these inter-institutional relationships, although the reason for this is not clear, since their establishment depends merely on administrative decisions which entail no expense.

(f) Active role of civil registration services (2.4, 2.5, 5.2 and 7.4)

Experience has shown that this set of resolutions is closely related to the completeness of registration records, which is essential if vital statistics are to present a true picture of the situation. Nevertheless, it is clear from the replies received that, except in the United States, little or nothing has been done to ensure that civil registration assumes an active role and to give its officials an increased awareness of the importance of their work, and to awaken and enhance public interest in the registration of vital events. The prospects of these resolutions' being implemented will continue to be poor unless the existing economic and administrative obstacles are overcome. Five countries mention the need for international technical assistance in the form of experts, fellowships and exchange of experience.

(g) Strengthening of administrative systems which include civil registration (2.6)

Co-ordination between the different bodies forming part of the vital statistics system exists, in widely varying degree and intensity, in Argentina, Chile, Peru, Trinidad and Tobago, and the United States, and efforts are being made to maintain it. The remaining countries ascribe their failure to comply with this resolution to the want of a co-ordinating agency and to ignorance of the importance of vital statistics. They see no immediate prospects of implementing it and, on the whole, consider that greater assistance from the international agencies is required.

/(h) Co-ordination

(h) Co-ordination between the civil registration and civil identification services. Footprints of new-born child and fingerprints of mother (2.8 and 4.11)

In eight countries there is a greater or lesser degree of co-ordination between civil registration and identification, but none of them have succeeded in instituting the mother-child relationship in that respect. Not without reason, they mention legal, administrative and even operational obstacles, especially in rural areas. In Chile, although civil registration and identification constitute a single body, no record is kept of the combination of prints referred to above, although the system was tried for several years during the fifties. The United States considers it unwise to take steps toward combining the two services, since public sentiment is opposed to the concept because of the cost, volume of records required and the expert personnel needed.

(i) Definition of vital events - practical application (3.1)

This was regarded as one of the most important recommendations of the first seminar, both because the completeness, accuracy and comparability of vital statistics directly depend on the adoption of international definitions, and because, even when adopted, they tend to be wrongly applied. In at least eight countries, there is no conflict between the national and international definitions. Colombia and Venezuela report certain legal discrepancies, and the rest failed to give a specific reply.

(j) International exchange of information and experience (3.2 and 3.3)

There is a virtual consensus that no exchange of information and experience in respect of civil registration is taking place in Latin America. This exchange is both useful and necessary, and could facilitate implementation of the rest of the resolutions of the first seminar. In this respect, it is considered of vital importance to strengthen the Inter-American Civil Registration Association or establish some other central body to regulate the American civil registration systems. Although there is an active inter-State exchange of information and experience in the United States maintained through the national office dealing with vital statistics, since this exchange is not at the international level it does not benefit the rest of the American countries.

(k) Geographical registration units - size and boundaries (4.2 and 7.7)

It is generally considered that once the size and boundaries of the geographical registration units (the territory under the jurisdiction of each registrar) are determined, no further thought need be given to the problem. However, in view of the continuous population shifts and the constant progress being made in means of communication and transport facilities, it is essential that the higher authorities of the civil registration services should have the necessary powers to resurvey the size and boundaries of local registration districts when required. In

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order to ensure completeness of registration, additional steps should be taken to establish registration offices in easily accessible places and to enable the registrar, with a view to extending his sphere of action, to delegate his powers when circumstances so require.

In spite of the importance of this resolution, most countries have failed to effect the revisions implied, or to authorize the higher civil registration authorities to do so. The difficulties mentioned include the existence of unsuitable laws, a widely dispersed population, and inadequately trained officials.

(l) Advisability of bringing teaching on the compilation of statistics into harmony with international recommendations (3.6)

Eight countries (Argentina, Chile, Costa Rica, Panama, Peru, Trinidad and Tobago, United States and Venezuela) report either that they have achieved such harmony or that serious efforts are being, or have been, made to achieve it. In the United States there are eleven universities that teach the various processes of collection and compilation of statistical data in accordance with international principles and definitions. The designation of the Statistics Institute of the University of Costa Rica as a Central American agency for statistical training and research, and the work of the Latin American Demographic Centre (Centro Latinoamericano de Demografía - CELADE), the Inter-American Statistical Training Center (Centro Interamericano de Enseñanza Estadística - CIENES) and the School of Public Health of the University of Chile (although the establishment of this faculty is neither related to nor a consequence of the First Inter-American Seminar on Civil Registration) are examples of the efforts to impart training in various branches of statistics in conformity with the international recommendations.

(m) Legalization of de facto marital unions - action of social service and persuasion measures (3.7, 5.1 and 5.3)

With the single exception of the United States, the replies show that the various countries have made only half-hearted efforts in this direction so far. However, any measures calculated to strengthen the bonds of the family, and consequently to combat the serious problem of illegitimacy and its pernicious effects, are considered a step in the right direction in Latin America. In this respect civil registration services should not only use their own resources, but should also draw on all the available resources of the community. One of the most fruitful means might well be to work in co-operation with the social or welfare services. Those agencies, in turn, are also interested in co-operating with the civil registration service in carrying out their own functions, since the family represents the centre of activity and frame of reference within which they try to work towards the welfare of the individual. In any case, the co-operation of the community is considered essential if

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worthwhile results are to be attained. In this respect, it must not be forgotten that the sociologists and other specialists are against the application of sanctions or compulsory measures to obtain the assistance of the community. It is better to use suitable measures of persuasion and encouragement and every possible means to improve the community's attitude to civil registration.

(n) Efforts to measure and remedy incompleteness of registration
(3.8, 7.1 and 7.2)

Nearly half the countries acknowledge that they have failed to carry out any studies on the subject, because of inexperience and shortage of funds. There is no question, however, that this is a responsibility of the higher authorities of the civil registration services, as may be inferred from their very objectives. If the law has entrusted them with the registration of vital events, obviously their duties embrace all such events and not only a few.

Among the methods that have been developed for measuring the completeness of registers, some are more refined than others, and therefore more complex. Many that are capable of giving a good indication of the degree of incompleteness, however, could be put into practice without much effort and at very little expense.

(o) Content and layout of registration forms (4.5 and 4.6)

There are still a few countries, such as Venezuela, whose registration forms are not pre-printed, a fact which considerably lengthens the registration process. In others, the layout is unsuitable and the content covers a mass of irrelevant information. In view of the fact that the purpose of the form in question is of an eminently legal nature and that the civil registration service collects statistical data in another document (statistical report) which it sends to the processing agencies, possibly one of the most useful measures would be to purify the content of the forms used, in relation to the aims concerned. Thus, the civil registration form would contain nothing but legal information and the statistical report only statistical data, which would avoid any unnecessary duplication of effort.

By way of illustration, it should be added that the United States review its forms every ten years, on the basis of advice from archivists, paper and form experts, specialists in inks, etc.

(p) General alphabetical indexes (4.7)

Few countries at present have a general alphabetical index of registration prepared by mechanical means, despite its decided advantages in securing maximum purity for the records, through elimination of the tendency towards duplicate registrations when the original entry cannot

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be readily located. In Argentina (the Federal capital and some of the provinces) an alphabetical card index is kept at the provincial level; nothing is said about whether or not it is prepared by mechanical means. In Colombia a general registration index is provided for in the bill setting up a civil registration service. Costa Rica has had a general registration index since 1954, prepared by mechanical means, but it is not up to date in the case of marriages and deaths. Chile has been preparing one for several years, also by mechanical means; and in the United States records are indexed alphabetically and chronologically. Peru, and Trinidad and Tobago, are exploring the possibility of making such an index, and Bolivia, Paraguay and Venezuela state that they need technical assistance for the purpose; Paraguay also requires financial aid.

(q) Reduction of space required for archives (4.8)

The use of micro-film seems to be the answer to the need to reduce the space required for the ever-increasing archives of such services as civil registration. But the countries that replied are not all in favour of this technique, mainly for financial reasons, since its introduction calls for a fairly heavy investment. In the United States the opinion of the different States is divided on this point, only some being in favour of micro-film. Venezuela is against the technique, while Paraguay is beginning to use it and says it needs funds to extend its activities in that direction. Argentina, Colombia, Costa Rica, Panama, Peru and Trinidad and Tobago are planning to introduce the use of micro-film, and Peru adds that technical assistance in the form of equipment is needed.

(r) Translation and change of baptismal names (4.9 and 4.10)

In Panama, Trinidad and Tobago, the United States and Venezuela, established procedures exist whereby persons may change their baptismal names in certain circumstances. Costa Rica, although not in principle in favour of the idea, would like technical assistance in order to study the problem. Paraguay and Peru propose to implement this recommendation in their new civil registration bills, now under study. In general, the only difficulties in the way of applying this resolution seem to be of a legal nature.

(s) Preference for documentary evidence of vital events (4.12)

In Colombia and Peru, the law provides for both documentary evidence and witnesses in the registration of births, deaths and foetal deaths by the registrar. The bills now under study to modify the civil registration system contain provisions dispensing with witnesses in cases where there is reliable documentary evidence. The procedure of the remaining countries is in line with the resolution concerned. In the United States, all births and deaths are attended by members of the medical profession, therefore, the certificate in question is issued by the medical officer or midwife concerned; the reply fails to state what procedure is followed in cases where no medical officer or midwife has been present.

/(t) Systematic

(t) Systematic use of statistical techniques in civil registration (6.1, 6.2, 6.3 and 6.4)

With the exception of the United States, statistical techniques are not used in civil registration, either systematically or sporadically. In general, the reason given is the shortage of skilled personnel, and Chile considers that this should be the task of the statistical services, in return for the co-operation they receive from the civil registration service. In any case, there is general consensus that technical assistance is essential in this field and that, as stated in the resolution, priority should be attached to the organizational, technical and administrative aspects of the system. Later, more complex techniques such as sampling can be used with a view to improving the system itself. By way of illustration it should be added that the United States, which today uses these techniques systematically, developed its own system in the way suggested above.

(u) Simplification of procedures for the correction of entries (7.3)

Seven countries (Brazil, Chile, Costa Rica, Guatemala, Panama, Peru and the United States) consider that the procedures in use are sufficiently expeditious and flexible and present no problems to anyone concerned, while three (Colombia, Paraguay and Venezuela) are of the opinion that the procedures should be simplified. It was generally considered that, in view of the technical nature of the subject, international technical assistance was needed to overcome the existing difficulties.

(v) Active and co-ordinated civil registration activities - co-operation of the community (7.5, 7.6 and 7.9)

Practically nowhere except in the United States are educational or publicity campaigns conducted to promote civil registration. Whatever little action is taken is sporadic and improvised and not part of any programme. It is seemingly taken for granted that the community's duty is to co-operate with the civil registration service and no attempt is being made to ascertain on what scale such co-operation exists or to increase it. Colombia considers that the bill on civil registration at present under study will promote clear links between the service and the community, while Paraguay, Peru and Venezuela maintain that the establishment of an international agency to further the advancement of civil registration could help in solving the problem.

(w) Free registration (7.8)

In principle it can be concluded, on the basis of the replies received, that civil registration is free in all the American countries. However, there is a hidden aspect of the problem that is not generally remarked on: it is not enough - and this is very important in developing countries - that registration is officially free; it should also be free in practice. The very low pay received by most registrars leads them to levy certain charges not provided for by law, which represent a heavy burden on the

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budget of those with small incomes. Sometimes the fees which registrars receive directly from the public, and which represent their entire remuneration, are also conducive to certain illegal charges. The American countries should devote special attention to this problem, because any financial obstacle may stand in the way of completeness of registration, despite any other efforts to achieve it.

(x) Inter-American Civil Registration Association (final resolution)

It has been suggested that there should be changes in both the form and substance of this resolution. The former consist of the following: (a) in paragraph 8.2, (b) and (h) should be fused into one sub-paragraph, and (e) and (f) into another, since in both cases the two separate paragraphs deal with the same subject; (b) paragraphs 8.3 and 8.5 appear to conflict with each other and therefore need to be clarified; (c) the following phrases should be deleted: in paragraph 8.2 "in countries where such associations do not as yet exist", and in paragraph 8.7, "inter alia".

The substantive changes suggested are: (a) to include the following in the objectives of the Association: to promote good relations in all countries between the civil registration service and the offices that make use of the data it provides; (b) to raise the status of the Association to that of an official agency of the United Nations; and (c) to provide it with adequate funds so that it can operate smoothly, and with technical personnel to advise and assist Governments in encouraging advances in their civil registration services.

4. Conclusions

The following conclusions can be drawn from the comments set out above:

(a) The resolutions of the First Inter-American Seminar on Civil Registration are still fully valid, since the various countries not only have raised no objections to them, except in a few isolated cases, but have shown that they fully appreciate their value and the need to implement them.

(b) None the less, the first seminar does not seem to have had the full impact that might have been expected in promoting advances in the American civil registration services. The last ten years have shown no appreciable progress with regard to structure and organization; Governments have failed to pay these services the attention called for by the importance of their functions, a fact which is reflected in inadequate budgets and underpaid, low-calibre personnel; registrars continue to adopt a passive, routine approach to their functions, which does nothing to promote completeness of registration or to improve the quality of the statistical data collected; the civil registration service maintains very weak links with other institutions working in the same field, and even with

/those with

those with which it should co-operate on a permanent basis such as health and statistics services, since it does not fully realize why such systematic co-operation is necessary. In this respect, a means should be sought to infuse force and vigour into the operation of national vital statistics and health committees.

(c) In most countries structural reform of the civil registration service seems to be the only way to obtain from it the desired results. Such reforms should necessarily include the bringing up to date of the basic legislation, the training of personnel, the allocation of adequate funds on a permanent basis, and a substantial improvement in the administrative process. At the same time, completeness of registration cannot be achieved without the active, conscious and deliberate co-operation of the community, and the main concern of the civil registration service should be to obtain this co-operation.

(d) In the replies the hope was expressed that the competent international agencies would be able to provide them with adequate technical assistance, and if necessary funds, to help them achieve the results referred to above.