

## **Strengthening Vital Registration Systems as Source of Demographic Data for Effective Socio-Economic Development Planning in Nigeria**

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**Abstract:** Compilation of demographic records/data for different reasons remains a constant characteristic of all civilizations-past or present. In particular, the usual purposes of such compilation among the past civilizations were in the main to impose taxation, assign military duties or some other onerous community services upon those considered to be eligible. However, the purpose of compiling and keeping records of population in the modern society has moved beyond the imposition of tax or assignment of military duties. In today's world, no meaningful socio-economic planning is visible without adequate records of the population. In this study therefore, the main objective is to isolate and examine the state of vital registration system as an important source of demographic data for socio-economic planning in Nigeria and to suggest ways, by which the system of vital registration can be strengthened to effectively serve its numerous aims in socio-economic development of the country. The conclusion is that as vital as vital registration system is to socio-economic planning and development, the system is not yet fully developed in terms of its overall coverage and is also, yet to be adequately appreciated in terms of its value to socio-economic planning. Hence, the study suggests some ways, by which the vital registration system, as it is today in Nigeria can be strengthened to generate necessary data for meaningful socio-economic planning in the country.

**Key words:** Vital registration, economic planning, development, demographic data, effective, Nigeria

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### **INTRODUCTION**

In each societal type, be it primitive or modern society, people plan for population and they need population data to plan. Planning thus becomes the central issue in all known societies no matter their type and stage of development, while demographic data form the basis of such planning. The relationship between population, planning and development (measured in terms of economic well-being) has a long history, which has been well documented in demographic study. For instance, Kyfitz (Dandare, 2003) pointed out that way back to the 4th century BC, the Chinese philosophers believed that the lower the population of a community or nation, the higher the expanse of land that would lie idle and the lower the returns from tax collection. Conversely, they also believed that if the population were too large, there would be hardship for the communities and/or nations.

The research of Rev. Robert Thomas Malthus also provides additional knowledge about the relationship between population, planning and development. Malthus in his days was alerted by the circumstances of his time and did his research on the observation he made

concerning the trend of population growth and human misery. Based on his observation, he submitted that there is an ultimate relationship between population number and available resources. According to him, the nature of this relationship could be seen as a measure of adjustment of population to environment in order to achieve maximum satisfaction. Malthus in his theory therefore, assumed that for any population to continue to exist there must be food, which is human directed, particularly, where agricultural technology is not fully developed. But he noticed that human beings are by nature indolent and are limited in their capacity for the adaptation to environment. Consequently, he theorized that the rate of population growth is not commensurate with the rate of food production. In this case, food production can only increase at an arithmetic ratio, whereas population increases at a geometric ratio. The implication of the above submission is that at anytime, there are more people than resources because of the rate of increase. While, it is true that there are several criticisms against the Malthusian theory, but the fact remains that it has also successfully demonstrated at that time the close relationship between population and standard of living (an index of development).

The issue of the relationship between population and development continues to be the focus of many international conferences on population, e.g., World Population Conference, Bucharest (1974), Mexico (1984), the International Conference on Population and Development, Cairo (1994) and ICOD, New York (1999). The common trend in all of these conferences was the submission that there is an important relationship between population and what we can call sustainable development. The international conference on population and development held in Cairo particularly emphasized that every activity of human being is closely interrelated with population change, population patterns and the level and capacity of its national resources (UNICPD, 1994). The conference further submitted that to speed up the pace of sustainable development, poverty alleviation and improved quality of life of the people, population has to be fully integrated into economic development strategies. From the foregoing, it can be shown that planning for development is not possible without adequate records of some population variables and their distribution across the human communities we want to develop. Understanding, the various characteristics of population and its (population) spatial distribution thus, becomes the main ingredient of any development effort. This explains why every civilization in the past used to compile records on certain portions of its population just like all the modern societies do, though for different aims. The usual aims of such compilation among the societies of the past were to impose taxation, assign military duty, or some other onerous service upon those eligible. The purposes of compiling and keeping records of the population in the modern society have however, moved far beyond the imposition of tax or assignment of military duty. In today's world, no meaningful socio-economic planning is visible without adequate records about the population.

### **CONCEPTUAL ISSUES**

The term population in this study means the total number of persons (usually residents) in a given area at a given time. This is the human aggregate subject to the influences of demographic processes of fertility, mortality and migration, which must be planned for and unless we understand the occurrence of these demographic processes across the nation, we may be planning without facts. Facts about population do not come from the blue, instead they are generated. Thus, the sources of demographic data or statistics needed for socio-economic planning include the followings: national census, sample survey, registration material and ad hoc sources. National census as the name suggests and as defined by the

United Nations in 1975 is the total process of collecting, compiling and publishing demographic, economic and social data pertaining at a specified time or times to all persons in a country or delimited territory. On the other hand, sample survey just covers a section of the total population of the country. Both national census and sample survey are commonly referred to as population canvass. The registration material constitutes another source of population data. There are two types of registration material namely, population registers found in Scandinavian countries and Japan and the vital registers, which furnish us with information such as births, deaths, marriages and migration. The fourth source of population data is what is now commonly referred to as the ad hoc source, which is the use of tax records, tombstone inscriptions, newspapers and list of students in higher institutions as sources of demographic data.

Of all the four sources of population data named and discussed above, vital registration remains the most important and highly reliable source as it provides a continuous basis for the generation of demographic data. In almost every culture, there is associated with each event a religious ritual to mark it birth and baptism, marriage and wedding, death and burial services etc. If these events are properly captured by way of recording them on continuous basis, they will provide adequate demographic records or data on which planning can be based. Thus, vital statistics as the name suggests could be defined as those data that pertain to each person's birth, change in his civil status throughout his lifetime and his death. Vital registration, which is otherwise known as civil registration is defined as the continuous and permanent collection, recording, collation, analysis, presentation and distribution of data on the occurrence and characteristics of vital events (such as births, deaths, still-births, marriages and annulment of marriages, foundling, migration and naturalization etc.) done in accordance with legal requirements of a nation (Umar, 2003; Maliki, 2003). This source of data provides the opportunity to get or secure data on continuous basis. Equally important is the fact that the process of updating census data in inter-censal years and the maintenance of an accurate and effective population register are dependent upon the availability of vital statistics data realized from a functioning system of vital registration. It is important to note that in addition to the importance of vital records to individuals and the essential application of vital statistics data for a wide variety of official uses, there are other important uses of registration data for scientific purposes. Those applications usually in the field of demography and public health are dependent on the information collected through

the civil registration system. Essentially, the civil registration system provides needed information on such topics as fertility, infant mortality, overall mortality, life expectancy and the impact of specific acute or chronic diseases. All these and other information provided by vital registration system provide useful bases for developmental efforts.

### **FUNCTIONS OF VITAL REGISTRATION SYSTEM**

From the foregoing, it can be seen that a civil registration and vital statistics system serves many needs in today's world. Indeed, the registration of vital events, namely the recording of the facts associated with live births, deaths, foetal deaths, marriages, divorces and related occurrences is important enough to justify governmental requirements for a mandatory or compulsory vital registration system. Since such facts cannot be captured on continuous basis by a national census program, the establishment of an orderly process for the creation of reliable records of vital events (simply referred to as vital registration system) is therefore of great value both to government and to its citizens and even the non-citizen residents. For individuals, for instance, vital records provide legal proof of identity, civil status, age and citizenship, upon which a variety of rights depend. Collectively therefore, the vital statistics derived from the aggregation of individual records provides experts with the tools for the demographic analyses needed for economic and social planning and development, including rates and trends of population growth and distribution. A sound knowledge of and availability of data on these two characteristics of population are therefore very important in planning for socio-economic development.

### **INSTITUTIONALIZATION OF VITAL REGISTRATION IN NIGERIA: THE PROGRESS SO FAR**

Today, because of the importance of vital registration system, most if not at all countries of the world have legislations authorizing vital registration systems for collection and collation of vital statistics that can be used for planning aims. To effectively do this several international agreements have been put in place to guide this collection and spell out how official statistics so collected are reported to the United Nations. Towards this end therefore, the international community has established structures and mechanisms to support the development and implementation of civil registration at

national level, with the United Nations Statistical Division (UNSD) playing the principal role in this field. This effort at the international community level as not led to equal success at national level. This is because establishing and developing complete and efficient vital registration is a costly and gradual process. In many countries, it has taken over a century for a well-functioning system of vital registration to emerge. Experience about vital registration has shown that an efficient vital registration is generally limited to wealthier countries with greater infrastructure, more resources and the available capacity to collect information. On the contrary and by extension, there is dearth of good vital registration in developing countries and this affects precisely these populations that actually need such a data source for socio-economic planning. These are the poorer countries and their poorest residents who still live in abject poverty and need population data to be planned for Nigeria, like many developing countries has a very long and uncoordinated history of vital registration. In the distant past for example, both private and public organizations instituted a practice that can be called vital registration for different purposes. For example, while private organizations such as the churches, mosques and traditional rulers organized registration of certain vital events such as births, deaths and marriages basically for their own consumption, many public organizations on the other hand, simply mounted vital registration systems in order to generate revenue (Sule, 2003). It is interesting to note that the various attempts by these private and public organizations to organize registration of certain events were done without any form of legislation that would compel people to comply. This thus, affected the depth of such compilation. However in 1863, the first formal attempt at institutionalizing a vital registration system in Nigeria was made with the promulgation of ordinance No. 21. This ordinance made provisions for registration of births and marriages as well as the census of Lagos colony (Maliki, 2003). The actual implementation of the provision of the ordinance did not kick off until 1892. The program recorded an encouraging level of success, in terms numbers of births and marriages registered, which made the colonial government to extend it to Warri and Calabar in 1903 and 1904, respectively (Sule, 2003).

Thereafter, several ordinances by governments in different parts of Nigeria emerged making expressed provisions for vital registration. However, a comprehensive legislation for registration of vital events that covered the whole country did not emerge until 1917. In 1948, a further progress was recorded when a 'birth, deaths and burial ordinance' was promulgated visibly to consolidate the provisions of the 1917 ordinance.

However, one interesting thing to note about the 1948 ordinance was that it was limited mainly to the township, while the rural areas of the country were left uncovered. As mentioned earlier, these early attempts at registration of vital events in Nigeria were not properly coordinate and as such they were not universally applicable, though each was characterized by pocket of success here and there. This means that at the initial stage, the best the country had were regional laws concerning registration of vital events. This was the situation before the Federal Government of Nigeria prepared and released a legal document, which introduced universal civil registration, titled births and deaths compulsory registration decree No. 39 of 1970. This decree was later reviewed, which gave birth to another decree named births, death etc. compulsory registration decree No. 69 of 1992.

It is interesting to note that the 1992 decree on compulsory registration of births, deaths etc. is indeed a response to the numerous international treaties on birth registration rights subscribed to by the Nigerian government at various times. Some of the treaties, which Nigeria is signatory to and which by implication make it compulsory for every child born in Nigeria to be registered are: the 1966, international covenant on civil and political rights, article 24, which stipulates that every child shall be registered immediately after birth and shall have a name; the 1984, universal declaration of human right article 15, which stipulates that everyone has the right to nationality and the 1989, convention on the rights of the child, article 7, which again stipulates that the child shall be registered immediately after birth and shall have the right from birth to a name and the right to acquire a nationality.

One unique feature of the 1992 vital registration decree is that it established for the first time vital registration in all the local governments in the country with effect from February/March 1994. The decree also placed the responsibility of vital registration squarely under the national population commission. The objective of this new attempt was to establish a uniform system of vital registration nationwide. To do this, the previous regional laws and decree No. 39 of 1979 were reviewed and from this exercise, a new decree was promulgated. Under this new decree, the commission was given the power to appoint the registrar-general, registrars and other staff to run the affairs of the vital registration programmes for the entire country.

Like all legislations authorizing vital registration in many countries of the world, the vital registration decree in Nigeria expects that the national population

commission register all vital events. However, because of the enormous nature of this assignment, the commission focused its attention for now on the registration of three events namely, births, deaths and still-births. To develop a complete and efficient vital registration of the above mentioned vital events, the commission started with some forms of experimentation broken into phases-phase I-III. These are called the experimental vital registration phases. Each phase covered different sector of the Nigerian society. For instance, the experimental phase I was urban local government areas-based in four states selected for the experiment. This is tagged urban experimental phase I. The experimental phase II on the other hand, is rural-based and it covered four predominantly rural local government areas in the same four states selected in phase I. The last experimental phase is the state local governments phase III. This was introduced nationwide in March 1991. This phase covered all the local government areas in all state capitals throughout the nation.

It is worth-noting that the overall success recorded in all the experimental phases led to the expansion of the project in February/March, 1994. The expansion was made to cover all the local government areas nationwide. With this expansion, the national population commission approved the establishment of at least two centers in each local government area in Nigeria. Another landmark progress made in the area of vital registration system in Nigeria is the institution of well-defined administrative structures for the implementation of vital registration objectives. The vital registration administrative structure adopted in Nigeria is the hierarchical organization type that conforms to the three tiers of operation of the national population commission. Consequently, registration centers have been selected at each commission's level of operation and staffed by registration officers. Procedures for registration have also been put in place.

An examination of the spatial and volume of coverage of vital registration in Nigeria in the context of the administrative structure discussed above shows that as of today, the spatial coverage is low and is only much effective in urban areas, states and local government headquarters. In the rural areas on the hand, the impact is almost absent due to inaccessibility of rural settlements. What can be deduced here is that because there are more rural than urban localities in almost all the states in Nigeria, the spatial coverage cannot be said to be above average. As of now, two registration centers are approved for each local government area, which is far from being adequate. The inadequate level of spatial and volume

coverage of vital registration in Nigeria as reported above may be due to a number of factors namely: insufficient funding; insufficient nationwide publicity; inadequate number of registration centers; competition from local councils and lack of effective sanctions.

### **REINFORCING VITAL REGISTRATION SYSTEM IN NIGERIA: PROPOSALS FOR A NEW AGENDA**

Vital registration system the world over has many advantages, which have been summarized as administrative, statistical, medical and personal advantages. Today, it is seen as an important source of population data and an essential complement to census figures (Sule, 2003). The above stated advantages alone constitute enough reasons why every nation including Nigeria should mount an effective and efficient system of vital registration. In spite of these numerous advantages, the success recorded in this vital area varies from country to country. Whatever, the case may, be a good and well-functioning vital registration system would cover all births and deaths that occur in a given population and reliably record basic socio-demographic information depending on the needs of the country instituting the system. In other words, the over-arching goal of efforts in this area should be to ensure that every nation (including Nigeria) is able to provide accurate, unbiased counts of deaths by age and sex and accurate counts of births etc. The question here is how much of this goal has been achieved in the Nigerian situation?

Although, it is too early to assess fully the vital registration project in Nigeria, but we can say with some level of certainty that in terms of coverage, the project is still limited in scope. It is in this context that this study suggests some new proposals, which Nigeria as a country can try in order to improve the quality of a vital registration system and sustain it on the long run. Therefore, some of the critical paths for improving or reinforcing vital registration system in Nigeria are spelt out in the following discussion. First and foremost, the country and particularly the people who are charged with the responsibility of piloting the affairs of vital registration system should be ready to make some initiatives to improve the current level of achievement in vital registration project. These initiatives should address strategies that will accelerate the improvement of civil registration and vital statistics systems. Any initiative to improve vital registration in Nigeria therefore, should set targets and make sure that the targets so set are pursued and met by all in the long run.

Secondly, at all levels of governance, starting from the national level to the local government level, political

will and support are necessary for implementing a co-ordinated vital registration system. No blue-print of action is good without the political will to implement it. It is necessary to understand that the recent improvements in vital registration in South Africa and Zimbabwe stem from strong political support for the changes recommended by technical committees appointed to review the functioning of the existing systems. Beautiful suggestions and strategies/initiatives are only rewarding if they enjoy political support. Thus, since the data provided by vital registration are good supplements to the national census and play important role in national planning, the governments at all levels should give full support to the institutionalisation of vital registration system in Nigeria. It is therefore not enough to enact laws, it is important to ensure the implementation of the provisions of the laws. Usually, committed implementation of public policies and provisions of the laws is only possible if the political will is strong. It is important however, to note in this regard that since the last national census in 2006 in Nigeria, the national government has shown a greater level of commitment to the implementation of vital registration scheme for the country.

Thirdly, it should be realized that individual responsibility in the process (the form of voluntary participation) is also a fundamental issue in the adequate functioning of vital registration. Therefore, incentives to participate (or sanctions for failure to do so) such as the linking of specific issues like school enrolment to birth registration and linking insurance/inheritance/property transfer claims to the death registration should be instituted, implemented, sustained and enforced. This will in no doubt increase compliance and public awareness which are essential ingredients of effective and efficient vital registration system.

Fourthly, if the objective is to improve the vital registration coverage, the country and particularly the National Population Commission should intensify the use of unofficial notifier system. This will involve the use of midwives, nurses, school teachers, burial\crematorium attendants and religious officials to improve registration and add to public awareness. The importance of vital registration in the nation's socio-economic planning calls for wide public awareness of the programme.

Fifthly in Nigeria, it may well be possible to make some improvements in civil registration systems with relatively small investments in building public awareness mentioned earlier and building capacity among government employees responsible for these functions. There is no doubt that an understanding of the

importance and uses of vital registration within increasingly decentralized systems and among policy makers at national and local levels may also increase support it receives at all levels of governance.

Sixth, as we have mentioned earlier, the major goal of vital registration is to ensure wide coverage. In order to achieve this, the governments at all levels should create enabling environment for enhanced efforts to register births and deaths. The policy environment must be well prepared to facilitate the type of interdepartmental, inter-agency, or inter-ministerial collaboration and coordination that will be necessary to ensure improved monitoring without which the programme will not succeed.

Seventh, some of the obstacles to improving the quality and use of existing vital registration data can be attributed to lack of effective institutional linkages at the national level and below. This situation will be greatly improved by facilitating dialogue structures and process that allow the necessary communication to take place among ministries of health, national statistics offices, ministries of local government and whichever government body that has authority over vital registration. For instance, statistics offices and ministries of health ought to be using common population denominators and structures and common statistics on the cause of death.

Finally, any progress in expanding and improving vital registration system in Nigeria will depend upon accomplishing specific objectives and milestones, making great operational strides and conducting formative research on best practice in a few key areas it will also depend on the training and retraining of the commission staff, which are responsible for the direct implementation of vital registration goals. What this translates to is that the vital registration project is a capital-intensive one. It requires huge amount of money at both the planning and implementation stages. It also requires money to sustain it. Consequent upon all these, the governments at all levels must increase the current level of funding so as to achieve the targets set that is to meet the international standards.

## **CONCLUSION**

In this study, we have been able to show that vital registration and associated vital records and individual statistical reports serve a dual function-first, they meet legal requirements to establish the civil status of individuals and secondly they serve as a source of data for policy and planning. To be able to perform this dual function, the study stressed that there must be a properly

functioning system of vital registration put in place, which will ensure high coverage that does not systematically under-or over-present particular population sub groups.

The study found that as important as vital registration systems is in socio-economic development, its spatial and volume coverage are far below international standard or the gold standard in Nigeria. This situation has been traced to a number of factors namely insufficient funding, insufficient nation-wide publicity, inadequate number of registration centers, competition from local councils and lack of effective sanctions for violators of vital registration laws.

In order to improve the present predicaments of vital registration systems in Nigeria, the study has suggested an 8-point agenda, which includes: readiness to make some initiatives to improve vital registration, effort to increase political will; provision of incentive to participate; the use of unofficial notifier system; capacity building of the vital registration systems; creation of enabling environment; introduction of improved institutional linkages and increased funding of the vital registration system.

Above all, the study is concluding that in order to strengthen or reinforce the vital registration system in Nigeria, the government should consider more seriously the issue of international partnerships so that the country can also benefit from the results of some of such partnerships, which include the employment of variety of data sources, such as DSS data, sample survey data and sample registration data. The national government in Nigeria should realize more than ever that the United Nations Statistical Division (UNSD) has primary responsibility within the United Nations System to support development and implementation of civil registration at national level. In addition, UNSD coordinates and promotes the systematic adoption by countries of statistical standards and principles and conducts training workshops for national agencies. To therefore improve the quality of vital registration systems in Nigeria, the national government should tap from the United Nations many potentials. By so doing, the country will have demographic data on a continuous basis that are needed for socio-economic development planning.

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