



# Establishing vital events registration and strengthening

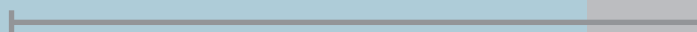
A case study  
of **Ethiopia**



Draft for consultation at the CRVS technical consultation meeting,  
Addis Ababa, 28-29 April 2014

**Prepared by the Vital Events Registration Agency  
in collaboration with the Central Statistical Agency**

A CRVS project sponsored by Canadian DFATD and WHO





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**“ Challenges are to be faced in such a huge first-time operation including the mobilization of about 17,000 kebele (lowest administrative areas) offices and 800 wereda (district) administrations, and more than 50,000 persons in the vital events registration activity on a continuous and permanent basis. ”**

## Civil Registration and Vital Statistics – Taking the initiative in Ethiopia

As a country implementing a civil registration and vital statistics (CRVS) system for the first time, the focus for action in the next few years is preparing the groundwork for full implementation.

Significant steps have already been taken towards a CRVS system. Careful planning, designing and testing are being implemented in preparation for developing a national system.

It is expected that several thousands of kebeles (lowest administrative areas) will open their doors to start conventional registration in 2016.

Once the vital events registration machinery is set in motion, with effective administrative structures in place, it is expected that CRVS will pick up momentum quickly and reasonable coverage can be achieved by the end of the second Growth and Transformation Plan (GTP2) of Ethiopia, in 2020.

### Will civil registration succeed in Ethiopia?

Establishing a conventional vital events registration system is an enormous undertaking that will require several years, starting from the preparation phase to the time when total nationwide coverage is achieved.

On the other hand, there are many opportunities which will contribute towards the success of the registration operation. Chief amongst these is the strong political commitment, careful planning and existing national structures in place to support CRVS implementation.

The potential use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) and possibility of linking vital events, and national ID databases and that of other stakeholders is expected to modernize operations and increase the scale of economies.

### Political commitment

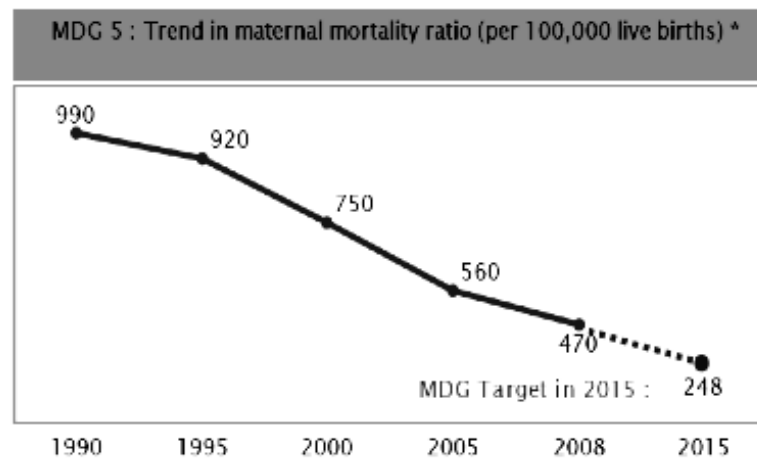
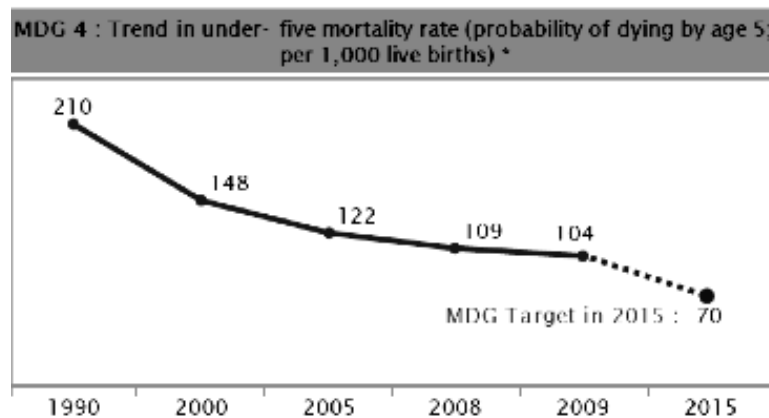
There is strong political commitment in Ethiopia to strengthening CRVS:

- Both the Vital Events Registration Council and the Vital Events Registration Board of Management comprised ministerial representations from multiple government ministries.

- At the national consultative seminar on vital events registration, held in Addis Ababa in November 2013, presidents, vice presidents and senior representatives of the nine regions and the two city administrations pledged to implement the vital events registration law in their respective regions in the shortest possible time; and
- Ethiopia, as the first host and chair of the standing Conference of African Ministers Responsible for Civil Registration, has played a major role in the Africa Programme on Accelerated Improvement of Civil Registration and Vital Statistics (APAI-CRVS). The Ministers for Justice and Health will be invited to consider the CRVS programme as part of the APAI-CRVS meeting in October 2014.

### Key country indicators

Millennium Development Goals (MDG 4 and 5) – Progress in Maternal and Child Mortality<sup>1</sup>



<sup>1</sup> The Ethiopian Demographic Survey (2005) results indicated that the birth of 6.6% of the sampled under five years of age children were registered with the existing civil authorities. The registration refers to a practice where certificates of birth were issued, mostly in urban areas and hospitals, without the event being officially recorded in a civil registry, as vital events registry did not exist before 2012.

CRVS dimensions<sup>2</sup>

Births	
Birth registration coverage	☐ 6.6 % <sup>1</sup>
Crude birth rate (per 1 000 population)	☐ 30.8
Total fertility rate	☐ 4.0
Adolescent fertility rate (per 1 000 girls aged 15-19 years)	☐ 79
Antenatal care coverage (at least four visits) (%)	☐ Urban - 46 ☐ Rural - 14
Births attended by skilled health personnel (%)	☐ Urban - 52 ☐ Rural - 5
DTP3 Immunization coverage among 1-year-olds	☐ Urban - 62 ☐ Rural - 33
Deaths <sup>3</sup>	
Death registration coverage	☐ --
Crude death rate (per 1 000 population)	☐ 8.8
Infant mortality rate (probability of dying by age 1 per 1 000 live births)	☐ 52
Under five mortality rate (probability of dying by age 5 per 1 000 live births)	☐ Urban - 82 ☐ Rural - 114
Maternal mortality ratio (per 100 000 live births) (2010)	☐ 350
Coverage and quality of cause of death data <sup>4</sup>	☐ Not available

## Accountability Framework – CRVS Progress

Key Results/Achievements	Highlights
Civil registration, plan developed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Ethiopia established its national CRVS and the Ministry of Justice has been the lead government authority</li> <li>✓ The country enacted legislation and developed a CRVS implementation plan in 2012 with technical support from development partners</li> <li>✓ Health Management Information System (HMIS) implementation is supported and scaled up</li> <li>✓ International Classification of Diseases (ICD-10) adaptation in progress</li> </ul>

<sup>2</sup> WHO 2010 Ethiopia Country health Profile 2010, sourced at <http://www.afro.who.int/en/ethiopia/country-health-profile.html>

<sup>3</sup> All data from World Health Statistics 2013

<sup>4</sup> Except where specified, all data from World Health Statistics 2013



## National Institutions

To support CRVS implementation, Regulation No. 278/2012 established the following national bodies in December 2012: (a) Vital Events Council; (b) Board of Management; and (c) The Vital Events Registration Agency (Federal Negarit Gazeta, 2012b).

National Body	Description
Vital Events Council	<p>The federal Vital Events Registration Council was officially established as the highest body on civil registration matters in November 2013. The Chairperson of the Council is the Minister of Justice, with members drawn from 35 ministries, agencies and other stakeholders. Some of the key stakeholders are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The nine regions, City Administrations of Addis Ababa and Dire Dawa,</li> <li>• Ministries including Justice (MOJ); Finance and Economic Development (MOFED); Health (MOH); Education (MOE); Urban Development and Construction (MOUDC); Communications, Information and Technology; Foreign Affairs; National Defense; Federal Affairs; Women, Children and Youth; Government Communications Affairs; and National Intelligence and Security Service; Ethiopian Shipping Lines; National ID Office; Federal Police, Human Rights Commission; Documents Authentication Affairs; Supreme Court; Central Statistics Agency; and Vital Events Registration Agency.</li> </ul> <p>The Director General of the federal Vital Events Registration Agency (VERA) is the secretary of the Council. The establishment of the Council at the most senior government levels indicates the Government's commitment to ensuring the success of the implementation of the vital events registration system by providing the very highest level of political and administrative support. The Council meets at least twice a year.</p>
Vital Events Board of Management	<p>The Board of Management which oversees the activities of VERA met for the first time in September 2013. The Board of Management is also tasked with coordinating relevant organs in relation with activities of the Agency, among others.</p> <p>The Board has nine very senior officials as members, comprising ministers, state ministers and agency general directors, from MOJ, MOH, MOE, MOUDC, Ministry of Women, Children and Youth Affairs, Ministry of Communications, Information and Technology, Central Statistics Agency (CSA), National Identification Project and the VERA. The Board meets once every month.</p>
The Vital Events Registration Agency	<p>VERA was established in June 2013 as the federal public administration autonomous organ to direct, coordinate and support the registration of vital events at national level, and to centrally organize and keep records of vital events.</p> <p>The organizational scheme of VERA has been approved by the Government and it has started operations by recruiting competent persons fit for the available posts.</p>

## CRVS – the Roadmap

Developing and implementing a national plan requires that stakeholders have a shared understanding of what needs to be done, reach agreement on priority actions, and on feasible strategies for establishing and developing a civil registration and vital statistics system over an agreed period of time.

The roadmap for the implementation of the vital events registration and vital statistics system is:



### Strategic Priority Intervention Areas and Objectives

At a time when much needs to be done to guarantee the successful establishment, development and implementation of a civil registration and vital statistics system, it is important to define strategic priority areas to focus on. VERA has a prioritized strategy and action plan to facilitate the implementation of the vital events registration. Detailed costing is being finalized. The strategy presents the overall objectives and eight priority interdependent intervention areas along with justifications. Specific objectives were formulated for each of the identified strategic intervention areas to ensure that the overall objectives are attained. The strategy was designed in such a way that it builds on opportunities and addresses challenges that were identified in a consultative process, in order to achieve the overall objectives and attain the mission.

The overall objectives of the strategy and action plan are:

1. to establish and develop a system that would guarantee legal rights and privileges to individuals by providing access to registration and certification of vital events, and creating the link between the individual and the state;
2. to ensure sound governance and improved public administration services by mainstreaming vital events registration at all administrative levels; and
3. to make available continuous, comprehensive, quality and harmonized vital statistics and related information disaggregated down to the local administrative levels for informed policy making and decisions.

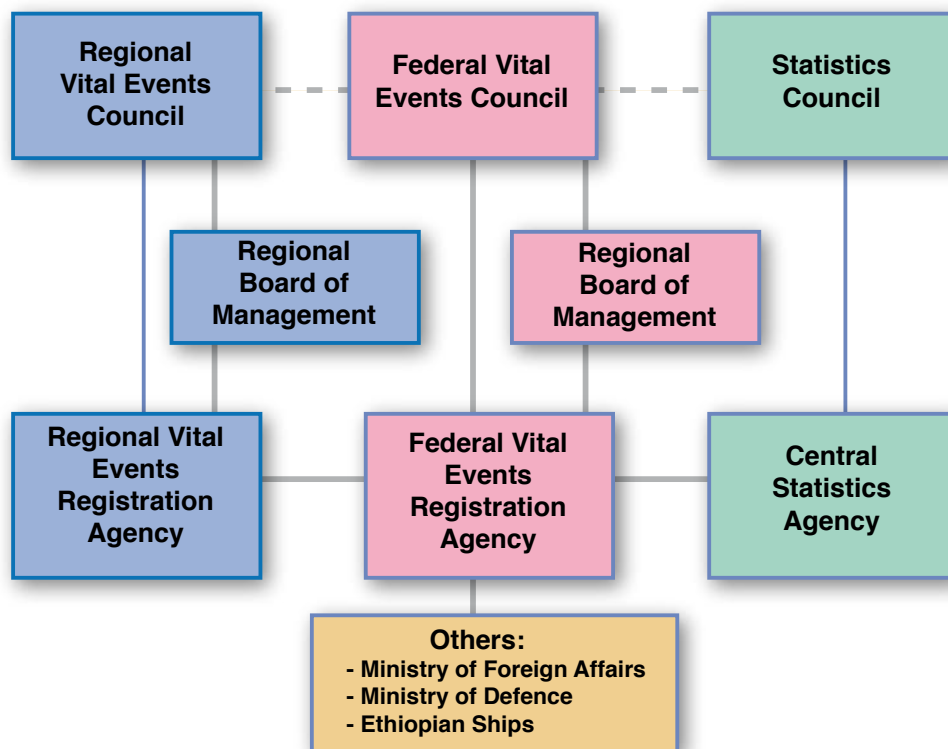
### Critical Partners

#### Linkages between the federal and regional vital events registration and CSA

Coordination and collaboration, and clearly delineated roles and responsibilities is key to the success of the implementation of the vital events registration system. This should lead to improved mutual understanding of responsibilities, make clear relations between different government organs, and strengthen areas of cooperation and common interest. Figure 1 shows the expected links between VERA, Regional Vital Events Registration Agencies (RVERAs), CSA and other stakeholders such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Defense, and Ethiopian Shipping Lines.

#### Country partnerships

Figure 2



## Structure and organization of the regional and lower level vital events registration

Each regional state is expected to promulgate its own vital events law that is consistent with the federal law. Several have started to draft their laws. Once these laws are enacted, the RVERAs are expected to structure their offices in a similar way to those of the federal organs, with some variations. The establishment of VERA is fundamental for a viable conventional vital events registration system in Ethiopia. To date, five of the regional governments have started to take steps towards establishing RVERAS, in their respective administrations. It is expected that all regions and city administrations would establish similar structures and organizations by the end of 2014.

### Implementation Options

There are two main options in the implementation of the vital events registration system.

Options	
<p>Option 1: Setting up complete coverage of vital events registration from the beginning</p>	<p>The implementation of the vital events registration function depends to a large extent on regional governments. Some of the regions might opt, from the beginning, to establish a civil status office in all their kebeles simultaneously, within their respective administrative areas.</p> <p>This approach would need careful planning, preparation, large budget and logistics. The budgetary requirement for human resources, training, publicity and advocacy, vital events materials, and others could be very high for some of the regions.</p>
<p>Option 2: Scale-up approach in the implementation of vital events registration operation and improving vital statistics activities</p>	<p>For a country like Ethiopia with a vast surface area and large population, it would require several years of strategic and prioritized investment to establish a fully functioning and complete vital events registration system, and therefore a scale-up approach might be the preferred option.</p> <p>The availability of basic services, such as power supply, communications and road networks are important for the smooth flow of registration documents between vital events registration offices at all levels.</p> <p>Although the road network connecting each kebele with its wereda is progressing at an amazing pace, there still remains more to do.</p> <p>The government's plan for complete electrification of all rural and urban centres is also on track. This would take a few years to attain total coverage.</p> <p>The current level of these services would not deter the implementation of a paper-based civil registration, although it could determine the pace of progress towards automation of the system.</p>

## CRVS implementation: Current status and progress

VERA has become operational. The Council and the Board are very supportive of the initiatives being taken by the General Manger to establish and run VERA, and the effort being made to jump start vital events registration operations in the regional states. These are the major accomplishments to date.

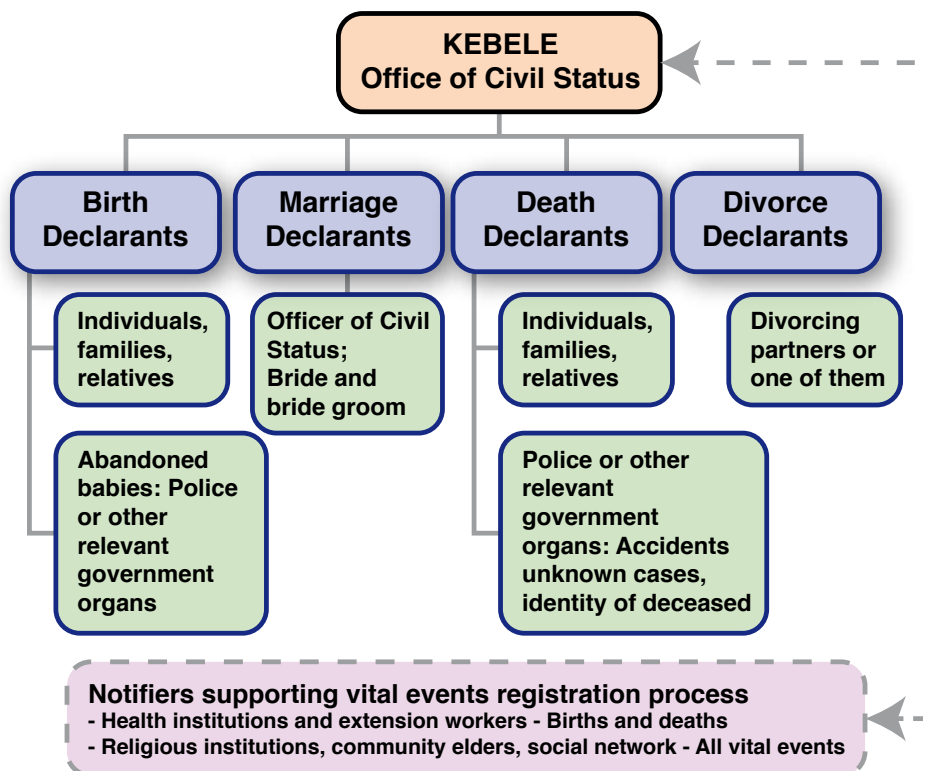
Office Space	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>•VERA is now operating in a two floor office in a building in Addis Ababa.</li></ul>
Staff	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>•The structure of VERA and the staff salary scale has been approved by Government. VERA has grown from a one person (the Director General) operation in June 2013 to about 50 strong. Recruitment of the remaining staff is underway and should be complete in early 2014.</li></ul>
Model Law	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>•The model vital events registration law has been distributed to regional states. Advisory support is being provided by VERA, upon request. So far 5 regions have their own CR laws, which are in line with the federal CR law.</li></ul>
CR Manuals, Handbooks and Registration Tools	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>•CR tools are being prepared in Amharic based on international principles and recommendations and tailored to the country's situation. Work has started but it is progressing slowly, mainly because it requires several professionals and/or consultants working on it.</li></ul>
Vital Statistics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>•CSA has conducted a preliminary study on how to collect, compile and disseminate vital statistics in a decentralized manner. Detailed study will be conducted in due course.</li></ul>

## Strengths

The major opportunities, mostly unique to Ethiopia, that would facilitate rapid implementation and the achievement of high coverage of vital events registration in a not too distant future are the following:

### Integrating registration activities in existing kebele administrative activities

Figure 2: Vital events registration structure at kebele level

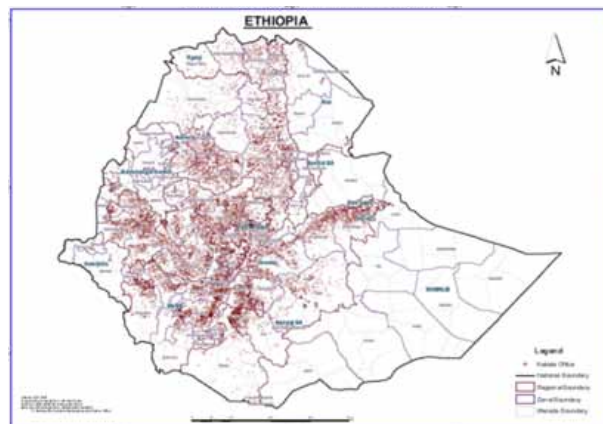


A kebele office is run by an Executive Committee comprising elected officers and representatives of line ministries (education, health and agriculture). It has a salaried office manager, with a minimum of a high-school education. The manager would serve as the kebele Civil Status Officer (registrar) at no or minimal cost to the vital events registration system. The registration of vital events is not going to add much to the workload of the manager as, on an average, only about 27 vital events per month are expected within a kebele for registration. The director of the school or one of the health or agriculture extension workers in the kebele would serve as a deputy registrar.

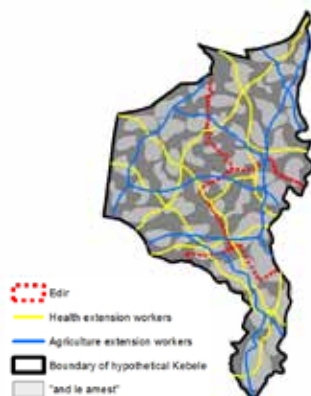
## Coverage, access and monitoring at the lowest administrative levels

Ethiopia is administratively decentralized with nine regions and two city administrations. The regions are further subdivided into 95 zones; about 800 weredas (districts); and about 17 000 kebeles. The kebele offices are spread out all over, covering the length and breadth of the country in all regions (see Figure 3, where each brown dot represents a kebele office). A kebele consists of roughly 700 to 1 200 households (CSA, 2012). One of the key features of the kebele offices is that they are easily accessible to the population living within their boundaries in terms of distance, as most of the offices are located at walking distances to the households living within their boundaries. The administrative structure and hierarchy of weredas and zones are also conducive to monitoring and supervising vital events registration activities at kebele levels. Wereda administrative offices would play a critical role by providing logistics, especially during training and distribution of registration materials.

Figure 3: Distribution of kebele offices in all regions and city administrations except Affar and Somali regions



## Social capital



There are several existing community-based networks, such as edir, equb, and mahiber, everywhere in Ethiopia that create social capital which would be an asset in diffusing information when kebeles conduct awareness and educational campaigns on the registration of vital events. If properly trained, they could also become “friends of the Civil Status Officer” and serve as notifiers of the occurrence of vital events in their neighborhoods. These organizations, with members usually ranging from few to many, are bonding social networks with many mutual benefits to the members, including the sharing of information and exchange of ideas. In addition to this, traditionally and culturally, community elders and religious leaders usually play important roles in officiating over marriages and divorces. A recent introduction to the existing traditional social networks is the concept of And-le-Amist, which literally means one-for-five. It is a cell of five people from the same neighborhood that informally look after each other’s interest. They were initially organized by rural and small town kebeles to promote health and development initiatives. The group creates greater interaction between members and generates a greater sense of community spirit. Before the roll out of the registration activities, extensive discussions will be held with civil society at grassroot levels to overcome barriers, especially socio-cultural, and create the kinds of incentives that would encourage timely registration.

### **Development partners**

The Government is committed to making vital events registration service available to the people in the shortest possible time.

However, support is needed from development partners, for instance in terms of human resources development, procurement of equipment and vehicles, office infrastructure at headquarters and in the regions, etc. This is needed to jump-start and ensure the smooth running of the operation, among others.

### **Building an effective technological environment**

The introduction of major automation into government administration such as the vital events registration system is a complex and costly process, which may take several years to complete. Although the needs and problems for meeting demands for registration services in one region are quite similar to those in other regions, some could move into computerization of the registration system quickly while others are still operating a paper-based system. The extent to which automation can take place in each region depends on the availability of competent staff, resources and equipment.

A broad information technology (IT) development structure and implementation strategy is to be prepared by VERA and CSA as an integral part of the overall civil registration and vital statistics system implementation plan. As the vital events registration is a new undertaking, the strategy for its automation is expected to follow a scalable approach using agreed criteria. Each phase, when completed, would be assessed and improvements incorporated before initiating the next phase. This will ensure incremental improvements to the automation of the vital events registration process. Information and Communications Technology (ICT) infrastructure and systems to be procured at federal and regional levels would be interoperable within themselves and other government systems so that they work with each other at present and in the future.

Registration of events in the nomadic region will require careful thinking and research in the use of mobile registration facilities and application of new technologies such as smart phones for use by notifiers of the occurrence of vital events.

Efforts will be made to learn and share lessons with other developing countries, with the support of development partners.



## Challenges

Ethiopia has three key main geo-social challenges impacting on the implementation of its CRVS system.

- Firstly, Ethiopia is a large country with a total surface area of about 1.1 million square kilometers.
- Secondly, Ethiopia is the second most populous country in Africa, with its population projected to reach about 88 million in 2014, 94 million in 2017, and 100 million in 2020. (CSA, 2013).
- Finally, Ethiopia still has a low level of urbanization. About 84 percent of the Ethiopian population lives in rural areas, making it one of the least urbanized countries in the world (CSA, 2013). The main occupation of most of the rural sedentary population is farming.

## Administrative Challenges

In addition, there are several key administrative challenges in implementing CRVS in the country:

Challenge	Description and action
Infrastructure	<p>Currently, most of the kebele offices are in a position to conduct registration and issue certificates in terms of the manpower required for this undertaking. Rural and small town kebele offices are, however, very small in size and in some cases they share offices with other local government agencies. The existing documents in many of them are exposed to the elements and to rodent infestations. Therefore, it is a must that all kebeles and weredas Civil Status Offices should be equipped, at the minimum, with safe, strong and fire-resistant filing cabinets for the storage of vital events registers, certificates and seals. This would entail a substantial investment on the minimum fixtures required at the lowest administrative levels.</p>
Information, education and communication (IEC) programme	<p>An effective IEC programme is basic for the establishment, development and maintenance of a civil registration and vital statistics system in any country. For the civil registration system to take root and function effectively, the public has to be effectively informed, educated and convinced of the uses and benefits of the registration of vital events. People will not declare the occurrence of vital events if they are not aware of the need and the obligation to do so, as well as the benefits of doing so. The public has also to be educated on the vital events registration law. Hence, developing an IEC programme for a civil registration and vital statistics system should be a basic and priority function of VERA, RVERAs and CSA. Although mobilizing the general population for development initiatives and other national exercises, like the population census, is not new to Ethiopia, still effective and sustained awareness creation and advocacy strategies will require big investments in terms of research, expertise, training and equipment.</p>
Capacity building	<p>Building institutional capacity in vital events registration and vital statistics systems in all regional states and city administrations and lower administrative levels is a core activity that would enable sustained delivery of services and outputs and ensure quality and continuous flow of data. The expected outcomes of capacity-building include, among others, competent civil registrars, statisticians, IT experts and strengthened training institutions.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ First-time training and upgrading of skills would be conducted for over 50 000 persons at different levels over the planning horizon. Cascaded training will be implemented, whereby a selected few are trained using the instructions manuals being developed and, in turn, they train further groups of people, and so on down the line. This requires huge but critical investment in capacity building involving logistics, preparation and distribution of materials, setting up well-equipped training centers and so on.</li> <li>■ Kebele and wereda officials would be educated on the benefits of the civil registration and vital statistics system, and on their duties and responsibilities to make this work. When these officials are empowered both as individuals and as part of the management of the kebele and wereda offices, then they can effectively impart knowledge, motivation and confidence to the kebele inhabitants within their jurisdictions. This would enhance the transparency of the vital events registration process and contribute greatly to its credibility and public confidence in the system. Civic education is a critical and effective empowerment tool for promoting citizens' participation in the registration initiative as part of the overall national democratic and development processes.</li> </ul>

Backlog	It is important to clear backlogs of vital events, in particular births, from the point of view of this being a human rights issue. Important lessons on successes and failures can be drawn from the experience of a UNICEF and Ministry of Women's Affairs joint project implemented on clearing birth registration backlogs conducted from April 2009 to December 2010 in the Amhara, Tigray and SNNP regions, and in Addis Ababa and Dire Dawa city administrations (UNICEF, n.d.). VERA recognizes, in principle, the importance of clearing backlogs after in-depth studies have been conducted on the why, how and when of this initiative. However, backlog clearance is not one of its top priorities when it is preoccupied with establishing the system throughout the country.
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## Summary

The task to build a functioning CRVS system is challenging, but commitment and determination are strong, and critical to the tasks ahead.

The right steps, the careful design and management of new systems within a strong administrative structure, and a partnership approach are the building blocks needed to ensure that civil registration and vital statistics become a critical piece of the country's development infrastructure.

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