

# Exploring the potential of population registers in Africa as an emerging data source for official statistics

## Background

Administrative registers generated by governments and service providers are becoming an increasingly important data source for official statistics. Based on recent experiences in conducting population and housing censuses, it has become evident that there is a growing interest in using administrative data sources for producing demographic and social statistics among countries in different parts of the world, for numerous reasons, including cost-effectiveness, meeting the critical need for more frequent and granular data, improving data quality and responding to emerging changes in population data collection methods. The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and the difficulties caused by the pandemic (notably the need to reduce direct physical contact with respondents) underlined the need to explore alternative data collection approaches, and particularly the potential for administrative registers. However, the capacity to maintain high quality registers and putting them to statistical use remains weak among African countries.

[The eighth session of the United Nations statistical commission for Africa](#) held in October 2022 encouraged the development and use of registers and administrative data sources among African countries. In its recommendations, the commission:

- i. *“Encouraged countries to build consensus on the importance of administrative data sources in data systems and the need for collaboration at the national, subregional, continental and global levels;”*
- ii. *“Requested the Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA) and partners to strengthen their support for countries in building holistic civil registration and vital statistics identity systems, including population registers;”*
- iii. *“Called upon each member States to build a single, national, authoritative and universal address register that is available to public institutions and that is included in their respective business processes;”*

The Commission also acknowledged the discussions held at the fifty-third session of the United Nations Statistical Commission in 2022<sup>1</sup>, regarding the 2020 round of Population and Housing Censuses, including the recognition of the potential for use of administrative registers in censuses and need for modernization of approaches for conducting population and housing censuses through information and communications technology and digitization. The commission called on the Economic Commission for Africa, the United Nations Population Fund and other partners to build the capacity of countries in establishing population registers and producing statistics from the registers.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://unstats.un.org/UNSDWebsite/statcom/session\\_53/documents/2022-41-FinalReport-E.pdf](https://unstats.un.org/UNSDWebsite/statcom/session_53/documents/2022-41-FinalReport-E.pdf)

The African Centre for Statistics (ACS) at UNECA has been leading implementation of the 2020 Africa Programme on Population and Housing which among others aims to assist member States to improve the operational efficiency of national statistical systems to produce and use demographic and social statistics. ECA also coordinates and leads implementation of the Africa Programme on Accelerated Improvement of civil registration and vital statistics systems (APAI-CRVS) and the United Nations legal identity agenda, both of which promote implementation of a holistic approach to legal identity, including the development of population registers.

## **Population registers**

According to the United Nations (UN)<sup>2</sup> a population register is an individualized data system, that is, a mechanism of continuous recording, or of coordinated linkage, of selected information pertaining to each member of the resident population of a country in such a way to provide the possibility of determining up-to-date information concerning the size and characteristics of that population at a given point in time. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD)<sup>3</sup> alternatively defines population registers as accounts of residents within a country which are typically maintained via the legal requirement that both nationals and foreigners residing in the country must register with the local authorities. Aggregation of these local accounts results in a record of population and population movement at the national level.

Population registers exist in two distinct formats: (i) as administrative data systems (i.e., administrative population registers and (ii) as statistical registers, distinctly used to produce population level statistics. The United Nations describes a statistical population register as a systematized and indexed collection of individual records for every resident (including nationals and foreign citizens) of the country. Where developed and functioning, it represents the backbone of the compilation of official statistics and represents a master population frame as well for designing and running statistical surveys. Connected on a regular basis and under the provisions of the law with administrative registers, starting with the administrative population register, it should be regularly updated with pertinent information.’

Administrative population registers provide primary input data for the establishment and continuous updating of statistical population registers. In recognising the importance of population registers in producing register-based official statistics; the 2022 UN handbook<sup>4</sup> on Registers-Based Population and Housing Censuses lists the existence of a Central population register as one among eight other preconditions for implementing a register-based census.

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<sup>2</sup> United Nations Principles and Recommendations for Vital Statistics Systems, Revision, 2013 Available at [ST/ESA/STAT/SER.M/67/Rev.3](https://stats.un.org/esa/STAT/SER.M/67/Rev.3).

<sup>3</sup> International Migration Statistics for OECD Countries: Sources and Comparability of Migration Statistics, OECD, 2021 p. 4. Available at <https://stats.oecd.org/glossary/detail.asp?ID=2089>.

<sup>4</sup> United Nations Handbook on register-based population and housing Censuses, 2022 <https://millenniumindicators.un.org/unsd/statcom/53rd-session/documents/BG-3e-Handbook-E.pdf>

In Africa, except for a few national studies, literature about population registers is limited and the extent of implementation of these registers in the region remains largely unknown.

### **Methods and format of the paper**

This paper will explore the potential of population registers as an administrative source of demographic statistics in Africa. The paper will discuss current practices in implementation of population registers among African countries, based on findings of a recent survey undertaken by ECA to assess the status of implementation of the registers across countries on the continent. The second part of the paper will address key features and prerequisites for establishment of population registers based on United Nations guidelines. In the last part, the paper will address methods for assessing the quality of population registers, to determine their potential for production of official statistics.

### **Conclusion**

Recognising that there have been critical investments in administrative data systems of civil registration in Africa over the last 10 years, the paper encourages countries to begin looking into how these investments can yield statistical outputs. In particular, countries that have progressed in the development of administrative population registers are encouraged to review their level of quality and completeness and to explore their usefulness for the production of official statistics.