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Review

Vital registration in rural Africa: is there a way forward to report on health targets of the Millennium Development Goals?

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ABSTRACT

Vital registration – the systematic recording of births and deaths – has both legal and health significance. In particular, accurate recording and reporting of vital statistics are public goods to enable the monitoring of progress towards achieving health related targets of the 2015 United Nations Millennium Development Goals (MDG). The reality in Africa is that most births and deaths cannot be traced in legal records or official statistics and as such, there is currently no way of assessing progress towards achieving MDG targets and this applies particularly to rural settings in Africa.

From the context of a rural district in Malawi, we describe an informal traditional system for the reporting of deaths at village level, and discuss the potential opportunities, challenges and ways forward in the wider implementation and interpretation of vital data generated by such a system.

Such a system might provide an interim solution for accelerating the production and use of district level vital statistics for legal, administrative, statistical purposes and to report on the MDG in rural Africa while waiting for more comprehensive national systems to become a reality.

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1. Introduction

Vital registration – the systematic recording of births and deaths – has both legal and health significance. From a legal perspective, birth registration is important to protect human rights particularly those of children: illegal

child labor, trafficking, military recruitment, early marriage and inheritance of parental property by orphans, while death registration is an integral part of maintaining law and order.

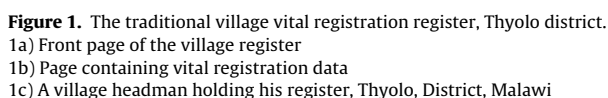
From a health perspective, vital registration allows the measurement of trends in the overall health status of a population, enables evaluation of the impact of health related interventions and is a key entry point for health systems strengthening.^{1,2} In particular, accurate recording and reporting of vital statistics are public goods that enable

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Despite its importance, most people in Africa are born and die without leaving any trace in any legal record or official statistic.⁴ On a global scale, more than one-third of the world's 128 million annual births and two-thirds of its 57 million annual deaths are not registered.⁴ Where vital registration exists, this is often limited to health facility based data^{4,5} which are not representative as more than half of all deaths that occur in rural African settings do so outside of health facilities.^{5,6}

In Malawi, a small resource-constrained country in sub-Saharan Africa, there is no enforcement of civil registration laws and reporting of births and deaths is not compulsory. Data on vital registration at national level is thus weak or non-existent. However, a traditional system of informal death reporting through village heads has been practiced for decades. From the context of a rural district in Malawi (Thyolo district), we describe this system and broadly discuss the potential opportunities, challenges and



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