

Conference to tackle civil registration in Africa

Some countries on the African continent don't have national population registers, resulting in a situation where children are born, live their lives and die, without ever being recorded.



(Image: GCIS)

It is this sort of situation that African ministers responsible for civil registration and statistics will seek to address when they meet in Durban next week for the Civil Registration and Vital Statistics Ministerial Conference.

South Africa will host the conference on behalf of the African Union and the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, with African Union Commission chairperson and Home Affairs Minister Nkosazana Dlamini Zuma chairing it.

"The conference hopes to confront the challenges caused by the absence of reliable vital events data such as births, deaths, marriage, and divorce on their citizenry on the African continent. Such statistics enable government to plan holistically for their national development and planning with a view to providing quality services to their citizenry," she said.

They need to know how many people there are

Briefing the media ahead of the conference, Home Affairs Director-General Mkuseli Apleni said for any country to plan properly it first needed to know how many citizens it had.

It was equally important to know how many people were on the continent, particularly as African countries attempt to work together to tackle its challenges.

"In Africa, we think we are one of the driving blocks of economy in the world but we are talking of a population of a billion plus. We don't have an accurate basis for that because some countries don't even have a national population register so it means we are not talking from an uninformed basis," he said.

South Africa, in particular, had a role to play in helping African countries improve their systems related to civil registration and vital statistics, said Statistician-General Pali Lehohla.

Currently, on the matter of civil registration, there were probably only three other African countries - Mauritius, Seychelles, and Egypt - that had the kind of facilities South Africa possessed, he added.

"The rest to the continent doesn't have this sort of system of actually identifying a child when they are born... So without recording people at birth, you don't have a mechanism of knowing what is happening in the country, except at times of census..." Lehohla explained.

Know your people to prosper

Evidence showed that more developed countries knew their citizens. In a continent of about a billion or so, there was little hope that it could resolve its problems and address its development challenges, let alone the issue of integration, without knowing its citizens, he said.

"The scandal of invisibility on the continent is so huge that children are born and die even before they get known. Adults roam the countries without being known."

South Africa had a national population register and working systems around those issues, he pointed out.

"There are 54 countries; four of them have these kinds of systems. The absence of any of these systems in any one of these countries means that Africa will be deficient in what it has to do. The overwhelming majority, 50 of the countries, don't have the systems," he pointed out.

It was up to South Africa and other African countries to tackle this challenge head on.

The 54 ministers, as well as 500 delegates from African countries, including senior civil registration technical experts, development partners, young statisticians and professional associations attending the conference will seek to do exactly that.

The conference, coordinated by the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, the African Union Commission, African Development Bank, and the South African Government, takes place in Durban from the 3 - 7 September 2012.

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