

The Practice of the Civil Registration and Vital Statistics System among Rural Councils in South-East Nigeria: The Epistemological and Empirical Values of Practice Theory

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Abstract

Civil Registration and Vital Statistics (CRVS) systems are among the fundamental structures of analysis, projection, and postulation of the demographic status of every nation across the globe in the 21st century. As such, the nature of their management focuses on determining the quality of demographic data presented by each nation to the global community. Although the activities of vital registration have been modernized (digitalized) among the developed and some developing nations, the practice is still at its rudimentary stage among most developing nations, such as Nigeria, making it vulnerable to challenges induced by human behavioral dispositions. This study, which was conducted in south-east Nigeria, focused on, among other substantive issues, the challenges faced by the registrars of local council population authorities. The study adopted practice theory and a qualitative methodology, involving in-depth interviews with local registrars. According to the findings, ignorance, administrative issues, and geo-locations are among the prevailing challenges. Nevertheless, based on the findings, the study strengthened the epistemological and empirical values of practice theory in the area of social demography and equally raised unseen policy lapses therein.

Keywords

Birth registration; civil/vital registration; colonial civil registration; death registration; demographic documentation; Practice theory

Introduction

One key area where data collection is essential is that of human population. Its data collection procedure is usually by direct enumeration carried out for every individual in the territory at approximately the same time (Adele, 2009). There is no doubt that accurate population statistics are vital to sound development planning and economic management. This explains the seriousness attached to the assemblage of population and vital statistics across the globe today (AbouZahr et al., 2015; Eniayejuni & Agoyi, 2011; WHO, 2014a).

Civil Registration and Vital Statistics (CVRS) systems are among the most essential and reliable data collection methods and have enabled many governments among developed nations to operate efficiently (Braa & Sahay, 2012; Ohemeng-Dapaah, Pronyk, Akosa, Nemser & Kanter, 2010). This is because the population census, which is the conventional basis for demographic

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compilation, is conducted seasonally/periodically (every 5 or 10 years, or more), with certain levels of errors (Okafor, 2016; Okafor & Okoye, 2019). However, CRVS, if properly managed, produces comprehensive, consistent, and regular information about a particular population, as has been the case in the Netherlands and other developed nations where it has replaced the perennial population census (AbouZahr et al., 2015; Mahapatra et al., 2007). In utility terms, CRVS guides proper economic, health, and other socioeconomic policies (Adams, 2011; Randall & Coast, 2016; Szreter, 1991).

Apart from information on the stock of a country's population, it is essential to know the rate at which the population is changing, both structurally and in aggregate. Vital statistics, as computable from the registration of important events (especially, circumstances surrounding births, deaths, marriages, and migration), constitute an important set of data for studying the dynamics of a country's population. Marriage, divorce, judicial separation, stillbirth, live birth, adoption, migration, and death are vital events that are registered in supposedly all countries (WHO, 2014a; 2014b). While the registration of these vital events in developed countries is done effectively enough to be useful for determining population changes and planning, the situation in most developing countries is dissatisfactory. Reports show that 1 in 3 newborns of about 40 million births in Africa are unregistered (AbouZahr et al., 2015; Akande & Sekoni, 2005). As of 2013, there was still evidence that one in every three children aged 5 were not officially registered (UNICEF, 2013); while, an estimated two-thirds of deaths are not registered, especially among the developing nations (WHO, 2012; World Bank & WHO, 2014). Similarly, among the developing nations, over 60% of vital events are not registered nor accounted for in the vital statistics (Botha & Bradshaw, 1985; Garenne et al., 2016; Randall & Coast, 2016). While circumstances ranging from government's lack of interest in the matter to lack of funding among the developing nations have affected the issue of civil registration among these nations (Fobil, Aryee, Bilson, May & Kraemer, 2011; Joubert et al., 2012; Rao, Bradshaw, & Matthers, 2000; Toma, 1981; United Nations Statistics Division, 2007; World Health Organization, 2013), spartial distribution, location of centers and some historical antecedents have equally made an unprecedented impact on the issue of civil registration, especially in the sub-Saharan African nations (Abass, 2014; Maduekwe, Banjo & Sangodapo, 2016). According to Toma (1981):

In ex-French West Africa, Senegal, Mali (previously French Sudan), Mauritania, Ivory Coast, Upper Volta, Benin (previously Dahomey) and Niger, when compulsory registration was instituted in 1933 for the African population, it applied to only a selected group such as soldiers, public servants, residents of certain administrative centres, certain chiefs and their families and those eligible to pay taxes on landed property or income. In 1950, compulsory registration was extended, this time, to Africans living some ten kilometers around civil registration centres, which were usually located in principal towns (p.2).

Also, within the former British West African colonies, compulsory registration among the African population in the 19th century was predominantly limited to Government Residential Areas. As such, the issue of CRVS was already considered an unfriendly activity by the indigenous people and, by implication, created future difficulties for every attempt to merge the people with the practice (Kucrynski, 1949; Okafor & Okoye, 2019; Umoh, 1972).

British colonialism has affected the way the issue of population administration is handled in Nigeria. In a detailed publication of location and identity of the members of the population availing themselves of the registration of vital events in western, middle belt, and northern Nigeria, some studies revealed a massive gap regarding the location of centers as well as inconsistencies in the definition and pursuit of the objectives of CRVS (Abass, 2014; Adi et al., 2015; Akande & Sekoni, 2005; Maduekwe et al., 2016). According to their findings, while in some circumstances the location of registration centers and agents are far from the rural populace, there were equally problems of duplication of responsibilities and unacknowledged responsibilities in the coordination of CRVS.

The importance of CRVS for national and local planning has not received adequate or genuine attention in Nigeria, especially from the political class (Okafor, Adeleke & Oparac, 2007). In Nigeria, CRVS started in the colonial era and is currently operated by the National Population Commission (NPC), which was inaugurated in 1989; however, until now, there has yet to be regular, accurate, and standard civil registration and vital statistics documentation in Nigeria.

While all the studies above investigated the issues of CRVS in other parts of Nigeria other than south-east Nigeria, secondary data has shown that there is a gap between the findings of these studies and a theoretical capturing of the phenomenon, which is of epistemological interest regarding social demography. The critical need for an understanding of the challenges of the data collection/collation agents and accurate explanations of the issue, using a combination of empirical data and theoretical paradigms, informed the present study. In this study, the following questions were answered in the interest of building reliable theoretically and empirically informed civil registration policies to accommodate rural settings in the area studied.

Research Questions

1. What are the prevailing challenges to CRVS among the rural councils in south-east Nigeria because of the dominant practices?
2. What are the contributing factors to the challenges of CRVS in rural councils in south-east Nigeria?
3. What are the theoretical and policy implications of the prevailing challenges to CRVS in south-east Nigeria?

Conceptual issues

The concept of civil registration and vital statistics

Civil Registration and Vital Statistics (CVRS) systems are concerned with the legal registration, documentation, and analysis of vital events in the population (WHO, 2013). These vital events include births, deaths, marriages, divorces, fetal deaths, annulments, judicial separations, and adoptions. According to Salawu (2009), vital registration can be 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, stillbirths, marriages and annulment

of marriages, foundlings, migration, and naturalization) done in accordance with the legal requirements of a nation. Equally, the United Nations (cited in WHO, 2013) aptly put it as the universal, continuous, permanent, and compulsory recording of vital events provided through decree or regulation following the legal requirements of each country. According to the World Bank and WHO (2014), CRVS equally includes health and service delivery inequalities among the population, which help in the knowledge and management of epidemiological issues among the general population as well as policymakers.

The concept of vital/civil registration, according to available documents, can be traced to Europe (London specifically), and to the clergy, who were saddled with the responsibility of compiling vital events, such as death (burials), birth (baptism), marriage, and divorce in the early 16th century (Wrigley & Schofield, 1981). Beginning from 1592, these records (or bills) were printed and circulated weekly during particularly rough years, and so they were called London bills of mortality (Laxton, 1987; Lorimer, 1959; Weeks, 1999;).

More scientifically and comprehensively, John Graunt (a Londoner) in 1662 succeeded in using this compilation of vital events to examine the effect of bubonic plague on the population and the trend of mortality with other demographic factors. This gave birth to the first statistical analysis of demographic data using vital registration as well as the foundation of demographics and epidemiological studies (Okafor, 2016; Weeks, 1999). The work of Graunt stimulated efforts by other scholars, such as Lotka, William Petty, and Edmund Halley, who ventured into harnessing the utilitarian value of CRVS data in explaining other social phenomena related to the human population, such as death, birth, suicide, and divorce (Sutherland, 1963; Willcox, 1936).

While Graunt was working on the bill of mortality in London, William Petty was also working on bills of mortality in Dublin (Ireland). In Petty's work, apart from the general calculation (like that of Graunt), he further applied his calculations to smaller units based on political and geographical arithmetic, this made it easier for demographers to use demographic information to predict political participation and possible outcomes in Ireland first, and then subsequently, in other parts of Europe. William Petty published his work in two volumes (1676 and 1683). On the foundation of Graunt's work, Edward Hailey (an American Astronomer) was able to produce a complete life table in 1693, while John Sussemilch, on the same foundation in 1742, produced a thesis on population, analyzing population from a religious perspective (Lorimer, 1959).

After the works of Graunt, Petty, Sussemilch, and other scholars on CRVS as a dimension in demographic compilations, CRVS became salient in demographic computations such that the CRVS system among many developed countries is now taking the place of the seasonal census for demographic updates (AbouZahr et al., 2015; Okafor & Okoye, 2019; Tate, Calderwood, Dezateux & Joshi, 2006; Zaruth, Jasilionis & Jdanov, 2012).

The CRVS system in Nigeria, the journey so far

The first attempt at collecting data on births in Nigeria began in 1863 with the promulgation of Ordinance No. 21 at the Lagos Colony. However, the actual registration of these events started in 1892. The success spurred the government to expand the program to villages bordering the colony, including Warri in 1903 and Calabar in 1904 (NPC, 2008a).

Comprehensive legislation on the registration of vital events throughout the country was introduced in 1917. The Births, Deaths, and Burial Ordinance of 1948 consolidated the provisions of the 1917 Ordinance even though the application was restricted mainly to the townships. Thus, in various parts of the country, one form of registration or another of births and deaths had been in place throughout the colonial period and beyond. There was no uniformity of operations or complete coverage; objectives of registration were narrowed to the colonial needs for tax assessment and security imperatives.

Although it seems to be the practice in Nigeria to restrict the civil registrations to a particular geographical area and social categorization, these restrictions equally appeared in French West African colonies as late as 1933 and 1950. In 1933, when civil registration was introduced for the African population, among the French West African colonies, it applied to only select groups, such as soldiers, public servants, residents of certain administrative centers, certain chiefs and their families, and those eligible to pay taxes on land, property or income (Toma, 1981). Equally, the practice of restriction of vital registration, geographically and otherwise, was observable in other British West African colonies, such as Gambia, Sierra Leone, Gold coast, etc. (Umoh, 1972).

The first conscious effort to have a comprehensive CRVS in Nigeria was in 1979. This effort was when the Federal Government, in search of an alternative source of demographic data, promulgated the 'Births and Deaths Compulsory Registration' Decree (Now Act 39 of 1979). The decree came into effect on the 1st of September 1979 and provided for the establishment of a uniform CRVS nationwide. This was followed by the 'Births and Deaths (Compulsory) Registration' Decree (Now Act No. 69 of 1992), which came into effect from the 1st of December 1992. The law gave the sole authority to register these events nationwide to the NPC. The provisions were further reinforced by section 24 of the Third Schedule of the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria.

Although it was specified in the Nigerian constitution, the responsibility of CRVS, as the sole assignment of the NPC, the conflicting duties of the local, state, and national levels of the commission have continued to dismantle the consistency and accuracy of CRVS over the years. According to Maduekwe et al. (2016), specific gaps appeared in the network of CRVS across the nation due to some undefined positions and responsibilities. The studies by Abass (2014), Adi et al. (2015), Ayeni & Olayinka (1979), and Williams (2014), have all pointed out at different levels, from local registration centers to state levels, the inconsistency both in the completeness of data entry by the local population and the handling of the collected data in some parts of the nation, such as Northern Nigeria, Western Nigeria, Southern Nigeria and, equally, the middle belt region of the country. Beyond individual scholars' publication on the problems of CRVS and the implications for the quality of the data from the source, the Nigeria Demographic and Health Survey (NDHS) publication of 2013 equally pointed out the overall impact of weak CRVS on the general quality of Nigerian demographic data. According to the 2013 NDHS, the average national under-five-years birth registration was 30%. Also, the disparity between urban (49.8%) and rural (18.6%) areas and between geographical zones of the country – North (19.5–27.8 %), South (37.3–51.8 %) revealed the existence of unseen challenges to CRVS (Maduekwe et al., 2016; NPC & ICF Macro 2014)

From the first time CRVS started in Nigeria until now, the conduct and outcome have contradicted its essence (Umoh, 1972). For instance, the first documentation of vital events, which started in 1863 during the period the British colonial government was in control of the southern

and northern protectorates (as separate entities), was limited to the Lagos colony. The exercise also isolated the rural settings when it was reinforced in 1892 and 1903 (NPC, 2008a). After Nigerian independence, the conduct of vital registration continued with the errors of poor coverage, inconsistency in data collection/method of data collection, and inactivity of some registration centers across the federation (NPC, 2008b; Salawu, 2009).

Theoretical framework of the study (practice theory)

The study was guided by practice theory. Practice theory focuses on the everyday behavioral disposition of the members of society in view of their predominant situations. It has been applied in several studies anchored in the interrelationship between social circumstances and dominant practices (Røpke, 2009; Rosenblatt, Cheshire & Lawrence, 2009).

Practice theory, as a theory used in the social sciences and, to a greater extent, in sociology, can be understood by carefully examining the various perspectives of earlier scholars who have worked on the theory, and its applications in the explanations of different human interactions in different contexts and circumstances, and even sometimes with some level of geographical and disciplinary mapping.

Despite the varied approaches to the understanding of practice theory and its application to everyday living, one thing is agreed among scholars, and this is the fact that practice theory is a routine behavior, which involves interconnected elements of bodily and mental activities, objects/materials, shared competencies, knowledge and skills (Horne, Maller & Lane, 2011; Reckwitz, 2002).

From a sociological perspective, Anthony Giddens and Pierre Bourdieu have equally shaped the understanding of practice theory in the interest of sociological research, owing to the peculiarity of the discipline in its approach to common behavioral issues. While Giddens (1984a) argues that each practice is shaped by the broader realm of power relations, infrastructure, technologies, and society, Bourdieu's perspective maintains that practices are actions that are shared mainly amongst individuals, and which go mostly unquestioned. Furthermore, they contain the tacit and collectively shared experience of what is possible in a given context, and thus constitute a form of shared contextual rationality, which in turn motivates the individual actions of which practices consist (Schatzki, 1996).

According to Bourdieu (1972), the internalized experiences of practices by individuals in society depend on one's position in the social structure and power networks in the social system. In essence, the social, economic, and symbolic capital available to the members of a society, position them for a diverse response to social circumstances over time thereby building for them a consistent way of carrying themselves within the social circle. For Giddens, practices are constituted by practical knowledge, which is tacit and implicit, and by discursive knowledge, of which people are aware (Giddens, 1984b). The emphasis by Giddens is on the importance of routines in the structure of everyday social activity, and in the continuous enactment of social structure (Baber, 1991; Corsini, Laurenti, Meinherz, Appio & Mora 2019; Giddens, 1984a).

Practice theory, in its dominant influence in sociological and social scientific explanations and empirical investigations, has equally affected virtually every area of human sociopolitical and

economic endeavor. As such, every aspect of someone's social life has an element of practice theory to explain its existence and sustainability.

As plausible as it appears, practice theory has emerged as one of the enduring social scientific theories cutting across the edges of scholarships in various specialized disciplines. Put differently; the theory has been applied across disciplines in explaining social issues as well as informing empirical investigations in areas such as the study of sustainability (Haberl, Fischer-Kowalski, Krausmann, Martinez-Alier & Winiwarter, 2011), environmental studies (Rockström et al. 2009), consumption (Hansen, Nielsen & Wilhite, 2016; Jensen, 2017; Spaargaren, 2011), and climate change (Shove, 2010).

As far as is known by this researcher, practice theory has not been applied in the empirical investigation and explanation of the CRVS system in particular, as it concerns south-east Nigeria and sub-Saharan Africa. The plausibility of this theory in explaining the behavioral issues surrounding the CRVS system among the rural population of Nigeria is apparent regarding the issue of the vestiges of colonial government administration, religiosity/belief systems, cultural taboos and a host of other behavioral circumstances surrounding the understanding of "government agents" and the indigenous people's relationship to them.

While colonialism triggered the dominant attitude of avoiding government activities as foreign elements, especially the issue of population documentation among Anglophones (Toma, 1981; Umoh, 1972), the preconceived knowledge and routine (Giddens, 1984a) against the best practices of CRVS system and its essence (WHO, 2013) led to an ignorance of the importance of population documentation among the local population. Equally, religious, and other allied superstitious belief systems among the population, became a hurdle to the CRVS system. These appeared in the form of religious belief overruling the understanding of empirical documentation of vital events, the belief system dominating social realities, and cultural taboos determining the pattern of responses to perceived out-groups and the understanding of the relationship between the government and impoverished citizens as exploitation (Okafor, 2016; Okafor et al., 2007).

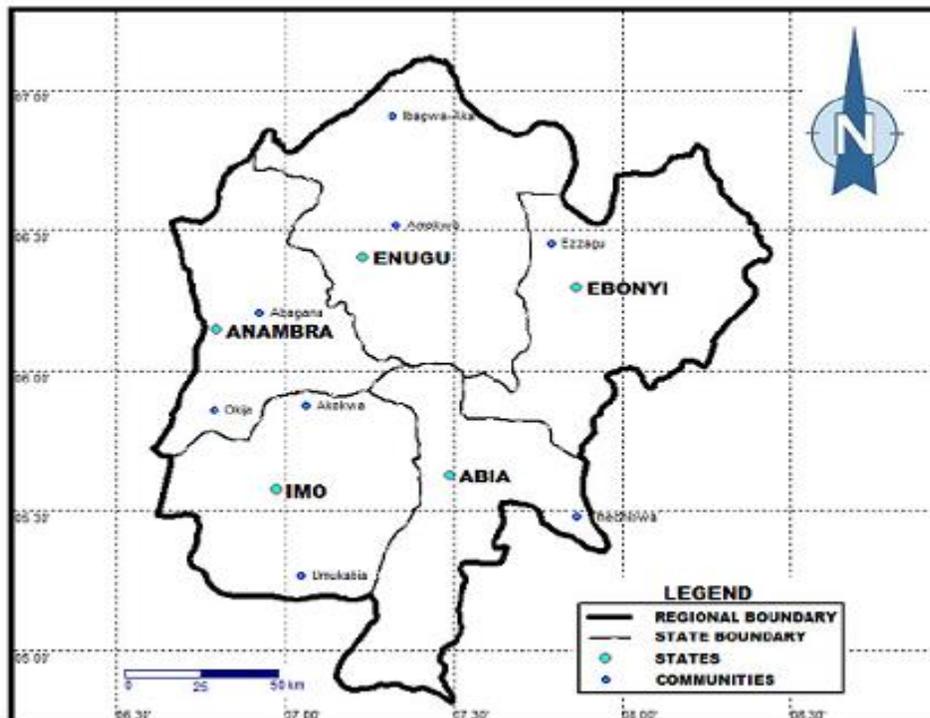
Materials and methods

The study adopted in-depth interviews with the staff of local government population authorities in some selected Local Government Areas in the south-east part of Nigeria (see Figure 1 below). There are five states in the region (see Figure 2 below).

Figure 1: Map of Nigeria, showing the location of the south-east region



Figure 2: Magnified map of south-east Nigeria showing the states located in the region



Currently, the National Population Commission maintains three tier levels of operation concerning civil registration (with community centers, which seem to be almost non-functional in majority areas of the country). While the central government coordinates on behalf of the national headquarters, local government authorities act as primary coordination centers, using the community registration centers, hospitals, maternities, community health centers, churches, mosques, and *non-regular informants* in rural villages to coordinate their activities (Maduekwe et al., 2016; NPC, 2008b).

Given the current status quo, the study deemed it necessary to utilize the heads of population departments (local registrars) as reliable informants based on the fact that they are the only structurally coordinated hierarchy with direct access to ordinary citizens, as far as the issue of CRVS is concerned, in the rural settings studied. As such, they were able to help with the gathering of information on the tripod issues affecting successful CRVS in the region, such as administrative, structural, and citizen-participation issues.

Fifteen informants were purposely selected from the local government authorities situated in rural areas. The informants were made up of the heads of the population departments (registrars) at the local government authorities selected. An option to avert unnecessary canceling of interview schedules was open for the heads (local registrars) of the population departments who were selected to send in their immediate assistants in case of unavoidable absence on the day of the scheduled interview. As such, four heads of departments were represented in the interview by their immediate assistants, while the rest of the 11 heads of departments (registrars) were personally available on the day of the interview schedule. All informants who participated in the interview schedule had worked in the population authorities/department for at least three consistent years.

The information-eliciting instruments used were the semi-structured questions bordering on registration of births, deaths, marriage, divorce, separation, adoption, and fetal death. The interviews and responses were elaborated to accommodate probes by the interviewer and extended discussion by the informants, but were carefully guided by the thematic issues of the study.

Also, some official documents of CRVS, as designed by NPC, were adopted to guide the study. Following the National Population Commission's schedule on civil registration, there are categories or forms and certificates, which capture the details of the individuals and events being registered. These can be seen in the table below:

Table 1: NPC forms for CRVS

S/N	Types of forms	Code	Designated purpose
1	Birth Registration Form	(B1)	All information about births is captured using this form. It covers information on the characteristics of the child, the mother, the father, and the informant, which is given to the registrar.

2	The Death Registration Form	(D1)	All information about deaths is recorded on this form. The information includes age at death, cause of death, place of death, and place of usual residence.
3	The Still-birth Registration Form	(SB1)	Information about still-births is recorded in this form. This covers information about the deceased and the mother.
4	The Birth Certificate	(B2)	This is the certificate issued after the registration of birth. It contains the name of the child, date and place of birth, name of the mother and that of the father, amongst other information.
5	The Death Certificate	(D2)	This is the certificate issued after the registration of deaths. It contains information on the personal characteristics of the deceased, cause and place of death, and information about the informant, amongst other things. Other forms/certificates, the formats of which could not be accessed, including marriage and divorce certificates.

All the events captured by the forms in the table above are registered at sub-locations and the local government population authority. The sub-centers include the community center, hospitals, maternities, community health centers, churches, and mosques. Periodically, (monthly), data are collected from these centers, compiled by the local government registrar, and forwarded to the state directorate (state registrar) for further compilation and onward transmission to the national headquarters.

Ethical issues

The interviewees (the local registrars) were duly consulted and given ample opportunity to decide on their participation as well as a comfortable place for the interview. All the interviewees (local registrars) gave their consent and chose for themselves the appropriate places for the interview. For instance, while a majority of the interviewees (9 out of 15) granted the interview at their offices, six (6) interviewees chose to give the interviews at their residences due to the nature of their offices and the time the interview took place, while only one of them granted the interview somewhere other than his office or residence. Permission was sought from all interviewees after briefing them on the reason for the interview.

Findings

Although the NPC carefully arranged the manner and method of collecting information about vital events across the federation to accommodate the allied institutional structures and geographical settings, there are still challenges, which have frustrated the efforts in collecting

information about vital events in the rural councils in south-east Nigeria. Among these challenges, according to the findings and thematic build-up from the study, are *ignorance* among the rural inhabitants, *poor networks and coordination*, *lack of staff*, and *poor cooperation* by the members of the communities. These were systematically captured into thematic presentations following the elements of the research questions and the indices of the responses elicited from the interviewees. While the research questions guided the in-depth interview, the interview was made elaborate through probes into the substantive issues of the study.

Ignorance of the operation and importance of CVRS

Ignorance, as it appeared here, is relative to circumstances surrounding the understanding of the essence of registering the vital events among the population. As such, most of the people classified as exhibiting the indices of ignorance in this context were people with some level of formal education. From the majority of interviewees (66.7%, 10 interviewees), there is evidence that ignorance played a major role in the way hospital managements, maternities, churches and community health centers responded to the issues of birth registration, death registration, and other vital events whenever the local population authority reached out for the periodic collation of data. From the experiences of the local registrars interviewed, it appears that stillbirths among the private hospitals and maternities were not documented, especially when they occurred outside the hospital, and the patients later came for medical attention. While in some cases, according to the interviewees, this often occurred as a result of the ignorance of the health workers at these facilities, who were mostly non-professional health workers, the traditional belief system and dominant practices of connecting “untimely death” to demons also play a role in such contexts. As such, these vital events are ignored due to the social current of the moment, which usually creates a melancholy atmosphere.

In some other contexts, it was recorded that due to the public perception of abortion, reporting stillbirths is considered harmful and it is morally unacceptable to talk about a baby that died in the womb, or the one terminated either due to a clinically designated treatment or self-decision abortion among the local population. While the dominant belief practices about deaths and the assumed circumstances surrounding some types of death contribute to determining the willingness among the population to cooperate in giving out information on vital events, especially the ones that connect to death, ignorance of the CRVS worsen the situation as the local population has defined their relationship with the government as that of exploitation. From the colonial era (when colonial agents related with the colonized only with regard to taxations and levies) to the Nigerian Fourth Republic, any individual or group of people presenting themselves to the local population on behalf of the government have been considered to be deceptive and to have hidden agendas. This has affected the extent of cooperation with the local registrars in supplying available information on vital events. According to one of the local registrars:

People find it difficult in the local communities here to give the informants (who may be the agent of the authority or from among them) attention whenever the issue of birth outside the hospital, death, or marital incidence is raised. This is either because of the assumption that involvement in government-related matters generally brings problems, or that if a child had been given birth to, other processes that usually go on in the hospital are no longer necessary (LR1).

In a similar context, another local registrar involved in the interview revealed how dominant behavioral dispositions towards government-related matters had created a dual interpretation and perception of government-related activities among the local population:

You will receive attention when you raise the issues of politics, party membership religious association, the argument, discussion, and interaction will be interesting and even attract the onlookers; however, when you specifically want to get details about a birth, death, marriage or divorce.... (Though they do not regard a man sending his wife parking as divorce because such case is hoped to be resolved later except, in the case of following due process to inform the kinsmen from both sides), the mood and intensity of participating in the interaction or the inquiry changes, turning into that of suspicion.... Either that you are enemy's informant, government property evaluator or unknown agents who have come under cover as a government agent. Indeed, the only time that is believed to be a period of the government collecting official information on the citizen, is during the census (LR2).

While discussion about political and religious activities on a neutral basis is a welcome development among the local population, involvement in government-related issues requiring the provision of information and documentation is simply perceived as detrimental to privacy. Equally, CRVS appears to be distant from the level of knowledge of the population either as a result of literacy levels or lack of familiarity with the socioeconomic implications of population documentation. Another interviewee maintained that “mentioning CRVS-related registration to any individual here outside the desk of hospital clerk, is like speaking Greek to a typically uneducated old man” (LR3).

The ignorance, as defined in this context, grows more complicated with different categories of health workers, parishioners/clergies/imams, and other members of the community under the studied local councils. While some categories of hospital workers and church/mosque workers seem to be entirely ignorant of the operation and importance of CRVS as it has to do with their roles in data compilation, some of these envisaged partners to the population documentation authorities make the process more complicated by submitting incomplete reports on certificates and oral information. Thus, in some settings, there could be available data for conducted marriages, births, and deaths without comprehensive details on the certificate. “On the part of some of the hospitals and maternities, the case is somehow complicated. Most of the hospital clerks seem to understand birth and death registration as a mere hospital exercise resulting in the high level of uncompleted details of some births that happened in their hospitals” (LR1).

The dominant understanding among the people concerning marriage, divorce, and death in connection with either superstitious belief or the cultural definition of such, outside the conventional/legal definitions according to the NPC, equally affected the quality of data and number of cases reported among the clergy, imams, and local informants. From the perspective of practice theory, when certain traditional understandings are carried into other emerging issues, it creates a definite crisis among the population ascertain unfamiliar things are subjected to their familiar understanding and approach (Corsini et al., 2019). In such a situation, certain conventional practices are either modified or simply subjected to wrong interpretations. According to the interviewees, there are elements of traditional practices regarding marriage systems that play into the manner information is given to the local population authority as well

as into documentation among the allied institutions to CRVS. The interpretation given to marriage documentation, especially with regard to divorce and separation, is that the local informant, as well as the local population, either modify the conventional definition of these concepts or, at worst, avoid their reportage to the population authority.

The churches around, which help in providing information on marriage issues, end up in most cases in giving poor details of marital events. While some could not specify between divorce and separation, some view separation and divorce as damaging on the image of the church especially when such ended without court procedure. Among the lay reporters, such cannot be classified easily as the details required in the form are somehow complex and required accurate information. On the issue of death, the clergies, imams and lay reporters provide scanty information as a result of certain circumstances surrounding the deaths and burials (LR4).

Administrative and mobility issues

The difficult terrain in the areas studied, poor coordination of hospitals, maternities, and religious institutions in the area, coupled with the issue of financial requirements to execute the processes involved in information collection, are serious challenges being faced by the local registrars/agents in the region. The problems of underdevelopment in most of the rural communities become a burden to the processes involved in the collection of data on vital events. Locations of the allied institutions to the CRVS, such as churches, mosques, maternities, and private hospitals/clinics in the region display a number of issues, such as poor road networks, poor or no identification signs, and an unwillingness to cooperate with the population authority for proper documentation.

Before getting to some communities in the area, you must resort to Okada, which may even take some hours. Before you convince a priest to offer information about a child baptized in his church who was not captured in the hospital due to one hiding maternity somewhere, it may take you some days of visitation and calls. Most birth attendants do so in hiding corners such that you cannot know how many births that had taken place under their auspices (LR6).

While the dominant understanding among the political class is that rural communities have no justifiable need for motorable roads has made the rural location of CRVS allied institutions difficult in terms of accessibility, and the corruption among the operators of private clinics and maternities further complicate the issues associated with the collection and collation of data by local population authorities. For instance, some private clinics and maternities are not licensed in rural communities, while others are involved in some illegal practices, which make them apprehensive whenever they perceived the presence of government officials around.

Administratively, the NPC in its structural and financial setup lacks a proper capacity to encourage accurate CRVS due to issues ranging from adequate training for hospital workers, maternity/traditional birth attendance, and the knowledge of the general public on the

procedures and imperatives of civil registration and vital statistics. While the issues above scuttle the principles and goals of the United Nations on civil registration, the inadequate financial backups for the rural population registrars demoralize and discourage them from embarking on the arduous task of active registration of vital events involving extra-official procedures.

Some hospital clerks in the area lack documentation skills to separate dates and period of births properly; still-births reported to them are not organized in comprehensive compilation. To carefully follow these, you need huge financial logistics... But to be sincere, you may need to involve your salary or you cut short some other involvement, thereby failing to capture some births, still-births, death and marital events (LR3).

Inadequate NPC staff and poor cooperation from members of the rural communities

Inadequate and unskilled staff coupled with poor cooperation from the members of the community are serious challenges, which are encountered in civil registration and vital statistics in the region. Among the available staff, the majority fall in the category of *ad hoc* staff, whose performance affects the overall quality of performance in each of the local authorities. Specifically, on the side of the NPC down to the local councils (population department/authority), there are extremely few skilled employees with knowledge of the intricacies of the data collection and compilation processes. Also, out there among the population, there is still the problem of cooperation from the members of local communities, making it difficult for the few staff to gather available data. According to the local registrars interviewed, lack of staff and cooperation from the citizens hamper the chances of gathering available data on vital events in the region. This is captured in the extract below:

We lack a good number of properly informed staff who can contribute excellently in the process of data collection and compilation... This is as a result of employing ad hoc staff instead of skilled individuals. Also, the attitude of our people here makes it difficult for us to comprehensively cover the area in terms of the information on vital events that have taken place in a particular period (LR7).

I will be sincere to you.... What I have been doing in this department for three years I was posted to this department has not been accurate in my self-assessment compared to the best principles and practices of CRVS and other population documentation issues [as proposed by the United Nations]. However, the more you go deep, the more you become used to the job. Regarding our experience in the field, everything in this nation has been politicized such that people are skeptical about giving out certain categories of information. Although the issue of taxation, which I will say frightened our fathers in the past is no longer the case today, the lay members of the rural communities still find it difficult to feel free with anything that has to do with government (LR6).

Belief systems and colonial practices spill over into the conventionality of CRVS

The NPC, given the importance of CRVS, has developed a comprehensive framework to cover the entire territory, creating stages and methods of documentation of vital events following the global mandate and the inherent uniqueness of the domestic population landscape (AbouZahr et al., 2015; Maduekwe et al., 2016; WHO, 2014). Despite the developed framework, there are still a number of obstacles before free and comprehensive coverage of the territory can be achieved. These challenges, apart from the dominant colonial vestiges in the NPC, differ according to cultural diversities within the territory, which affect people's attitudes towards cooperating with agents and local registrars. In local council authorities within south-east Nigeria, these challenges include ignorance of the importance of demographic documentation, poor logistics, lack of skilled staff, and poor cooperation from local communities.

Starting with the colonial government in Nigeria, demographic documentation has been an issue of controversy both at local and national levels due to a lack of proper orientation on the issue among citizens. While some individuals/groups have ignored it due to a lack of interest, the majority have taken it for granted due to a lack of adequate and regular promotion by the NPC via public media outlets (Okafor & Okoye, 2019). Of course, this issue has been reflected in every activity of the NPC all through the colonial era and into the post-independence era (Okafor, 2016).

Ignorance, as it appears in this study, exclusively deals with a lack of understanding of the implication of proper documentation of the demographics of the citizens. As such, most of the citizens who contribute to the challenges of the CRVS in the local communities studied are educated, and their attitude towards CRVS and general population issues shows the hidden dichotomy between "nominal education" and education with some atom of civics and patriotism.

The practices of the *ad hoc* approach to activities involving ordinary citizens were transferred to the indigenous government from the colonial government in Nigeria. Such practices, in turn, have forced citizens to develop an attitude of indifference towards every activity involving the government in the belief that the government only approaches its citizens intending to compel them to serve the interest of the people in government. The practice of avoiding the government over the years became the prevailing attitude of citizens, especially in rural communities, and involving any incident relating to the government. This phenomenon captures the common ground among the early scholars of practice theory (Bourdieu, 1972; Giddens, 1984b; Schatzki, 1997). The behavioral disposition of members of the society does not appear spontaneously; rather, they are the embodiment of experiences, skills, perceptions, and emotionally structured packages, which are waiting for circumstances and conditions in the social system. In any case, what people do as a group is simply the accumulation of knowledge, experiences, and skills, which carry their bodily form in the social system (Bourdieu, 1972).

Beyond the problem of ignorance of demographic documentation, the poor road network and coordination of the religious and health institutions are problems that hamper the comprehensive and accurate gathering of available information on ongoing vital events. The spill-over of the practices of divide and rule adopted by the colonial government unconsciously laid the foundation for this aggregation of the rural population from the towns and cities in terms of social amenities, such as functional road networks. Currently, fewer local councils in the region have motorable roads to the interior, while the majority of the local councils are in dire condition as far

as rural roads are concerned. As such, the locations of the institutions mentioned above are always difficult to reach. As a matter of practice and spill-over of practices, the owners of private hospitals, maternities, and religious institutions evade the coverage capacity of the NPC and allied bodies for reasons such as illegal operation and substandard establishments.

Normally, the churches, mosques, and private health institutions must register with local government authorities; however, due to corruption and inadequate supervision, many individuals and groups set up such institutions without due consultation. As such, the local council population authorities' operations in the region are fraught with coordination difficulties.

For comprehensive coverage of vital events in rural settings where almost everyone fails to understand the essence of reporting and compiling vital events, there is a need for adequately trained staff. However, the obtainable situation so far is the opposite of expected. According to the findings of this study, the available staff executing such sensitive tasks as coordination of CRVS are few in terms of allocation of responsibilities and expected landmass to cover. Equally, most of them have a low level of educational qualifications. Most of the staff employed at this level are *ad hoc* staff with West African School Certificate Examination (WASCE) and, at most, Nigerian Certificate of Education (NCE). Not only do they have a low level of educational qualifications, but they also lack opportunities for proper orientation and training for specific skills required in this area. This has resulted in inadequate coverage of vital events since 1994 when the NPC worked out a compressive strategy for the total coverage of vital events in the territory (NPC, 2008a).

The issue of *ad hoc* staff started with the colonial government in Nigeria and spilled over into the independence government. However, *ad hoc* staff engagement has continued to rock the civil service system, especially in rural councils where the management regularly employs people who are willing to collect anything for a salary and become dormant at their duty posts. This problem has also found its way into the administrative structures of the NPC. While the employment and management of the NPC have followed the trend of *ad hoc* staff practices at the local authority level, the *ad hoc* staff, due to poor remuneration and inadequate skill appear passive and unmotivated; hence, the practice of an *ad hoc* approach to CRVS operations at the local councils.

Theoretical and policy implications concerning issues with CRVS in the region

The Civil Registration and Vital Statistics system in Nigeria has passed through certain stages, informing many acts and adjustments; yet there are still some lapses, which have continued to counter the desired result. Some of these lapses have been revealed here. They include ignorance of demographic documentation, poor logistics support for the operators of CRVS at the local authorities, and a lack of skilled staff in the sector.

Regarding the findings of this study, there are indicators for an inductive explanation of the challenges of civil registration in south-east Nigeria. All things being equal, the foundation of a particular exercise can predict its successor futility; this is one of the underlying logics of practice theory, which formed the framework of this study.

Based on the foundation of population documentation in Western Europe and North America, there are indications of a sincere commitment both on the side of the citizens and that of the government. For instance, there were coordinated efforts by individuals and the government in the efforts to record the number of deaths and births even when they haven't drawn political attention (Laxton, 1987; Wrigley, 1974; Wrigley & Schofield, 1981). As such, every dimension that has been adopted in collecting the population data in these regions has first observed the primary interest, which is to maintain accurate population data. As a practice, the members of society in these parts of the globe have come to the understanding that giving out information and helping to maintain accurate information on the issue of population is the inalienable responsibility of all. This, equally, has made the members of these societies, both the policy formulators/makers and the policy implementers view the issue with some level of seriousness.

Turning to the Nigerian system, where colonialist empire builders started the activities of demographic documentation, there is another dimension to the understanding of population issues among the citizens. Having begun on the platform of selective/politically motivated head counting, the National Population Commission was subjected to automatic isolation from the knowledge and interest of the ordinary citizens, which equated to an administratively and structurally induced failure (Karl, 2014; Okafor, 2016; Toma, 1981; Umoh, 1972). What is operating today within the system of the NPC cannot have moved far from the platform that was set up at the onset.

In-between the approaches to CRVS by the developed and developing nations as represented in the above principles of practice theory. People are what they repeatedly do, while what people do is simply the outcome of the path they have modeled by *social default*. Fundamental to practice theory is the assumption that people repeatedly live out their experiences overtime consciously and unconsciously (Bourdieu, 1977; Giddens, 1984a; Ortner, 1984; Schatzki, 2001; Wittgenstein, 1975). Human mentality as a phenomenon is made up of the formal and informal skills people have acquired as a result of their complex exposure to social circumstances (Giddens, 1984b).

The current situation regarding civil registration is the outcome of practices that originated from the colonial administration in Nigeria when CVRS was first introduced. The findings from this study have once more revealed the empirical validity of some of the envisaged behavioral disposition of people, which practice theory has aspired to explain. For epistemological interest, the principles of practice theory in the cause of this study have been recognized in the understanding and interpretation of some components of social demography, such as CRVS in the developing regions of the world, such as south-east Nigeria.

Policy-wise, there are lapses, as found in this study, which require policy intervention. Technically, for a more comprehensive system in the operation of the NPC, the position of the local communities and the field experiences of the local agents ought to be observed to create a more robust CRVS system and more accurate demographic documentation.

Since the ignorance of demographic documentation appeared to be a factor of the lack of cooperation between the NPC and local communities and an inaccurate compilation of vital events by hospital clerks, there is a need for policy strategy on public orientation and enlightenment on demographic documentation and the common good of the populace. Equally, since the use of *ad hoc* staff has become the order of the day irrespective of the enormous toll it takes on the accuracy of performance in different sectors, the government should create a

structure and regular framework for consistent and specific skill orientations and training for the *ad hoc* staff for maximum and accurate performance. Nonetheless, the government should develop a comprehensive network and geo-mapping to incorporate every institution that is involved in one way or another in the issue of CRVS in order to maintain regular/active civil registration to curtail the problems of transport networks and logistics.

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