

Scoping an interoperable e-CRVS system for the Cook Islands to connect government agencies, across borders and into regional data systems

Project Objective and Intended Output, Outcome or Impact

The Cook Islands currently use a Microsoft Access database for the recording of paper-based civil registration events. This is not connected to national health or statistics systems. It is not possible for residents to register births or deaths online. Paper-based processes must also be used to apply for identity documents, such as a passport. Off-island events, such as deaths, are not captured and the data is not available for health monitoring or identity security purposes. Producing vital statistics and cause of death data requires considerable effort due to the lack of electronic records.

The key outcomes and deliverables of this project will be:

- A set of “as-is” civil registration process maps, agreed by the CRVS committee and key stakeholders, which clearly show current linkages or areas of disconnect across the public service.
- Immediate non-IT improvement opportunities are identified and progressed by the CRVS committee which result in more effective, accurate and timely civil registration or vital statistics.
- Barriers to moving to a e-CRVS system are identified and plans to address these are developed.
- Interoperability requirements, with a particular focus on health, statistics, immigration, passport and regional data systems are documented and inform e-CRVS projects in the Cook Islands and the wider Pacific. This will include “south-south” collaboration with Niue and Vanuatu (possibly others subject to another funding application) to share experiences in enhancing civil registration systems and cross-border data.
- Specifications for an e-CRVS system with funding and procurement approach options presented to the Cook Islands Government for consideration.
- Following Government approval, the Cook Islands successfully funds and implements a sustainable, interoperable e-CRVS system, able to offer online services to residents and effectively produce timely vital statistics reports.

Country Context

The Cook Islands comprises 15 islands whose total land area is 240 square kilometres (93 sq mi) set within a vast 1,960,027 square kilometres (756,771 sq mi) of ocean. We are larger than Texas! Our Polynesian neighbours are American Samoa, Niue, Tokelau, Tonga and Samoa to the west, and Hawaii in the North.

We have a well-functioning civil registration system, but significant numbers of records in the health system are not formally registered with the Ministry of Justice and vice versa. Reporting completeness ranged between 88% and 134% during 2013–2018 (<https://purl.org/spc/digilib/doc/tannd>). One reason for this is that data flows are manual and rely on paper-based processes with family members physically moving paper between the health and civil registration systems.

As the number of residents receive medical treatment in NZ through referral or by choice. Recording overseas births and deaths is critical to obtaining accurate health information on the resident population for planning purposes. Despite a data sharing agreement between the Cook Islands civil registry and New Zealand, shared data has not yet fully integrated into national systems due to the lack of electronic data transfer processes.

A comprehensive vital statistics analysis was published in 2015 covering 1999–2013. Progress in developing a second report, covering 2013–2017¹ has been slow due to challenges in accessing reliable data electronically.

This project will identify and remedy the gaps or duplication in data flow by enabling the implementation of an inter-operable e-CRVS system.

Government Commitment

The Cook Islands has a CRVS committee, consisting of representatives from the National Statistics Office, the Ministry of Justice, and the Health Information Section of the Ministry of Health. The importance of this collaboration is embedded in the National Statistics Plan 2015–2025 and the Health Information Plan 2015–2019.

The Ministry of Justice Strategic Plan 2021–2026, submitted to Cabinet 14th July 2021 and endorsed by Hon. Mac Mokoroa, Minister for Justice, seeks an online registry for births, deaths and marriages with scoping in 2023 and deployment in 2026. These timeframes can be significantly shortened by this project. A letter of support from the Honourable Minister is attached.

The use of administrative sources for official statistics and for producing census information is being explored. A fully interoperable e-CRVS system will provide solid foundations for a future national ID system and contribute significantly to a future register-based census.

The Brisbane Accord Group² has identified e-CRVS and interoperability as a priority for the Pacific. This aligns with commitments made through the Ministerial Declaration³ to "Get everyone in the picture" in Asia and the Pacific, adopted in 2014. This initiative will also contribute nationally and regionally to reporting against eight of the Sustainable Development Goals⁴ and in particular achieving goal 16.9.

Measuring and Addressing Equity through Data Use

Replacing current, largely manual collection of birth and death data will enable data to be more easily used to identify and address inequalities in health. Interoperability between civil registration and health systems will ensure cause of death information is complete and accessible for analysis. The addition of data from "off-island" births and deaths will ensure that impacts of accessing remote health services or of migration are visible to researchers and decision-makers.

Process mapping current registration system, including paper flows with Health and Statistics, identifying improvement opportunities and barriers to moving to an e-CRVS system, and developing new "to-be" process maps will enable equity issues caused by processes, IT infrastructure, legislation and institutional arrangements to be identified and addressed.

Interoperability with the Social Assistance System (MIS) will ensure all mothers, especially those most vulnerable, can access financial support without needing to visit multiple locations or purchase birth certificates.

Project Activities

This project will:

- Map the current registration processes, including paper flows with Health and Statistics, by workshopping with representatives from the national CRVS committee and wider public service.

¹ Stats Office, MoH and SPC (Cook Islands Statistics Office, Ministry of Health and the Pacific Community). Nov 2015. *The Cook Islands Vital Statistics Report 1999–2013*. Rarotonga, Cook Islands: Ministry of Health. Available at: <http://purl.org/spc/digilib/doc/xrrj2>

² <https://sdd.spc.int/brisbane-accord-group-bag>

³ <https://getinthepicture.org/crvs-decade/ministerial-declaration>

⁴ <https://purl.org/spc/digilib/doc/civzw>

- Identify improvement opportunities and barriers to moving to an e-CRVS system, such as processes, IT infrastructure, legislation, and institutional arrangements, and develop new “to-be” process maps.
- Document interoperability opportunities and requirements for new e-CRVS systems with particular focus on health, statistics, immigration, passport and the regional data systems. In-scope countries for detailed analysis are New Zealand, Niue, the Cook Islands, Tokelau, Samoa, Tonga, Vanuatu and America Samoa. Contact will also be made with Fiji and the Solomon Islands so that insights from larger countries are captured. See map below for area covered. This resource will be available to use across the Pacific.
- Engage with Niue and Vanuatu in a “south-south” collaboration to share experiences in enhancing civil registration systems and cross-border data sharing. This may be as part of the Auckland Workshop Project (see more details below).
- Prepare specification documents and options analysis for consideration by the Government.

By completing these activities, the Cook Island Government will be positioned to develop specification documentation and a budget for a modern, e-CRVS system which connects across health, statistics, and identity systems, internally and off-shore. The wider Pacific will also have a regional resource that will assist other countries or development partners when looking to connect their CRVS other government or across border systems.

Project Monitoring

This project will be managed by the Cook Islands Ministry of Justice ([Tamatoa Jonassen](#)) with support from the Pacific Community ([Jeff Montgomery](#)).

The National CRVS Committee, comprising representatives from the National Statistics Office, the Ministry of Justice, and the Health Information Section of the Ministry of Health will be actively involved with this project and have agreed to meet monthly to monitor progress and address issues as they arise.

Key milestones will be:

BPI and e-CRVS Workstream	
Funding secure and consultants on board	15 August 2023
BPI Opening Webinar held – <i>Orientation training on the tools to be used for the assessment, analysis and redesign of selected civil registration processes</i>	1 September
Consultation meetings to collect “as-is” information completed— <i>Orientation training on the tools to be used for the assessment, analysis and redesign of selected civil registration processes in Cook Islands. CRVS process documentation describes in detail, the steps needed to complete a core business process from start to finish i.e., the timely registration and certification of births and deaths</i>	1 September 2023
3-day national Business Process Mapping Workshop held – <i>relevant national CRVS stakeholders consulted for the system analysis redesign phase of the business process improvement project and to strengthen the capacity of national CRVS stakeholders to analyse CRVS business processes as part of continued CRVS system strengthening</i>	31 October 2023
High-level validation of “as is” and “to be” process maps – <i>To present the findings of the CRVS Business Process Improvement Project and seek approval on the findings from policy makers and government officials</i>	30 December 2023
Final Cabinet paper delivered – <i>including specification and options analysis for consideration by Cook Island Government-completed</i>	28 February 2024

The Brisbane Accord Group will provide another level of oversight through quarterly meeting which will focus on the regional elements of this project.

Technical support

The following individuals or partner agencies will be providing technical support:

Jeff Montgomery, CRVS Adviser, SPC will lead support for this project. Jeff has 10 years' experience in civil registration as New Zealand Registrar-General and convenor of the Pacific Civil Registrars Network. He is also a member of the UNESCAP Asia Pacific Steering Group for Civil Registration and Vital Statistics and has worked closely with all relevant United Nations agencies (such as WHO, UNICEF, UNDP) as well as Bloomberg Data for Health and the CDC Foundation.

<https://www.linkedin.com/in/jeffmontgomerynz/>

Zoran Dokovic, Civil Registration and Identify Management Specialist will be the technical lead the Business Process Mapping elements of this project. With 15 years' experience with CRVS, Zoran has recently completed BPI projects, supporting ESCAP, in Niue, Samoa, Vanuatu and Nauru.

<https://www.linkedin.com/in/zoran-dokovic-9aaba96/>

Te Puna Vai Mārama, the Cook Islands Centre for Research is a joint venture arrangement between University of the South Pacific (USP), Cook Islands and the Cook Islands government to become a focal point and resource for post-graduate research training, for research and the provision of information and policy advice to the Cook Islands government. Professor Heather Worth, Director, will lead engagement with Cook Island stakeholders and the writing of the Cabinet paper.

New Zealand Department of Internal Affairs are venue hosts for workshop and key participant exploring the connection between New Zealand Passport and Cook Island Civil Registry systems, and opportunities to exchange information. New Zealand attendees will be specialists in passports and identity documentation, data sharing regulations and modalities, civil registration, and use of data to prevent cross-border identity fraud.

Pacific Island Health Officers Association (PIHOA) will share insights on how information is shared between U.S.-Affiliated Pacific Islands (USAPI) and with mainland USA.

US Centres of Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) - leads the oldest and most successful example of inter-governmental data sharing in Public Health. CDC will share insights on how mainland US States share civil registration information with each other and possible options for application to the wider Pacific.

Identifiable Obstacles

The key assumption and risk in the BPI and e-CRVS Workstream is that key stakeholders from the Cook Islands are not available to assist in providing access to current state information and to participate the future state workshop, within the timeframes required. This risk will be mitigated through the active engagement of the National CRVS committee which has senior representatives for the three core agencies. This is further addressed by engaging an experienced in-country consultant, familiar with the Cook Islands government.

Equity

The proposed work will be carried out by a mix of in-country and overseas consultants working alongside Cook Islands public servants. Training will be provided on tools for the assessment, analysis and redesign processes in Cook Islands.

An effective CRVS system is essential for equitable planning and decisions making. Connecting the civil registration system with systems for statistics, health, social assistance, and education ensures that everyone is counted and that everyone can access the services or support that they need.

This project will provide the Cook Islands Government with the information they need to make decisions about a future e-CRVS system. It will also provide information to other countries and development partners about the potential and pathway to interoperability and sharing of data within countries and across the Pacific.

Sustainability

At the end of this project, the Cook Islands government will have a clear view on the next steps to implement an eCRVS system. This will include the costs of implementation and the on-going operation of a system. The Interoperability and Data Workstream will deliver resources that will be available to other countries, with dissemination overtime being managed by SPC.

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