

#COUNTINGEVERYONE

CRVS Leadership in Colombia



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Through the coordinated efforts of leaders like Dr. Victor Hugo Alvarez Castaño and Dr. Edna Margarita Valle Cabrera, and the adoption of new strategies and technologies, Colombia has created one of the most complete civil registration and vital statistics (CRVS) systems in Latin America. A focus on reaching rural municipalities through inter-institutional leadership and collaboration has been instrumental in showing how health and vital statistics entities can work together to create a complete picture of birth, death and cause of death, stemming from near-universal access to CRVS.

Dr. Victor Hugo Alvarez Castaño is the former Director of Epidemiology and Demography at the Ministry of Health and Social Protection, where he served for 20 years. He began his career as an epidemiologist, focusing on rural regions in the Eastern Plains. He discovered early on in his career that the study of diseases were incomplete without an intricate knowledge of the people they were affecting, and worked toward his masters in demography to understand what he calls “the behavior of diseases.” He explains: “A vital statistics and civil registration system is one of the most appreciated sources of information, with multiple impacts. It has a legal impact, as in the recognition of a person's rights and duties. It has an impact at a demographic level, providing the inputs that help us understand the dynamics and structure of the population... It has an epidemiological component that allows me to understand why certain communities have a particular health status... Understanding their life experience helps us have a better understanding of health issues, and direct better decisions for intervention and look for a better quality of life.”

Dr. Edna Margarita Valle Cabrera is the Vital Statistics Coordinator for the Census and Demography Directorate at the National Administrative Department of Statistics (DANE). She is in charge of the collection, production and publication of official data for births and deaths in Colombia, which includes developing guidelines and identifying innovative tools and IT solutions. Her role gives her a unique perspective on the issues facing the system and the solutions available to solve those issues.

One crucial outcome of the government coordination and dynamic leadership like theirs: the creation of a CRVS infrastructure capable of wide-ranging registration of births and deaths in rural regions—notably indigenous communities and ethnic minorities who often remain outside of the public safety net. Dr. Valle Cabrera sees it as such: “I think the civil registration and vital statistics system is very powerful, that specific objectives can only be reached when working harmoniously. Each entity cannot reach those goals individually. Each one needs the support of other entities.”

Over the course of his career, Dr. Alvarez Castaño has overseen the implementation of vital statistics gathering efforts in some of the most remote regions of Colombia, training members of the local communities and integrating advanced technologies into the data collection processes. This experience has informed the implementation of the Colombia Rural Vital strategy, which engages communities and leverages mobile technologies to increase the registration and certification of vital events. In 2018, a platform for reporting vital events using cell phone text messaging was implemented in 14 municipalities with low levels of birth and death registration. Since the program’s implementation, more than 1,000 community members and 200 verbal autopsy interviewers have been trained across those municipalities. As Dr. Valle Cabrera notes, “Having the certainty that comes with quality data, means consistency. It is an x-ray of what's happening in the country and provides peace to the state.”

Key Success Factors

- More than 1,000 community members and 200 verbal autopsy interviewers have been trained across 14 municipalities to use the Colombia Rural Vital Platform to report births and causes of death. The platform uses a text-messaging notification system for vital events, to ensure that everyone is counted in remote parts of the country.
- Text messages are used to activate a cascade of actions to verify vital events (such as births, deaths, marriages); provide reminders and referrals for follow up to complete the verification process of the vital event; and collect any additional information.
- More municipalities are being added to the CRV strategy to increase the registration of births and deaths in rural and Indigenous and ethnic minority communities. In all, in a medium-term process of institutionalization, 371 rural municipalities with populations of less than 25,000 will be added to the system. The total area of these sparsely populated areas amounts to 19% of the national territory and encompasses a population of 5,402,735.
- Due to the pandemic, the institutional and community strategies for the surveillance of mortality due to COVID-19 was developed, as well as the implementation of a system that has helped to correct the cause of death for more than 20,000 suspected cases of COVID-19. The team also implemented a text messaging system to report deaths that occurred at home in 720 municipalities of the country, corresponding to 65% of the entire national territory.