Digitalising civil registration to accelerate inclusion

Reliable inclusive digital civil registration is more than an administrative tool. It is a strategic lever for strengthening fundamental rights, improving governance and stimulating economic development. Enabel draws on Belgian expertise in helping to implement modular solutions tailored to national contexts.

Introduction

Nearly 850 million people around the world live without a legal identity due to a lack of civil registry documents. These are women, children and vulnerable people deprived of effective access to fundamental rights, essential services and economic participation (World Bank Group, 2021). Without a legal identity, how can you vote, access health care, obtain a passport, travel, set up a business, open a bank account or even prove you exist?

In many countries, civil registration, still based in whole or in part on paper registers, is fragmented, inefficient and governed by obsolete laws.

Digitisation is not an end in itself, but it is a strategic opportunity to strengthen civil registration as a whole. Enabel offers a pragmatic approach based on Belgium's recognised experience in civil registration digitisation, while taking care to adapt it to partner country contexts and priorities. This approach, based on co-construction, local ownership and complementarity between partner country and international expertise, has borne fruit in a dozen communes in Guinea, where a pilot project financed by the European Union (EU) allowed to digitise almost 500,000 civil registration documents since 2021, to equip several centres, to train officials and to pass two structuring laws.

Civil registration covers elements of a person's legal life (name, date and place of birth, parentage, marriage, death) which form the legal basis for proving identity. Identity in the broad sense includes vital event data, but also other elements that define a person (residence, nationality, household composition, administrative situation, etc.).

Civil registration digitisation refers to the process of transforming systems for recording vital events (births, marriages, deaths, etc.) into digital systems, through the use of technology. This means:
- replace or supplement paper registers with electronic databases;
- digitally record civil registration documents using computers, tablets, etc.;
- digitise civil registration documents, with the possibility of issuing them via e-desks;
- Protect data.

An efficient digital civil registration system is an infrastructure that serves governance, stability and economic development. Digital civil registration supported by Enabel is therefore fully in line with Belgium's current priorities in terms of international cooperation and with the EU's Global Gateway strategy.

Modern civil registration for a stable and prosperous region

Modern civil registration at the heart of the regional economy

Civil registration is foundational to stable, modern and attractive regional markets and to sustainable, secure and interconnected investments. Efficient civil registration is key to creating enabling environments, which are core elements of the Global Gateway strategy (European Commission, 2021) and the strategic corridors:

- Legal identity allows access to financial services for citizens and businesses alike.
- Mutual recognition of identities facilitates the regional mobility of workers and businesses, and ensures the security of cross-border trade.
- Digitisation is a strategic lever in the fight against fraud, corruption and illegal flows.

Digital civil registration can be seen as a standalone infrastructure, as it relies on material technical components (servers, networks, cabling, IT equipment) while supporting mobility, health, education and digital development, which are at the heart of the Global Gateway strategy.

In Africa, many states are showing strong political will to reform their civil registration systems, as with the Africa Programme for Accelerated Improvement of Civil Registration and Vital Statistics (APAI-CRVS). Spearheaded by the Economic Commission for Africa and the African Union, this flagship initiative aims to provide the continent with modern, inclusive and interconnected civil registration systems. The interest shown by civil registration officials from Guinea and five other West African countries (Benin, Togo, Burkina Faso, Niger and Côte d'Ivoire) during a study visit to Belgium coordinated by Enabel in February 2025, also testifies to the replicability potential and attractiveness of this approach. Today, it is crucial to seize this momentum by supporting convergent partner country trajectories, built on local realities, but geared towards regional integration.

An accelerator of stability and inclusion
Digitisation has the potential to generate major benefits for democratic governance and stability, which the Belgian government considers to be one of three Global Public Goods (General policy paper, 2025).

- Digitisation speeds up vital events registration, reduces human error and minimises the risk of paper records being lost or destroyed.
- It increases public service transparency and effectively combats corruption. It helps to avoid duplicated civil registration documents and identity fraud.
- It ensures that data backup and protection systems are in place.
- It reduces paper use and the need to travel. What is more, by using sustainable energy solutions (such as solar power to supply registration centres) it becomes a lever for ecological and resilient administration.
- It facilitates the collection of reliable and up-to-date demographic data, reduces the need for costly censuses and makes it easier to organise elections and guide public policy.
- It enables states to adapt their laws to the digital age.
- Interoperability between civil registration databases and those of other institutions encourages the exchange of information between administrations and improves the fluidity and efficiency of services.

For the public, digitisation means easier and cheaper access to civil registration documents. This facilitates their access to services (health, education, social protection, etc.), particularly for people living in isolated areas or far from urban centres. For women and young people in particular, legal identity is the basis for empowerment and socio-economic development (access to credit, entrepreneurship, mobility, etc.). In contexts of forced displacement, the legal identity of people is preserved thanks to digital technology, which facilitates their reintegration into host areas, in line with the triple nexus approach. In the aftermath of conflict or serious human rights violations, civil registration data can also be used to support transitional justice processes, in particular to identify victims.

In a human rights-based approach, a digital reform of civil registration is an inclusive political act on the part of the State, which recognises everyone as an individual with rights, while reaffirming its duties towards its population.
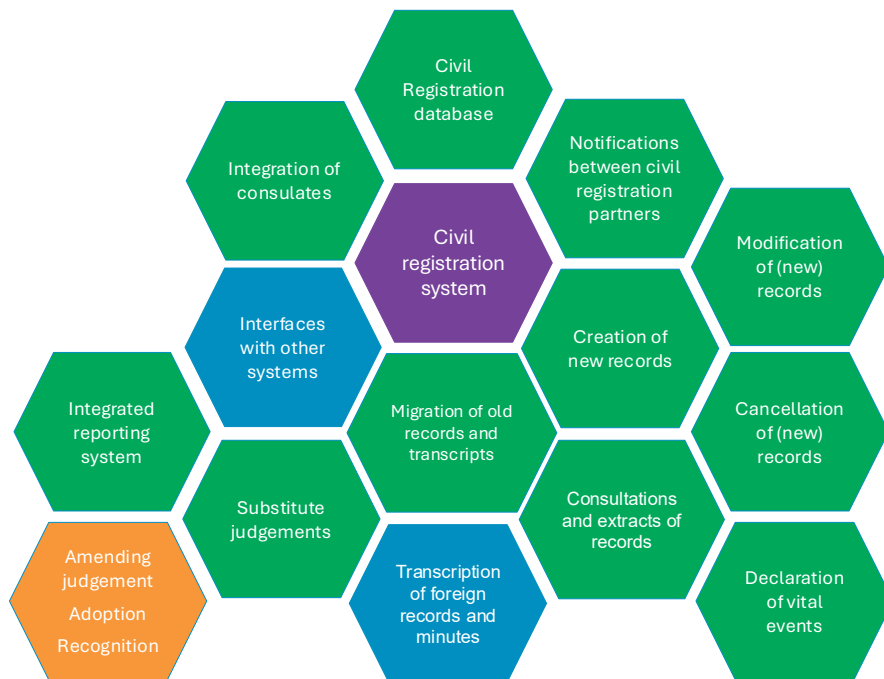
The added value of Enabel's approach
Enabel offers support that goes further than simple digitisation. Its approach is distinguished by its vision, proven methods and technical rigour. Its holistic nature, locally embedded and designed to last, is what sets it apart.

A unique Belgian model
Since 2019, Belgium has been one of the few European countries to fully digitalise its civil registration system, eliminating paper records and enabling citizens to obtain official documents from any location, regardless of where they were originally issued. This success is based on an inclusive approach involving the local authorities, neutral institutional coordination, a thoroughly revised legal framework and controlled interoperability with the population register. The use of a single national registration number is another characteristic feature of this system, guaranteeing the uniqueness of each individual and facilitating interconnected governance of public services.

This innovative model that Enabel uses, allows the quick implementation of complex infrastructures in partner countries by re-using solutions already tested in Belgium, while adapting them to local realities. The best expertise is sourced through Belgium's administrative simplification agency (BOSA), the management committee of the Belgian Database of Civil Status Records (DABS/BAEC) and experts of DXC Technology, the Belgian IT company that contributed to the digital reform. This approach is in line with the current orientations of Belgian international cooperation, viewing innovation as a factor of transformation and making the most of Belgian expertise within the framework of balanced partnerships.

Civil Registration database

Integration of consulates

Notifications between civil registration partners

Civil registration system

Modification of (new) records

Interfaces with other systems

Creation of new records

Integrated reporting system

Migration of old records and transcripts

Cancellation of (new) records

Substitute judgements

Consultations and extracts of records

Amending judgement Adoption Recognition

Transcription of foreign records and minutes

Declaration of vital events

The various modular functionalities of the application developed by DXC Technology to digitise the civil registration in Guinea ("Like from a menu, you choose à la carte").

A tried and tested approach

Before specifically supporting digital civil registration in Guinea, Enabel had already acquired solid technical expertise through several projects to strengthen civil registration systems (Benin 2009-2013, Mali 2011-2016, Senegal 2020-2024).

The experience and solutions (including digital solutions) deployed in Belgium and in earlier Enabel projects can be adapted to other contexts to rapidly produce visible results.

The comparative advantages of the Enabel approach

- **A holistic approach that offers more than technology**
  More than a digital tool, the approach encompasses legal, organisational and infrastructural reforms to support digitisation. It aims to strengthen governance, simplify administration and improve access for the public. Unlike other initiatives that focus on identification, Enabel's approach is based on a sustainable comprehensive institutional vision to strengthen civil registration.
- **A modular, adaptable solution**
  Far from the ready-to-use approaches, it is based on a modular application, giving national authorities the choice of functionalities according to their priorities and the maturity of their civil registration systems. This flexibility means that solutions can be tailored to meet specific needs.

- **Genuine co-construction**
  Involve end-users (local authorities, for example) from the outset through workshops, real-life testing and a long-term training strategy.
- **A clear distinction between civil registration and biometric identification**
  Only civil registration confers a legal identity; biometric identification being a technical means of identification based on unique characteristics (fingerprints, photo, iris, etc.), the misuse of which may entail risks for fundamental rights.
- **A special focus on cybersecurity**
  Enabel plays an important role in implementing Belgium's cooperation policy in cybersecurity and the fight against cybercrime, including in fragile contexts (Enabel, 2025).
- **A strong regional base**
  Enabel operates in many African countries and capitalises on its knowledge of local contexts, its operational integration and its practical experience in providing support to civil registration, which strengthens the coherence, continuity and impact of its actions.

Recommendations

1. Adopt a gradual approach to digitisation, starting with pilot municipalities to test, adjust and demonstrate the relevance of solutions before the national roll-out. Digital solutions also need to be built in stages with users to design and validate each feature.

2. Develop open and modular tools to enable national authorities to choose the most appropriate functionalities.

3. Build a trusting and sustainable relationship with partner institutions, respecting national priorities, remaining flexible and engaging in transparent dialogue. Use the train-the-trainer methodology to ensure an effective transfer of skills to the partner country.

4. Ensure clear governance of the initiatives, with a neutral coordination body, to guarantee the coherence of the process.

5. Distinguish between civil registration and biometric identity, while establishing controlled links with other systems (population, elections) in strict compliance with fundamental rights and data protection laws.

6. Systematically integrate cyber security awareness, while strengthening partners' legislative and regulatory frameworks to ensure effective protection against cyber threats.

7. Value European public expertise, but also the **European private sector** to enrich digitisation projects.

8. Capitalise on a proven political will by identifying the needs of other partner countries and offering them a tried and tested approach.

9. Adopt a coordinated approach at regional level as part of the Global Gateway strategy. And in the same spirit, develop and implement a strategy to support regional institutions in their ambitions to modernise civil registration.

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