



Vital statistics and Tokelau

Information paper to the
Heads of Statistics and Planning Meeting 2013

About this document

This document provides information about civil registration and vital statistics issues in Tokelau. It describes how they are systematically addressed across the government sector.

Tokelau is one of the most isolated countries on Earth

Tokelau is one of the most geographically isolated and smallest countries on Earth.

Tokelau is made up of three small coral atolls, Atafu, Nukunonu, and Fakaofu.

It has a usually resident population of 1,411 people who live on little more than 12km² of land. The only way to travel to Tokelau is by boat, a 500km or 25 hour journey due north from Samoa.

Although a dependent territory of New Zealand, administration of the country has largely been delegated to Tokelauan authorities.

All governing authority is derived from the traditional village councils (Tapulega), and much of this authority is passed to Tokelau's legislative body (the General Fono), which meets three times a year.

Different government agencies operate across the three atolls, and from a liaison office in Apia, Samoa – where infrastructure and telecommunications solutions make some government operations more efficient.

Vital statistics are important for keeping up with rapid change

Tokelau has undergone rapid social, political, and economic change over the past 40 years.

Formal centralised government is only 20 years old in Tokelau. Governance is developing quickly with a healthy tension between the need to ensure efficiency in central planning, and the desire to represent faka-Tokelau (the Tokelauan way) within government structures.

The Tokelau National Strategic Plan 2010-2015 (TNSP) emphasises the importance of the development of good governance, transparency, and accountability. The *TNSP* has set key national targets in the areas of infrastructure development, human development, and sustainability.

As government in Tokelau develops, the need for independent, timely, and quality information also develops. The need for good quality, relevant statistics across the government is at a critical point. Government agencies are beginning to develop the collections they need for monitoring purposes, and international organisations are helping develop best practice collections in health, and social statistics.

Vital statistics are fundamental to population health monitoring and planning. The Tokelau government wants to use civil registration data for:

- keeping track of and estimating future school enrolments
- understanding changing fertility rates and their impact on future population size
- estimating needs for future health funding, (eg. vaccinations)
- measuring and understanding Tokelau's disease burden by monitoring causes of death
- targeting policy for, and monitoring non-communicable diseases (NCDs).

Vital statistics provide a key source of information on population health. Tokelau's rapid development, could mean changes in life expectancy, disease profiles and other public health issues. These can best be monitored using a good quality vital statistics system.

Current civil registration system is broken

Current levels of birth and death registration are poor. Approximately half to two thirds of births from the last five years are not registered. Death registration is likely to be worse.

Overall the birth and death registration system is broken:

- there are no clear responsibilities for deputy registrars, no job descriptions, and no standard process to follow
- there is no on-atoll training
- the system currently relies on the good-will of families to complete registration, but with no good incentives to do so – most people do not register until they try to travel overseas
- the current forms are old, and lack important detail for producing good quality information
- the legislation is outdated, and does not provide for some required information.

Tokelau is taking its place in the centre of the Pacific

There is legal obligation for all births and deaths that occur in Tokelau to be registered, and the information is crucial for planning and decision making for population and health.

The *Ten Year Pacific Statistics Strategy*, signed off by the heads of all Pacific Islands Statistics Departments highlighted improving vital statistics as one of four key priority areas in statistics for the region for 2010-2020.

The Pacific is leading the way in dealing with civil registration problems, and there is international support available. The World Health Organisation, the Secretariat of the Pacific Community, the University of Queensland, and the Australian Bureau of Statistics are all providing technical assistance, and they see Tokelau as a potential leader in the area.

The departments in Tokelau that deal with civil registration and vital statistics have joined together to form a 'Vital Statistics Committee'. Together they have outlined a draft for a new, best practice civil registration system.

Traditional incentives for registration

Getting the balance right between compelling people to register births and deaths, and incentivising registration can be difficult.

Unlike other larger Pacific countries, no birth certificate is required to access education, hospital care, or other government functions. Instituting such a requirement does not necessarily make sense in a village environment where everyone knows everyone else.

In terms of death registration, there are no finance systems requiring proof of death, no land titles to transfer, and at present no electoral role to be removed from.

In the 2011 Tokelau Census, more than 80% of usual residents indicated that had spent more than six months overseas. Overseas travel is the first tangible incentive for formal birth certification.

A health focused system

The Vital Statistics Committee has had to look beyond the usual incentives, and processes for civil registration.

Strong cooperation between Tokelau's health, statistics, and civil registration agencies has resulted in a proposed health-dominated system for vital statistics, and for backing up an improved registration system.

There are hospitals on all three atolls, and they are central to major events in the life of the community. Virtually all births happen in hospital, and a clinician attends all deaths. This makes the hospital the most important point for civil registration in Tokelau.

Hospitals can also refer patients off-island to either Samoa or New Zealand for more comprehensive health care. If a patient gives birth, or dies overseas they fall outside Tokelau's civil registration system, but not outside the statistical population of interest.

Given that vital statistics are of most use to health-care policy planners and providers, using their processes and systems to help collect these statistics makes sense. Additionally they can be used to support a civil registration system that lacks traditional incentives.

A day to celebrate civil registration

Approximately half to two thirds of births from the last five years are not registered. Death registration is likely worse. This means that even if Tokelau had full registration from tomorrow, combined with a very small population it would still be missing a large part of the picture required for reliable statistics.

The Vital Statistics Committee is currently planning a civil registration day. It will be held nationally, and provide people with the chance to register previously unregistered births and deaths. It will be used to promote health in the village, and to talk about the new processes for registration.

The Vital Statistics Committee expects to work with the villages, and other government areas, like sports to create a carnival-like atmosphere to make registration fun, easy, and successful.

Small country, small resources

Tokelau is a small country, with very limited resources. Small government agencies are expected to carry similar outputs to other country's much larger institutions. Tokelau's statistics agency currently has staffing levels of only 1.5 full time people.

The Vital Statistics Committee addresses this issue by ensuring cross agency cooperation in the area of vital statistics. The committee has worked so well, that it is a model that will likely be repeated in other areas of statistical development. It means that money, and time can be effectively, and efficiently spent.

Tokelau is developing strong solutions to shared problems

The issues of incentives for registration, geographic isolation, limited resources, and a developing government are shared by many neighbours in the Pacific. Where Tokelau is a leader is in its step-by-step approach, applying consultative and unified solutions to difficult but common problems.

Tokelau's strength is its people, and this is embedded in the Vital Statistics Committee with its cross-government approach to the development of vital statistics.