Deus ex Machina

The Civil Registry as a Tool of Public Administration

by Alexander T. Knapp

In the majority of countries today, population, identification, and personal records are kept in a variety of forms and public offices, with numerous administrative laws and procedures governing how that data is managed, amended, and shared. For example, electoral rolls are often maintained by hand in decentralized offices throughout the country, while taxation records are managed in the capital in a centralized computer database.

In other countries, this data is managed in one location, with both basic information on the individual and specialized information relevant to each government agency or office that, as a rule, keeps population records up-to-date. This "civil registry" is the centralized, continuous, and coordinated maintenance of a population's relevant data by legitimate agents of a government or public administration.

Centralized Data Management – Sweden

Sweden has one of the most advanced civil registry systems, originating from data kept through church parish records dating back to 1571, and formalized in 1686 with a national directive instructing priests to maintain catechetical records for the entire population. The process wasn't significantly refined again until nearly three hundred years later when, in 1946, a unique personal identification number was introduced into the system. The data was computerized in 1960 and reorganized into its present format in 1991 under the 131 municipal tax authority offices.

Consequently, through one administrative tool, the Swedish government and public administration can manage records for several agencies and services. These include the National Tax Authority, Swedish Police Authority, Central Property Data Board, National Road Administration, Statistics Sweden, Swedish Population and Address Register, National Service Administration, Swedish Immigration Board, the National Maritime Administration, and the Church of Sweden, among others.

Advantages

Obviously, this type of registry has a number of advantages over redundant, decentralized systems of data collection and management.

First, under this system it is easier to keep data up-to-date and make it available to those offices or agencies that need it. Modern telecommunications allow for a nationwide range of data entry and management systems, as well as controls on what information is available to any given office or agency.

Second, costs and processing time are reduced across the entire spectrum of government services relying on population information. According to data released by the Swedish Tax Authority in 1994, costs to produce a single register extract dropped by 75 percent after the implementation of the civil registry, and the time to process this dropped by 30 percent.

Third, production of regular and special information products spanning multiple data sets (census extracts, voter lists, municipal housing records, and so on) are faster and easier to create than merging two different, independent sources of information. This provides more timely information for snap elections, natural disasters, or social research and tracking.

Finally, since the creation of a civil registry is often done from existing sources and systems of data management, the centralization and reorganization requires the standardization, updating, and review, improving each individual subset of information in addition to the whole.

Disadvantages

Still, civil registries are not without disadvantages that must be taken into account as well.

First, it is extremely costly to create a civil registry. Civil registry must be set aside as an administrative and budgetary priority by the highest governmental authority in the country in order to ensure compliance and standardization. Data is often obtained in vastly different formats and media, such as magnetic tape, paper records, and microfiche. This must be brought to a common nomenclature and digital standard.

Second, the country must have the necessary technological infrastructure to support such a system. Data collection and access points are scattered throughout the country following aggregate population levels, and one must have the capacity to update and synchronize records throughout the network instantaneously, with sufficient secondary systems to ensure continuous service.
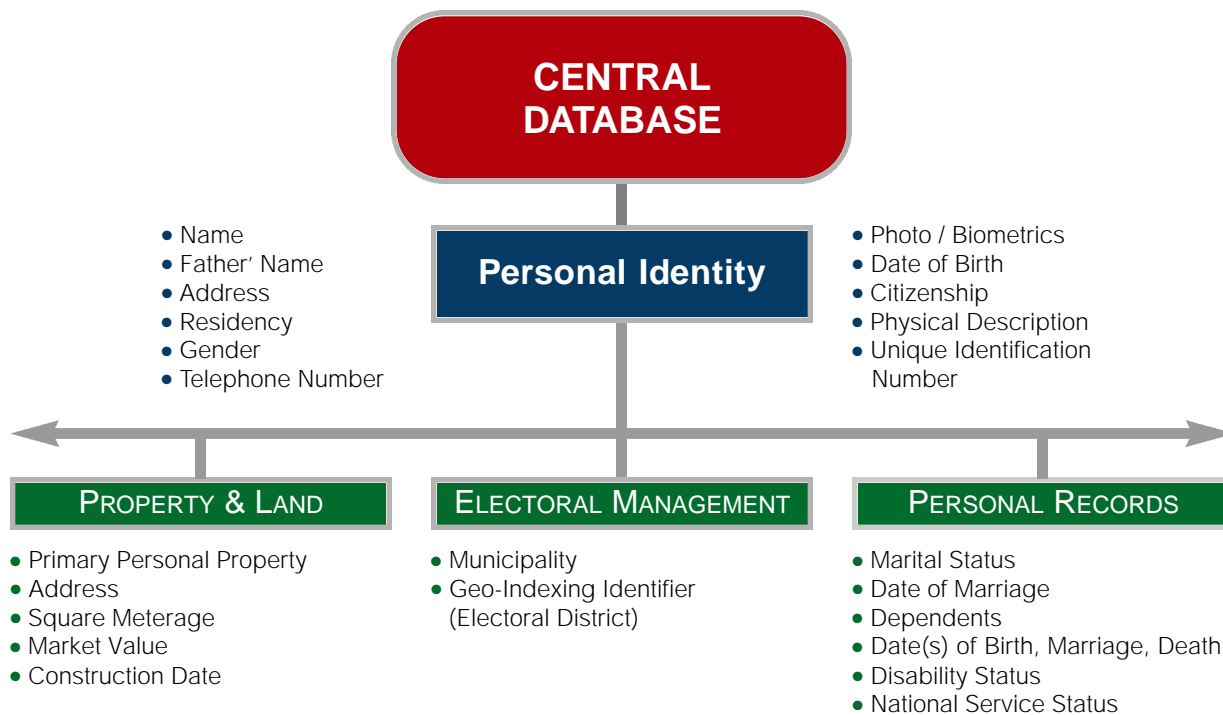
Once the registry is established, with the range of access points to the master data sets, there is a danger that records will not be maintained, accessed, and amended properly. Due to the dependence of numerous secondary agencies and services upon the centralization of an individual's record, one needs to constantly verify its accuracy and integrity. Deletion of an individual's records or erroneous changes in it can have widespread, catastrophic effects, especially on one's life and well-being.

Finally, one cannot compromise public confidence in the registry. As the source of data for electoral rolls, population statistics (the measurement for numerous types of government services), and other benchmarks of social and political stability, skepticism of the integrity of data will necessarily extend to any institution based upon those records.

Planning and Integration

Needless to say, planning and design of a civil registry – both the actual collection of data from individuals and existing public agencies, and the construction of the technological infrastructure and database systems — is a Herculean task.

Planning is paramount. All agencies contributing data must be included in the design and standardization process and all end-users must be represented to ensure that required data fields are included in the final product. Hardware and software must be identified (or more likely, designed) from an outcome-

CENTRAL DATABASE

Personal Identity

- Name
- Father' Name
- Address
- Residency
- Gender
- Telephone Number

- Photo / Biometrics
- Date of Birth
- Citizenship
- Physical Description
- Unique Identification Number

PROPERTY & LAND
- Primary Personal Property
- Address
- Square Meterage
- Market Value
- Construction Date

ELECTORAL MANAGEMENT
- Municipality
- Geo-Indexing Identifier (Electoral District)

PERSONAL RECORDS
- Marital Status
- Date of Marriage
- Dependents
- Date(s) of Birth, Marriage, Death
- Disability Status
- National Service Status

CIVIL REGISTRY MODEL

A civil registry utilizes the same set of core personal data in addition to that needed by each of the secondary agencies or services (only three of which are illustrated here).

Diagram by Alexander T. Knapp

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oriented perspective. Further, sufficient back-up procedures should be built into the system.

Parallely, this also calls for public education campaigns and specialized training. The population of the country must be informed of the registration requirements and the registration process, as well as be assured that the data being collected or consolidated will be held in confidence and managed under strict regulations. Civil servants required to use the new system will need significant levels of training before the actual restructuring is set in motion.

Data Protection

No less important are the legal and administrative checks on access to this information by government agencies, law enforcement, or judicial bodies. Particularly in highly technological and capitalistic cultures, central storage of data on every person makes room for misappropriate handling of information for commercial purposes.

Data protection takes several forms. First, there are restrictions on the types of data that can be collected from individuals, and how that data may be stored or related to other information. For example, some countries have a centralized fingerprint database, but it can only be accessed by order of the court. Or, in the case of magnetic strip technology, to ensure transparency, all digital information contained therein must be replicated in printed form on the front of the card.

Another form of data protection necessary to civil registry systems is access to information. While most government agencies will require use of general information on the identity of cit-

izens or residents, specialized departments or ministries have little need to have access to data specific to the other service providers. For example, while transportation agencies will need to access an individual's name, address and driver's license or automobile information, they have no right to access, see, or change data related to land records, health care eligibility, or social security status, even though that entire range of information is managed in the same database.

God from the Machine

As countries become more dependent on individual data management and the expectations of "citizen-customers" increase in this digital age, more and more governments will consider centralized civil registration as an attractive option to manage growing volumes of information.

However, the civil registry is, like the original handwritten records upon which it is based, a tool that is value-neutral, without inherent miraculous power or nefarious threat. Like any other tool, it can be used or misused, forcing those governments who manage its capabilities and potential to return to the fundamental requirements of their popular mandate – the stewardship and accountability of the authority vested in them by those they serve. ❑

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