The Universal Birth Registration campaign

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Birth registration is a critical first step in ensuring a child's rights throughout life.

Registration means proof of legal identity. It is vital for securing recognition before the law, protecting rights such as inheritance and making children less vulnerable to abuse and exploitation, especially if separated from their parents.

Articles 7 and 8 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) declare that national governments must register children immediately after birth and that children enjoy the right from birth to acquire a nationality.[1] The CRC says that states must grant citizenship to children born in their country if they are not recognised by another country. Under international law then, every child is entitled to registration of their birth, including children born to irregular migrants. In practice, however, there are many problems in the implementation of this rule, leaving many children stateless.

So why are 51 million children a year not registered at birth? The reasons why parents do not register their children include a lack of awareness of the importance of registration; the costs in both time and money of registering a new birth; the distance to a registry office; uncertainty that the child will survive; political turmoil; legal, social or cultural barriers; and the fear of persecution by the authorities.

Research by Plan International[2] in the Dominican Republic concluded that the denial of citizenship to children of Haitian descent through the refusal of birth registration was creating new cases of statelessness.[3] This was confirmed during the Dominican Republic's report to the Committee of the CRC, which elicited a harsh response from the Committee in 2008.[4] In Thailand, migrants from Burma who have their nationality withdrawn by the Burmese authorities once they emigrate are among the stateless members of Thailand's ethnic minorities. These

> "...it's a small paper but it actually establishes who you are and gives access to the rights and the privileges, and the obligations, of citizenship."
>
> Archbishop Desmond Tutu, launching Plan's Universal Birth Registration campaign, February 2005[5]

stateless people are bearing stateless children, perpetuating the problem. Birth registration has become politicised in both Thailand and the Dominican Republic, leading to generations of children being denied their right to a nationality.

Creating incentives for birth registration is one of the big challenges. Birth registration seems to have little importance in countries such as Zambia, beset by poverty, HIV and AIDS, and Nepal, where high child mortality rates give parents little incentive to bear the expense of registering children. Registering the most marginalised children is also a major challenge. This group includes nomadic and indigenous groups, migrant and refugee children, street children, orphans, and abandoned and separated children. This is a problem not only in countries with low registration rates but also in those with higher rates where these groups are likely to be over-represented among the unregistered children.

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14-year-old Doris Korodi was born to parents who fled the Papua Province of Indonesia in 1984. She is showing off her new birth certificate in a refugee settlement in Kiunga.

Lessons and good practice

The global campaign on Universal Birth Registration – which by 2006 had secured over five million registrations – aims to reduce the obstacles to the registration of every child at birth and to build capacity in countries to ensure that children are registered.[6] As part of this, Plan International and its partners have organised regional conferences to bring civil registrars and others together to share experiences, exchange ideas and provide examples for countries to consider when they are developing their national action plans. Among these are the following:

Governments may need to make substantial changes in policy and legislation to make birth registration universal, compulsory and permanent. National governments have to be influenced – and the political will generated – to change current policy and practice, create new legal frameworks for civil registration, review and amend existing legislation, ensure that birth registration is a reporting requirement and adapt the design and operation of birth registration systems.

Partnering at all levels is crucial. At the grassroots level, for example, an Indian NGO network on birth registration working in 15 districts of Orissa since 2002 has collected birth registration information for over 3.2 million children and has secured an overall increase in birth registration levels from 33% to 83%. Partnerships can also bring in beneficial technical support, especially from UN agencies such as UNICEF. In Colombia, UNHCR works closely with the government and Plan International on birth registration, and Xi'an University in China and the Inter-American Children's Institute in Central America have been valuable academic partners.

It is important to involve children and communities in the design and implementation of legislation, policies and programmes. Such involvement ensures these are realistic and helps build trust in the registration systems.

In Cambodia, young volunteers have educated friends and elders by displaying posters highlighting the importance of birth registration and holding children's fairs on the subject. In Egypt, children's committees on birth registration are being established within local community-based organisations, with children themselves spreading the message of why birth registration is important.

Birth registration systems need to be flexible in recognition of the difficulties and differences in people's lives. In remote rural communities, decentralised birth registration systems and mobile registration can help improve accessibility. In remote rural areas with the lowest rates of birth registration in Honduras, the National People's Registry introduced systematic mobile registration. In Thailand, Plan International is working with its partners to coordinate activities specific to hill-tribe ethnic minority populations, refugees and migrant worker families, which has resulted in a network of local authorities, NGOs and community representatives in provinces with large ethnic minority populations.

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Monitoring is essential to ensure birth registration systems continue to be responsive to their environment. This involves making any changes necessary to overcome administrative and bureaucratic obstacles. National governments need information systems for birth registration that will allow better follow-up and monitoring. In Pakistan, an online birth registration information management system allows all levels of government to view and track birth registration data. Another monitoring technique is free telephone helplines – such as in Bolivia and El Salvador – for providing information about birth registration procedures and registering any complaints.

Sustainability is best ensured by government ownership of birth registration. However, community involvement is equally important to ensure the continuity of birth registration systems in times of disaster or conflict, when formal methods may become inaccessible or may be hampered by political instability.

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1. Plan (2006) *Count me in! The Global Campaign for Universal Birth Registration*. Woking: Plan International.

2. http://untreaty.un.org/English/TreatyEvent2001/pdf/03e.pdf.

3. http://www.plan-international.org

4. See article p23.

5. UN Committee of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (2008) Concluding Observations of the Committee on the Rights of the Child on the Dominican Republic; www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/crc/docs/co/CRC-C-DOM-CO-2.pdf

6. Plan (2005) Universal Birth Registration – A Universal Responsibility; Plan (2005) Universal Birth Registration: Permanent Proof of Identity.

In some countries, in the absence of legal safeguards, the plight of statelessness is passed down through generations - as had been the case with this Bihari baby.

Free registration and birth certification make birth registration possible for poorer people. The cost of registration is mentioned time and time again as a barrier to registering children. Removing the cost also demonstrates a state's commitment to ensuring the rights of every child. In Africa, campaign successes include free registration for all children up to 12 months in Ghana; free birth registration for six months in Guinea; reduction of birth registration fees in Burkina Faso and in the cost of late registration in Togo; and a government commitment to free registration in Guinea Bissau.

Retrospective registration may be necessary where there is a backlog of children whose births have gone unregistered. In Senegal, the government is facilitating retrospective registration through free local court hearings and the number of unregistered children has fallen considerably as a result. In Sierra Leone, the government gave the National Office of Births and Deaths special permission to issue birth certificates to children over seven. In Bolivia, there was a successful three-year amnesty for the free registration of young people aged between 12 and 18.

Integration of birth registration into the broader child rights agenda is of fundamental importance to the realisation of the CRC. This offers a variety of advocacy opportunities. A good example is Belgium, where birth registration has been successfully linked to the issues of child soldiers and child trafficking.

Integration of birth registration into existing public services such as primary health care, immunisation and school enrolment is a cost-effective, efficient and sustainable way of ensuring birth registration. Birth registration rates rise where the process is integrated with vaccination and medical assistance at birth. In Ghana and Benin, for example, community health volunteers have been trained to record the information required for birth registration.

Training and capacity building of birth registration officials helps improve their motivation and competence, and reduces the possibility of mistakes, fraud and corruption in the registration system. In Cameroon, civil registrars have received training and been supplied with the basic office materials they need to carry out their role effectively. In Sri Lanka, a toolkit has been developed to help officials carry out mobile registration.