

KEY POINTS

Launch of Innocenti Digest 9
"Birth Registration: Right from the Start"
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What is the problem?

The births of more than 50 million children go unregistered each year – more than 40 per cent of total births worldwide. They have no birth certificate and, in legal terms, they do not exist. Their right to an identity, name and nationality is denied and their access to basic services is threatened. They are vulnerable to abuse and exploitation. They are, almost inevitably, the children of the poor and excluded.

What are we calling for?

This Innocenti Digest calls for free birth registration – and a free birth certificate – for every child in every country. It calls for effective registration systems that are compulsory, universal, permanent and continuous, and that guarantee the confidentiality of personal data.

Why does it matter?

Birth registration is a fundamental human right, opening the door to other rights such as education, health care, participation and protection from discrimination, abuse and exploitation. Effective birth registration ensures a child's name and nationality. It can protect children against rights violations – such as early marriage, child labour and recruitment into armed forces – that thrive on doubts about their age or identity. It is essential to juvenile justice, protecting children against prosecution as adults. A birth certificate – or lack of it – may determine whether a child can enrol in school. In later life, the unregistered adult may be unable to vote or obtain a marriage licence. And there are implications for the State. Countries must know how many people there are – and how many there will be in the future – if they are to plan their services effectively. Birth registration is integral

to good governance. It is the official recognition of a new member of society, who is entitled to all the rights and responsibilities of a valued citizen. Today, with mass population movements and organized child trafficking, it is more essential than ever.

What is the scale of non-registration?

- An estimated 41 per cent of births worldwide went unregistered in 2000 – 50 million children in all;
- In 39 countries, at least 30 per cent of all children were not registered at birth and in 19 countries the proportion was at least 60 per cent;
- In sub-Saharan Africa, over 70 per cent of births were unregistered – around 17 million children;
- South Asia tops the league in sheer numbers, with around 22.3 million unregistered births – over 40 per cent of the world's total unregistered births;
- In the Middle East and North Africa, nearly one third of the children born in 2000 (around three million) were unregistered;
- In East Asia and the Pacific: 22 per cent of births (around seven million);
- Countries for which there is no published information include Afghanistan, Democratic Republic of Congo and Eritrea;
- Falling registration recorded in Tajikistan, Dominican Republic, Honduras;
- Disparities: urban vs. rural. Niger: proportion of children registered in urban areas is more than twice that of rural areas. In Chad, Myanmar and Senegal, registration rates in urban areas are more than 30 percentage points higher than in rural areas.

What are the barriers to birth registration?

- Lack of awareness of the importance of birth registration as a human right;
- Lack of political will (passive or deliberate);
- Lack of effective legislation;
- Economic constraints at national level;
- The costs to the individual, in terms of money or time;
- Failure to adapt to local realities that may not be compatible with official registration system;
- Gender discrimination that excludes mothers from the registration process;
- Lack of effective registration infrastructures;

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- Lack of access to registration facilities;
- War and conflict.

What are the solutions?

A long-term approach is needed to create birth registration systems that are permanent and sustained to generate consistent supply and demand. This would:

- include every part of society, including local communities;
- involve every stakeholder by raising awareness of the importance of birth registration as a child right;
- introduce relevant legislation; ensure law reform to harmonize and enforce existing legislation;
- ensure coordination between relevant government ministries and institutions;
- build the infrastructure needed to reach every child;
- integrate birth registration in other governmental activities and 'piggy-back' on other programmes and service delivery;
- improve the capacity of the relevant government officials to do the job;
- provide the resources required to ensure a universal and effective system of birth registration.

Examples of UNICEF support to Birth Registration:

- **Angola: National Children's Registration Campaign** launched in August 2001 to register three million children in Angola by the end of 2002. The Angolan Ministry of Justice believes registration levels may be as low as 5 per cent. The Campaign brings together government ministries, churches, NGOs, the private sector and UNICEF. Registration is free and backed by a new law to simplify registration. Around 230,000 children were registered in the first four months of the campaign.

- **Uganda: Community-level initiatives.** The 2001-2005 Government of Uganda/UNICEF country programme includes a community-based household census as the first step towards a grassroots structure for registration. Members of the local Parish Development Committee will visit every household and the data collected will be entered in a household register. Every child between 0 and 8 years of age will be recorded – the beginning of a system that will lead to the issuing of birth certificates.

- ECUADOR: LONG-TERM PARTNERSHIP. **IN THE EARLY 1990s, IT WAS ESTIMATED THAT**

ONLY 50 PER CENT OF CHILDREN IN ECUADOR WERE REGISTERED IN THEIR YEAR OF BIRTH. THE GOVERNMENT, IN PARTNERSHIP WITH UNICEF, SUPPORTED MASS REGISTRATION CAMPAIGNS IN 1995, 1997 AND 1999, CONCENTRATING ON THE BORDER AREA. THE FOCUS IS NOW ON REACHING THE COUNTRY'S INDIGENOUS CHILDREN. BIRTH REGISTRATION IN 2000 WAS ESTIMATED TO BE BETWEEN 70 AND 89 PER CENT.

- **Getting the data.** Many of the figures in the Innocenti Digest come from the findings of the most recent set of Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS2), developed by UNICEF in consultation with a wide range of organizations. This was part of the preparatory process for the UN General Assembly Special Session on Children in May of this year.

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