

P R E S S R E L E A S E

Launch of Innocenti Digest 9
"Birth Registration: Right from the Start"
Embargo until 04 June 2002, at 00.01GMT

**MILLIONS OF BABIES GO UNREGISTERED AT BIRTH,
DENIED THEIR RIGHT TO AN OFFICIAL IDENTITY, A
RECOGNIZED NAME AND A NATIONALITY, SAYS UNICEF
REPORT.**

*"Lack of birth registration is a violation of the child's inalienable human right to be given an identity at birth and to be regarded as part of society." **Birth Registration – Right from the Start.***

GENEVA/NEW YORK, 4 June 2002 – A United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) study has revealed that millions of babies go unregistered at birth, denying them an official identity, a recognized name and a nationality.

Using the most recent data available, the UNICEF report, entitled ***Birth Registration – Right from the Start***, estimates that 50 million babies were not registered in the year 2000 - 41 per cent of births world-wide. In 19 countries, at least 60 per cent of all children under the age of five were not registered at birth. The report calls for free birth registration for all children.

"These children have no birth certificate, the 'membership card' for society that should open the door to a whole range of other rights including education and health care, participation and protection", says the report.

In later life, the unregistered child may be unable to apply for a passport or formal job, open a bank account, get a marriage licence, stand for elective office or vote.

"A birth certificate is one of the most important pieces of paper a person will ever own," said Carol Bellamy, UNICEF Executive Director. "If we do not get it right from the start and register babies, it is an uphill battle from there on. Unregistered children lack the most basic protection against abuse and exploitation and become a more attractive commodity to a child trafficker, illegal adoption rings, and others who seek to take advantage of their non-status," she said.

The right to be registered immediately after birth and to acquire a name and a nationality is recognized under article 7 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. This was reinforced by the recent UN General Assembly Special Session on Children which called on all Member States to develop systems to ensure that all children in the world enjoy such rights.

The UNICEF report notes that unregistered children are, almost inevitably, the children of the poor and excluded and that, in today's world, with massive population movements, organised child trafficking and the growing impact of armed conflicts upon children, birth registration is more essential than ever.

The value of birth registration continues to be overlooked, according to the report. It says that registration is a critical measure to secure the recognition of every person before the law, to safeguard the protection of his or her individual rights, and to ensure that any violation of these rights does not go unnoticed. Proof of age is an important first step in protecting children from age-related abuse and exploitation, including military recruitment and involvement in armed conflict, child labour and early marriage, says the report.

"Birth registration is a fundamental step towards good governance and a vital element in securing democratic systems," said Bellamy. "The root causes of non-registration are often economic and political, and as such it is a core development issue that must be addressed alongside poverty reduction and universal access to basic services."

The UNICEF report shows the percentage of annual births not

registered by region in 2000. In sub-Saharan Africa, over 70 per cent of births went unregistered, as were 63 per cent in South Asia. South Asia tops the league in terms of sheer numbers of unregistered children, with approximately 22.5million, or over 40 per cent of the world's unregistered births in 2000, compared to a total of around 17 million in sub-Saharan Africa. In the Middle East and North Africa, nearly one-third of the children born in 2000 (or some 3 million) lacked legal recognition of their identity, while in the East Asia and Pacific region 22 per cent of births in 2000 – some seven million children – were unregistered.

The UNICEF report says universal registration is a goal within the reach of all states. It calls for measures to reach that goal, in particular:

- providing sufficient resources so that birth registration is free of charge in every country.
- passing new legislation or updating and harmonizing old laws to facilitate registration rather than penalize non-registration.
- ensuring adequate registration offices and trained personnel to guarantee that no child is left behind.
- mainstreaming birth registration with other governmental activities and 'piggy - backing' on other service delivery programmes, including immunization and school enrolment.
- encouraging demand by raising awareness of the importance of birth registration and involving all levels of society, including local communities.

Countries waging successful campaigns to raise their birth registration levels:

Uganda once had a thriving registration system. Created in 1904, the system covered the entire country by 1930 but was completely unravelled as a result of bloodshed under General Idi Amin and the years of turmoil that followed. Uganda is now making great efforts to revitalise its registration system, with encouraging results. In its first year of implementation, one million children were registered.

The Philippines conducts a mass campaign every February – designated ‘civil registration month’. Awards for the best performing registrars complement nation-wide publicity about the importance of registration.

In **Bangladesh**, while overall levels of birth registration are still low, recent campaigns have resulted in the registration of over four million children.

India has established national registration campaigns operating in 15 different languages. It includes television and radio spots, posters, stickers, billboards, and publicity and documentary films shown in cinemas.

In **Thailand**, the Child Friendly Schools Programme is helping children to learn about their rights, including birth registration.

The birth registration campaigns in recent years in **Angola** have demonstrated that, despite the devastation of war, popular demand for birth registration can be extremely high. The first four months of a campaign begun last year saw the registration of more than 230,000 children.

Countries where significant numbers of children are unregistered:

In **Rwanda**, birth registration stood at over 80 per cent in 1973, but birth certificates with information on the holder’s ethnic origins were used to deadly effect by genocide killers in 1994. By 1998 Rwanda was among the countries with the lowest levels of birth registration, although the most recent figures give some grounds for optimism.

Cambodia's registration records were destroyed under the Pol Pot regime and the Government is still rebuilding its civil registry.

In **Niger**, only an estimated 45 per cent of births are registered (fewer among the nomadic population).

In **China**, it is estimated that the number of unregistered children may be as high as six million.

In **Indonesia**, the fourth most populous nation in the world, 37 per cent of children under five had not been registered in 2000.

In **Turkey**, some 26 per cent of children under five years of age go unregistered.

In **Nicaragua**, a combination of fragmented, outdated legislation and budgetary restraints has contributed to a registration rate of less than 40 per cent. A new comprehensive law for civil registration has now been drafted.

*"BIRTH REGISTRATION – RIGHT FROM THE START" IS PRODUCED BY THE
UNICEF INNOCENTI RESEARCH CENTRE (IRC) AS PART OF ITS
INNOCENTI DIGEST SERIES.*

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