Adam Hinton

Universal Birth Registration – a Universal Responsibility

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Universal Birth Registration – a Universal Responsibility

February 2005

Jenny Matthews

"With my birth certificate I will now be able to pass my school exam and take the first step in reaching my dream. I want to be the Prime Minister of Togo and help all the children in my country."

Eyram, aged 12, Togo

About Plan

Plan's vision is of a world in which all children realise their full potential in societies which respect people's rights and dignity.

Plan is one of the world's largest child centred community development organisations. Plan staff and volunteers work with children, their families and communities in 45 countries, building the skills, the structures and the resources to give all children an equal voice and an equal chance to develop into healthy, educated and responsible adults.

Plan also works through 15 national organisations. Staff in these offices work to develop an understanding of Plan's approach among current and potential supporters, and campaign on behalf of children worldwide. By doing so, they build committed partnerships with individuals, organisations, companies and governments, all of which means that Plan has reliable funds available.

Plan believes that children should be encouraged to express their own priorities alongside those of the adults. No project is undertaken unless it will have a positive impact for the children and there is a deep commitment to its success. Once the priorities have been identified, Plan works with a community to build its collective skills and resources to enable it to take a leading role in designing, executing and managing the projects.

Plan supports this work by developing partnerships at all levels to increase the impact of programs, influence policy, improve resource and service provision, and ensure that children's voices are heard.

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Foreword by Archbishop Desmond Tutu

You may be wondering why achieving universal birth registration should be made a priority. After all, no child is born without an identity. Babies are named, welcoming rituals are performed and relatives and the wider community acknowledge the presence of an additional member to their group.

Yet, as this report explains, birth registration is much more than an administrative procedure. It is a key event in a child's life. This is because birth registration acts as the starting point for engagement between the state and the individual. Registering a child at birth signifies the state's recognition of the child's existence and acceptance of its responsibility to ensure that the child enjoys the rights and privileges that he or she is entitled to throughout their lifetime.

With a birth certificate as legal proof of this acknowledgement, the child is better able to access these rights and privileges. Without a birth certificate the unregistered child may be denied things that you and I take for granted, such as access to education and health care. Furthermore, due to the state of powerlessness that the lack of a legal status can impose on an individual, the unregistered child may lack even the most basic protection against abuse and exploitation as well as entitlement to assistance in times of personal and national crisis.

UNICEF estimates that around 48 million children are not annually registered at birth. How does a child with no proof of age avoid detention and prosecution as an adult? How does an unregistered child orphaned by AIDS prove their identity and parental links in order to inherit family property? How does a child live up to the responsibilities that accompany citizenship if they are not acknowledged by decision-makers and may be unable to stand for elective office or vote when an adult?

This report encourages us to consider these questions and more. It encourages us to think beyond the individual and to consider how the statistics generated through birth registration can provide an effective tool for developing and monitoring effective social and economic development policies including, at the international level, the fourth Millennium Development Goal which aims to reduce child mortality by two-thirds by 2015.

Plan has vast experience of working on the issue of birth registration from the grassroots right up to the national, regional and global levels. This report provides a number of case studies which demonstrate the very real difference that having a birth certificate can make to the lives of children, helping to ensure that they are given every opportunity to realise their full potential.

It is for these reasons that I am delighted to support Plan's global advocacy campaign and I urge the international community, including UN agencies, multilaterals, bilaterals, donor governments and non-governmental organisations, to join Plan in its goal to achieve universal birth registration – a universal responsibility.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu

Executive Summary

Imagine you are an unregistered child. If you are lucky, you have been immunised, receive health care and go to school. However, as you grow older, you will find the lack of a birth certificate increasingly burdensome. You will be unable to sit for national examinations or go on to university. You will be unable to get a social security number to confirm your eligibility to work. You will be unable to get a passport so that you can travel. Eventually you will work your way through all the bureaucracy, but the process will be very costly and complex, and you will wish your parents had registered you at birth. You will wish you had a birth certificate.

Now imagine you are a child fleeing across national borders from persecution or worse. The welcome you receive on the other side will depend on your family's ability to prove who you all are, to the satisfaction of harassed and often unsympathetic officials. Luckily, your parents registered you at birth. You have a birth certificate.

Every child should be registered at birth. Article 7 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) states that, "The child shall be registered immediately after birth and shall have the right from birth to a name [and] the right to acquire a nationality". Yet the most recent statistics estimate that 36 per cent or over 48 million children are not annually registered at birth.[1]

A birth certificate provides a child with permanent proof of identity in a turbulent world. Without a birth certificate, children may have difficulty proving to officials they are eligible for assistance at times of personal and national crisis. They may have problems accessing human rights such as health care and education. They can be at risk of exclusion and not fulfilling their potential by operating at a disadvantage within social, cultural, economic and political spheres.

Of course, there are many other reasons why a child may be denied their human rights and Plan works with children and their communities to address human rights abuses in a multifaceted and holistic way. However, Plan's experience demonstrates that lacking official proof of identity is an immediate and very real barrier which must be addressed.

While other mechanisms for providing proof of identity do exist and a number of legal systems allow identity and age to be proved in a number of different ways[2], birth registration, when approached properly, is better than these other methods. It provides proof of identity right from the start.

A birth certificate, when used responsibly, provides the child with some protection against rights abuses such as exploitation. For example, proof of age can be used to stop under-age recruitment into the military in accordance with the Optional Protocol to the United Nations' Convention on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict or into child labour in accordance with the International Labour Organization's (ILO) Minimum Age Convention.

Furthermore, birth registration as part of an effective civil registration system, can play an important role in data collection, improving a state's ability to plan, monitor and report on economic and social policies including child mortality. This is particularly important since reducing child mortality by two-thirds is the fourth Millennium Development Goal.

Stephen Makau

Despite the fact that the vast majority of unregistered children are found in developing countries, figures show that fully functioning registration systems with virtually universal coverage can be found in even the poorest countries if registration is made a priority.[3] Positive progress has been made since 2002 when UNICEF estimated that 40 per cent of births every year went unregistered.[4] Yet the most recent statistics also demonstrate that there is still a long way to go. Current efforts need to be increased. Achieving universal birth registration is possible but it is a universal responsibility.

Plan commits to continuing work with children and communities, non-governmental organisations, local and national governments, UN agencies and other international organisations to ensure that every child is registered at birth. This will involve expanding our program and advocacy activities in Asia, Africa and the Americas and ensuring that we regularly bring stakeholders together at the national, regional and international levels in order to share best practices and lessons learned.

Plan urges the international community including United Nations (UN) agencies, multilaterals, bilaterals, donor governments and non-governmental organisations to increase their efforts to achieve universal birth registration:

1. Prioritising universal birth registration as a child rights issue and recognising its importance in monitoring the fourth Millennium Development Goal of reducing under-five mortality by two-thirds;
2. Incorporating birth registration into appropriate policy where it is not already reflected;
3. Making birth registration a reporting requirement for international partnerships; and
4. Establishing an international day for the 'Unregistered Child' on which to advocate for free or affordable, compulsory, non-discriminatory, safe, permanent and continuous birth registration worldwide.

At the same time, Plan urges the ratifying states of the Convention on the Rights of the Child to renew their commitment to register the child immediately after birth:

5. Increasing political will for birth registration;
6. Matching legislation on birth registration with local realities;
7. Building trust for birth registration; and
8. Engaging in advocacy on birth registration.

Finally, Plan recommends that grassroots organisations working directly with children and their communities at the local level should be:

9. Raising awareness of birth registration and the long-term impact of not registering children;
10. Demanding action from government on birth registration;
11. Building the capacity of local systems for birth registration; and
12. Ensuring the participation of all members in the birth registration system, including children themselves.

Adam Hinton

Introduction

"Why do they have to have a piece of paper to prove their existence?"

Eddy, father of three, Indonesia

What is Birth Registration?

Birth registration is the process by which a child's birth is recorded in the civil register by the applicable government authority. It provides the first legal recognition of the child and is generally required for the child to obtain a birth certificate.[5] Whilst, in some cases, this is issued to the child at the same time as registration, in others, a separate application must be made. It is important that the registered child receives a birth certificate, since it is this that provides permanent, official and visible evidence of a state's legal recognition of his or her existence as a member of society.[6]

Why is Universal Birth Registration Important?

A Rights Issue

Every child should be registered at birth. Article 7 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) states that, "The child shall be registered immediately after birth and shall have the right from birth to a name [and] the right to acquire a nationality".[7]

Not only is the state's obligation to register the child incorporated in the CRC but it is also contained in other human rights conventions and texts. These include the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (article 15) and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (article 24). The International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of all Migrant Workers and Members of their Families (article 29) goes one step further by providing for a specific right to registration itself.[8]

Birth registration is a key event in a child's life. This is because of its importance in providing legal proof of the identity of the child. Unregistered children find it difficult to access their human rights. These include the right to a name and nationality, the right to be free from all forms of exploitation, the right to protection in the juvenile justice system, the right to education and the right to health care.

When unregistered children grow up they may also be denied the enjoyment of collective privileges that are open to them as equal members of society. These consist of economic privileges, like the opportunity to work, to open a bank account, to obtain credit and to inherit; social privileges including marriage, welfare benefits, social security and a pension; and political privileges such as the right to vote and otherwise participate in civil and political affairs.

Of course, there are many other reasons why a child may be denied their human rights and Plan works with children and their communities to address human rights abuses in a multifaceted and holistic way. However, Plan's experience demonstrates that lacking official proof of identity is an immediate and very real barrier which must be addressed.

While other mechanisms for providing proof of identity do exist and a number of legal systems allow identity and age to be proved in a number of different ways,[9] birth registration, when approached properly, is better than these other methods. It provides a high standard of legal proof of identity[10] right from the start.

A resident of Hacienda San Diego tells Plan in El Salvador about the difficulties he had proving land ownership in order to qualify for a government housing project following the 2001 earthquakes:

"For almost two years we have been going around and around like a carrousel. It is crazy how difficult it is to get a piece of paper. I had the problem that my mother told me the land was given to her by her father but I didn't know the name of my grandfather. I had to look for the eldest in the community in search of my origin."

Making access to human rights such as education or health care conditional on possession of a birth certificate when the birth registration process itself is incomplete or inaccessible can be considered as a violation of the Convention of the Rights of the Child.[11] This means that birth registration and birth certificates must be free or affordable for the poorest members of society, non-discriminatory and, as far as possible, forgery-proof.

In addition, information asked for and obtained through the registration process must be used in a responsible way. The historical origins of civil registration lie in the need for state control over its subjects[12] and some states have, in the past, used civil registration data to systematically persecute and discriminate against particular groups by recording details such as their ethnicity, religion, social class or caste on the birth certificate.

Data Collection for Planning and Policy

The importance of birth registration also goes beyond the individual child. It is a critical element of civil registration systems which provide information on vital events including live birth, death and foetal death.[13]

Without the information that can be provided through civil registration and other tools such as Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS) and Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS), census data only provides a ten-yearly statistical snapshot of a country and will prevent authorities from spotting trends at much shorter intervals, such as yearly, quarterly or even monthly.[14]

Birth registration data, when correctly collected, can therefore play an important role in the planning of a country's economic and social development. This is because disaggregated population data can help identify geographic, social, economic and gender disparities within national boundaries.[15] This, in turn, will improve a state's ability to plan, implement, monitor, evaluate and report on the impact of its social and economic policies. It will also ensure that resources are allocated to where they are really needed within different geographical areas or different groups in society.

If local and national child welfare organisations have the capacity to react to trends that emerge from civil registration statistics, then accurate social and economic indicators can also be of great help to these groups when they come to decide how best to allocate their resources and projects on the ground.

A registrar in the rural city of Chinandega, Nicaragua tells Plan about difficulties in providing welfare organisations with accurate population data:

"Many organisations visit to help us, but they ask for assessments about how big our population is and its different age groups, and we can't answer because the Supreme Electoral Council's census is insufficient. We know that we have a high number of unregistered people."

Monitoring the Fourth Millennium Development Goal

As part of effective civil registration systems, improved rates of birth registration in all countries would assist the international community in monitoring progress towards the Millennium Development Goal of reducing under-five mortality by two-thirds between 1990 and 2015.

A Global Problem

The issue of unregistered children is a global problem. According to the most recent figures from UNICEF, 36 per cent or over 48 million children are not annually registered at birth. The region with the most unregistered children is south Asia where 63 per cent of births every year are not recorded. Next is Sub-Saharan Africa where 55 per cent of births go unregistered followed by central and eastern Europe, the Commonwealth of Independent States and Baltic States where 23 per cent of children are not legally recognised. This figure stands at 19 per cent in the east Asia/Pacific region, 16 per cent in the Middle East and north Africa, 15 per cent in Latin America and Caribbean and 2 per cent in industrialised countries.

Despite the fact that the vast majority of unregistered children are found in developing countries, figures show that registration rates vary widely between countries and confirm that fully functioning registration systems with virtually universal coverage can be found even in very poor countries if registration is made a priority.[16] Albania, for example, has near universal birth registration (99 per cent) because of high level political will for the civil registration process.

Birth registration rates also vary within countries. Urban areas tend to have higher birth registration rates than rural and geographically inaccessible areas because civil registries are often centralised. Similarly, because the registration process is often initiated in hospital, babies born at home are less likely to be registered.[17]

Disparities in registration rates can also be linked to uneven overall development with unregistered children more likely to be among the poor and the excluded. In India, for example, the birth registration coverage is over 90 per cent in the more developed states of Goa and Himachal Pradesh but under 30 per cent in the less developed states of Assam, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh.[18]

James Sparshatt

Indeed, statistical analysis demonstrates that the children who are not registered are the same children that are disadvantaged in terms of their socio-economic status, education, health care and protection.[19] They live on the edge of society in geographically inaccessible areas or are marginalised because of religion, race or ethnicity. They have weak links to the mainstream mechanisms of society such as health services and their parents are less likely to be literate.[20] As such, certain populations such as indigenous groups, refugees, asylum seekers, migrants and internally displaced groups are at particular risk of not being registered.[21]

This is especially relevant to developed countries where it has been suggested that unregistered children are likely to be those who are in the greatest need of all and may be subject to the same human rights violations typically thought to occur only in the developing world.[22]

The Audience for this Report

The aim of this report is to increase the recognition, prioritisation and support for universal birth registration (UBR) among the international community, national governments and key stakeholder groups including civil registrars, communities, parents and children themselves. Since it considers the issue of birth registration at the international, national and local levels, the report is relevant and useful to all these different audiences.

The report begins by making the case for birth registration. It explains why, without proof of identity, many children find it difficult to access their rights. At the same time it explains how a birth certificate can also be used as a protective tool if it is used responsibly.

An analysis of why birth registration is not being achieved follows, after which a series of case studies demonstrate how Plan is tackling some of the challenges raised. Finally, recommendations for achieving UBR are made. These are organised according to the actions that need to be taken at international, national and local levels. This final section emphasises the interdependency of stakeholders and stresses that UBR is a universal responsibility.

The Case for Birth Registration

"I want to protect my children's inheritance and property. I want them to have what I never got: access to education. I want them to know and have proof of who their parents are. Above all, I want them to realise that they are citizens of Uganda"

A mother from Tororo, Uganda

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) has been ratified by every country in the world except for the United States of America and Somalia. Article 7 of the Convention imposes an obligation on states parties to register the birth of every child: "The child shall be registered immediately after birth and shall have the right from birth to a name [and] the right to acquire a nationality."

Birth registration provides formal recognition of the child's identity and acts as the starting point of engagement between the state and the individual. With a birth certificate as proof of this legal acknowledgement, the individual is better able to claim and receive the rights and privileges to which they are entitled. Without immediate registration at birth, this relationship will be delayed and the individual is at risk of exclusion and operating at a disadvantage within social, cultural, economic and political spheres.

The Right to a Name and Nationality

The question of nationality is one of the most sensitive and complex aspects associated with birth registration, particularly for children of asylum seekers, refugees and minority groups who may experience discrimination within civil registration systems.[23]

Most states confer nationality according to the principle of jus soli (law of the soil)[24] or jus sanguinis (law of blood)[25] and some use a combination of both.[26] Jus soli means that the child acquires the nationality of the country in which he or she was born, even if one or both parents are from another country. Jus sanguinis, on the other hand, means that the child's nationality is determined according to the nationality of at least one of his or her parents.

Birth registration is an effective legal mechanism that can be used to prove a child's nationality. This is because the birth record or certificate typically includes details such as the child's place of birth as well as the child's parents. However, if a child is not registered and neither his or her place of birth nor the nationality of his or her parents can be proved, the child is vulnerable to being left stateless.[27]

The Right to Health Care

States Parties shall strive to ensure that no child is deprived of his or her right of access to... health care services.

United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 24

Every year, millions of children die of preventable diseases before reaching the age of five. Ineffective systems of birth registration play a role in this crisis since unregistered children may be unable to gain access to health care services or may have to pay more than the registered child.[28]

In some countries,[29] a child without proof of citizenship will also be denied access to free or subsidised vaccination programs.[30] The information provided in birth statistics can be effectively used to assist the government's ability to estimate how many doses of vaccine should be prepared and how many medical personnel should be allocated to carry out the vaccinations. But, where the child survival rate is low, parents may be reluctant to register their child and provide these vital statistics, because they do not want to incur the cost of doing so.

In Nicaragua, Plan works with a local organisation which brings local government authorities and communities together in order to increase the number of children registered at birth. During vaccination campaigns the municipality now accompanies health unit teams on their visits to communities where they set up a mobile registration desk. Mothers bringing their children for vaccination are therefore also able to register the birth of their children.

In Nepal, Plan has helped mobilise health volunteers and health workers to disseminate information on birth registration which has resulted in an increase in levels of birth registration.

Jenny Matthews

The Right to Education

States Parties recognise the right of the child to education, and with a view to achieving this right progressively and on the basis of equal opportunity.

United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 28

For many children, the impact of not having their birth registered is the long-term loss of potential caused by lack of access to education. Although the legal requirement to produce a birth certificate for enrolment in publicly-funded schools is not enforced or has been abolished in many countries, it remains a necessity in others.[31] The requirement to produce a birth certificate in order to enrol in school has a negative effect if birth registration is not universally accessible.

Cidade Olimpica in Brazil is a community of 64,000 people where 30 per cent of children do not go to school. In 2004, Plan staff facilitated a one-day workshop inviting children to participate in an education advocacy campaign by mapping the children and adolescents who were not in school and why. One of the reasons highlighted during this exercise was the lack of birth registration. The children wrote a report on their findings which was delivered to top government officials accompanied by letters demanding concrete actions to improve education and the protection of children's rights.

Whilst some countries do not require a birth certificate for school enrolment purposes, one will be required for those students applying for educational scholarships in other countries like Malaysia. In Sri Lanka, the lack of a birth certificate may also be a barrier to taking national examinations and, in Tanzania, advancing to secondary school or enrolling in university.

Liba Taylor

In 2002, Plan Togo conducted a survey showing that 70 per cent of children attend primary school without a birth certificate. Without valid proof of age, these children are unable to register for exams that allow them to continue with secondary education. Using a participatory approach to birth registration, Plan Togo facilitated the provision of formal training for a number of stakeholders including headmasters.

In Nepal, birth registration coverage is just 34 per cent. However, the Ministry of Education instructs District Education Offices that a birth certificate is mandatory for admitting a child to school. According to research undertaken for Plan Nepal, this action has become a barrier to school attendance. Although there are cases where school principals do not follow the Government's instructions and allow children without a birth certificate to attend school, they are not officially registered as a student. As such, they are unable to access the free course books provided to registered children. Nor do they receive a registration number which means they are unable to sit for examinations or enter into higher education.

Birth registration can be integrated into the educational system so that children who do not have a birth certificate are registered when they enter primary school. However, in countries where attending school is a mechanism for receiving a birth certificate, gender discrimination that prevents girls from attending school has a negative impact on levels of birth registration. This is of particular concern, since research shows that girls who have missed out on education are less likely to register their own children when they are mothers.[32]

Plan Senegal works with teachers to assist them in registering the birth of both boy and girl students. Simple forms are filled in and taken to the local council to be officially recorded.

Without access to education, children are more susceptible to other rights abuses such as exploitative forms of work and trafficking. A study by the ILO into child domestic service, for example, found that children regularly cited lack of access to education as a 'push' factor.[33] On the other hand, the 'pull' of learning has been found to be a factor that traffickers capitalise on by falsely promising parents that they will send their children to school.[34]

The absence of a birth certificate can also impact negatively on the quality of education that children receive. For instance, although many countries specify an age for compulsory education in their national legislation, this cannot be effectively implemented and monitored if parents and the state do not know how old a child is. In addition, such uncertainty means that children of extremely varied ages and levels of ability may be put in the same class – a situation that exacerbates other problems caused by poverty (such as large class sizes) and makes the learning environment deeply ineffective.

A survey of children in rural schools undertaken for Plan Ghana found that many children – even literate ones – freely admitted that they did not know their own age. Eighty per cent of those who did give their age were found to be incorrect when their answer was compared to the date of birth given in the school register (which also tended to be hugely incomplete). In the case of one boy who gave his age as 10 years old it emerged, after lengthy investigation, that he was actually 17 years old.[35]

Furthermore, birth registration data generates information about the size, gender and age of the child population which helps governments to plan effectively for education – recruiting and training the required number of teachers and estimating the funds to ensure that there are enough primary and secondary schools.[36] Such data helps assist the international community in meeting the Millennium Development Goal of ensuring universal primary education.

Property Rights for HIV/AIDS Orphans

Almost 38 million people are living with HIV/AIDS, with young people (15-24 year olds) accounting for nearly half of all HIV infections worldwide. HIV/AIDS thrives in the poorest communities where children are least likely to be registered at birth.[37]

Unknown numbers of children orphaned by AIDS are being denied their right to inherit parental property because they do not have a birth certificate providing legal proof of their identity and family ties. This makes enforcing their right to parental property in a court of law very difficult. In addition, many children die without ever being legally recognised or supported by their own government.[38]

In Uganda, where women and young children have traditionally not owned property, and where property is distributed posthumously by clan leaders or is 'grabbed' by other family members, Plan is working in partnership with the Federation of Women Lawyers (FIDA) to provide legal aid and assistance to widows and children orphaned by AIDS. This is part of Plan's Support to AIDS Orphans program which also offers training for will writing and succession planning at legal aid offices in Katikamu and at HIV/AIDS clinics within health centres. Plan and FIDA work to reduce incidences of property grabbing and increase levels of birth registration by conducting legal awareness seminars and improving understanding of laws related to inheritance, marriage and property among men, women and children. Community volunteers support these efforts by attending training sessions and conducting further awareness-raising activities in the community.

Plan Uganda is also working in partnership with the authorities in the district of Tororo to implement an integrated birth registration project. The objective is to increase the proportion of children with birth certificates, with particular focus on orphans and vulnerable children.

Liba Taylor

Protection against Child Trafficking

States Parties shall take all appropriate national, bilateral and multilateral measures to prevent the abduction of, the sale of or traffic in children for any purpose or in any form.

United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 35

Child trafficking is defined by the United Nations as the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of any person under the age of 18 for the purposes of sexual or labour exploitation, forced labour or slavery.[39] Its practice threatens the lives and development of children by denying them their rights to education, to health, to grow up within a family and to protection from exploitation and abuse.[40]

An effective system of birth registration can play an important role in helping to prevent the trafficking of thousands of boys and girls within countries and across international borders whether for purposes of illegal adoption, child prostitution or child labour. Since 2001, for example, the authorities in Mali have been checking identity papers and birth certificates at border checkpoints as part of their efforts to counter child trafficking.[41] Similarly, in Vietnam, the police can request a child's birth certificate from adults travelling with a child at any time.[42]

The absence of a birth certificate fosters an environment where children are prone to trafficking due, in large part, to the state of powerlessness that the lack of a legal status can impose on an individual.[43] Members of hill tribes in Thailand, for example, widely regard lack of proof of legal status as the single greatest trafficking risk for their children. Traffickers capitalise on the fact that these indigenous peoples are unable to prove their eligibility to work legally in their country of origin and are, as such, considered illegal aliens.[44]

Other factors exploited by traffickers include inadequate access to education and poor vocational opportunities.[45] Yet, in some countries,[46] one barrier stopping children from attending school or taking examinations is the absence of a birth certificate.

Not only does the absence of a birth certificate hinder efforts to provide alternatives to trafficking as part of a preventative strategy,[47] but it can also pose a stumbling block in pursuing and punishing traffickers. If a child is not registered at birth it is difficult to prove his or her age which is a hindrance should the child pursue his or her exploiters through court.[48]

Research carried out for Plan Nepal discovered a situation where police were unwilling to trace a girl known to have been trafficked across the border to a brothel in India because she had no birth certificate or means of identification. This meant that there was no proof of her age, nationality or even her existence.

A birth certificate also plays a significant role in providing every child with a traceable identity and history for repatriation purposes by identifying the child's parents, proving the child's nationality and helping to gain access to health, education and other welfare services when the child returns home.[49]

Plan Togo is working with communities, local organisations and the government to combat child trafficking. Part of their strategy involves the promotion of birth certificates. This is because very young people who are trafficked often forget who their parents are.

Caroline Irby

Protection against Sexual Exploitation

States Parties undertake to protect the child from all forms of sexual exploitation and sexual abuse.

United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 34

It is difficult to estimate the number of children who are sexually exploited and abused – given the clandestine nature of the activity and the intense feelings of shame that sexually assaulted children experience, many never report it. However, according to UNICEF, estimates indicate that as many as two million children, mainly girls but also boys, are sexually exploited worldwide every year.[50]

Many of these children are unwittingly trafficked into the sex trade and exploited for commercial purposes such as prostitution, pornography and paedophilia. But children may also be sexually abused in their own home or community.

In many countries, sexual relations with a girl under 16, with or without consent, are regarded as rape. Yet, without a birth certificate to confirm a girl's age and to prove she is under age, it is hard to prosecute the perpetrator and obtain a conviction.

Mukasa told Plan Uganda about his 13 year-old daughter, Phina, who was sexually abused. He could not prove that she was under age because she was not registered at birth. In Mukasa's words: "If only I had registered my daughter at birth, I would have won the case. I would have protected her."

At the Plan/UNICEF birth registration campaign launch on the 2003 Day of the African Child, one child from Ethiopia made the statement that: "In the news we hear about the problem of girls being abducted when they are going home from school. After being abducted they are raped and forced to marry. On the radio we hear about girls who fight against this practice and take them to court. If these girls don't know how old they are, then they will have problems in court. If they can prove they are under age, their case will be stronger."

Adam Hinton

Protection against Child Labour

States Parties recognise the right of the child to be protected from economic exploitation and from performing any work that is likely to be hazardous or to interfere with the child's education, or to be harmful to the child's health or physical, mental, spiritual, moral or social development.

United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 32

The International Labour Organization (ILO) estimates that around 246 million children are currently involved in child labour worldwide. Of these, 179 million – or one in every eight children – are exposed to the worst forms of child labour.[51] The importance of an effective birth registration system in protecting children from economic exploitation is explicitly recognised in the ILO Convention 138 (recommendation 146, article 16).

Birth registration can play an important role in combating hazardous child labour. Establishing a legal minimum age for work is clearly an important step. However, unless an effective birth registration system is in place to back it up, government agencies acting to eliminate exploitation will find it difficult to enforce such a regulation without being able to easily confirm the age of the child concerned. Similarly, it will also be difficult to prosecute his or her employers.[52]

Recent research conducted for Plan Ghana found that children below the age of 16 are working full-time in hazardous circumstances on cocoa farms. In order to stamp out this practice, Ghana's government is trying to prosecute cocoa farmers engaging in these exploitative practices. However, in order to prosecute they need to know the child's age. The absence of a birth certificate makes this very difficult.

Protection against Early Marriage

Early marriage is defined as marriage below the legal minimum age which, in many countries, is 18 years old. It is common practice in parts of east Africa, west Africa and south Asia. Worldwide there are currently more than 51 million girls and young women aged between 15 and 19 who are married and, if this trend continues, over 100 million girls under the age of 18 will be married in the next decade.[53] Early marriage can have repercussions for the lives of young women, including reproductive health problems and the denial of education.

Registering girls at birth can help protect them from early marriage as the absence of a birth certificate makes it difficult for law enforcement personnel to verify the age of the girls concerned. This is especially the case when parents may actively try to conceal the real age of their daughter in order to get a higher 'bride price' or to avoid paying too high a dowry.

> **In Bangladesh, marriage of a child under 18 is prohibited by law. However, a mere declaration regarding the age of the bride is enough for marriage registration. The incidence of early marriage could be reduced if all marriage registrars asked for birth certificates and proof of age. With this in mind, the government bodies in Gazipur, Dinajpur and Nilphamari, supported by Plan and working with the Bangladesh National Women Lawyers Organisation, arranged a one day workshop with 60 marriage registrars. At the end of the orientation the participants came up with an action plan on how to use birth certificates to reduce early marriage.**

Accurate data on early marriages and pregnancies is also vital for understanding the scale of this issue and ensuring an effective response. Yet, because young married women and mothers are found in the most marginalised populations where birth registration is more likely to be absent or incomplete, the ages of the girls involved in the practice may not have been recorded or even known. Similarly, because early marriages are generally recognised under local law or custom, they may not be formally recorded in national statistics.[54]

Protection during Armed Conflict

States Parties shall take all feasible measures to ensure that persons who have not attained the age of 18 years are not compulsorily recruited into their armed forces.

Optional Protocol to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict, Article 38

During conflict and in times of civil unrest, the probability of having a birth, name and nationality registered is particularly low. Systems of birth registration collapse and existing identification papers are misplaced or destroyed.[55] As a result, adults and children become officially 'lost' – unaccounted for by any government system.[56]

Plan Nepal has found that conflict is hindering birth registration efforts because many of the officials in village development committees have left their posts to move to safer areas. As a result, villagers have to go to the District level in order to register births which is both time consuming and expensive.

Children displaced by conflict and born in refugee camps across national borders are particularly vulnerable since receiving states often refuse to recognise and register their births. This means that they become 'stateless children', a situation that not only deprives them of social opportunities, but exposes them to many forms of discrimination.[57]

Without identity papers, for example, children and their families may experience problems qualifying for food aid and refugee status, gaining access to health, educational and welfare services and claiming their right of residence when returning to their home country. Furthermore, children lost or abandoned in such upheavals and who lack papers cannot easily be legally adopted. This means they may end up living in institutions or on the streets[58] especially if bureaucracy is placed above the rights of the child.

Adam Hinton

Irregularities in birth registration also exacerbate the problem of under age recruitment of children into armed conflict. Recruitment officers are left to determine the age of children: a practice that leaves minors at high risk. Indeed, more than half-a-million children under 18 have been recruited into government forces and a wide variety of non-state armed groups in more than 85 countries worldwide.[59]

Because these children cannot legally prove that they are too young to work or serve in the military, the Optional Protocol to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict (which raised the age limit for the recruitment and deployment of soldiers from 15 to 18 years) cannot be enforced.[60] Furthermore, the absence of a birth certificate makes the prosecution of recruiters of child soldiers very difficult.

Unregistered children rescued from their situation of exploitation as child soldiers are likely to find that their repatriation and reintegration back into society is problematic. This is often because they lack any legal document proving their age, family links or country and place of birth.[61]

At the 2004 First West and Central Africa Birth Registration Conference organised by Plan/UNICEF/UNFPA, a child delegate from Sierra Leone, representing the African Movement for Working Children and Youth, talked about the experience of an ex child-combatant who had asked for help in gaining a birth certificate so that he could enter school. The movement managed to trace his background – not an easy task. Though they were not able to find out his actual birth date, they were able to establish his likely age and a birth certificate was made based on this information and the ex child-combatant was accepted into school.

Protection in the Juvenile Justice System

Neither capital punishment nor life imprisonment shall be imposed for offences committed by persons below eighteen years of age [and] every child deprived of liberty shall be separated from adults.

United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 37

International standards recognise that children are entitled to special care and protection in justice systems because they are still developing physically, mentally and emotionally.[62] A birth certificate may provide children under arrest with some protection against prosecution as an adult by providing proof of age. This should also help to ensure that the child receives the special legal protection that is available to him or her as a juvenile in national and international justice systems,[63] including immunity from capital punishment.

At the 2003 Third Asia Regional Conference on Birth Registration organised by Plan and UNICEF, an example was given of a child sentenced to the death penalty. His lawyers attempted to get relief for him under the Convention on the Rights of the Child. However, because he did not have a birth certificate he could not prove his exact date of birth.[64]

In addition, children have the right to be held separately from adults. Failure to do so may deny them access to education and exposes them to adult criminals, decreasing their chances of successful re-integration into society. Holding children alongside adults also increases the risk of their being exposed to violence and contracting HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases, through sexual abuse.[65] Finally, children without proof of citizenship may be subjected to judicial treatment that provides less protection to non-citizens.[66]

Adam Hinton

Common Obstacles to Achieving Universal Birth Registration

"I don't have a birth certificate because my father believes that a piece of paper does not feed a child, that farming activities are more useful for the child than lengthy administrative procedures."

A Cameroonian child

Factors that prevent the registration of children immediately after birth range from a lack of demand for birth registration by parents and communities to a lack of resources that prevents states from fulfilling their responsibilities. This means that birth registration is often neglected in the face of issues that are more immediate and tangible. As a consequence, children are denied substantial and automatic rights and the long-term benefit and security birth registration brings.

The Local Level

Lack of Awareness and Motivation

In many developing countries there is a lack of urgency and motivation attached to registering a child at birth. The low value attached by parents to birth registration is brought about by a lack of awareness of the benefits of registering their child and even, in some cases, being unaware of the government's responsibility to do so.

Since the implications of non-registration are often only understood when people experience problems in transactions which require official proof of identity and age, many people only register their children when it is necessary – to enrol in primary school, for example. Furthermore, because officials often waive the legal requirement for a birth certificate in practice, other forms of identification such as horoscopes or immunisation cards are used instead.

For people whose options are severely limited due to poverty and other disadvantaging circumstances, their enjoyment of rights and services is so low that they might not ever experience the need to prove their child's identity and, as such, birth registration appears to bring about no tangible benefit at all.

Fear of Discrimination and Persecution

In some cases, presenting birth registration in terms of a governmental requirement means that parents may feel justifiably scared or threatened if they do not understand how the information about them and their children will be used. Indeed, lack of trust is a major factor prohibiting minorities from feeling sufficiently empowered to approach authorities to register their children. Some ethnic or indigenous populations choose to be overlooked for fear that identification of their ethnic origin might lead to discrimination and persecution.

The information shown on a birth certificate varies from country to country. Typically, it will record the name of the child, the names of his/her parents, the name of the attending health care professional, midwife, birth attendant or other witness and the date and place of birth. But in some countries it might also record information that can be used in a discriminatory way. By recording the parents' profession, for example, children may be discriminated against because of their caste or social class. Similarly, the child may be discriminated against if the marital status of their parents means that they are classified as illegitimate. Religious orientation or ethnic origin are also significant factors that provide a basis for discrimination and persecution.

Plan Uganda has found that most parents are unaware of the need to register a birth or do not realise its importance. It is viewed as something that government officials want them to do without knowing why. Some people think that the government has an ulterior motive for wanting to count children. Others believe that counting children is unlucky and could lead to death.

Fear of authorities and the legal process means that people are largely uninformed as to the birth registration process, procedures and requirements of their nation. Language is also a factor here, with governments failing to communicate the importance of birth registration and how to go about it in ways that can be understood by minority groups or illiterate members of society.

Adam Hinton

Incompatibility of Birth Registration with Local Realities

In some countries, the birth registration system may be incompatible with local circumstances. Societal attitudes may mean that unmarried women are reluctant to register an illegitimate child out of embarrassment or because of their unwillingness to use anything but the father's name.[67]

Traditional values determining behaviour after birth may also impact negatively on the birth registration process because, in some cultures, traditional values prevent mothers leaving the house with their baby for a fixed time period after birth. Parents who miss this deadline and register their child late, then have to pay fees; another disincentive for registering a birth since many parents cannot afford to pay them.[68]

Birth registration may also be seen as 'interfering' with sacred practices. Where no tradition of written records exists, birth registration remains an alien concept that is misunderstood and not seen as beneficial to the community.[69] Where the birth registration system requires that parents present their own identity documents when registering their children, this can lead to an intergenerational cycle of non-registration.[70]

Likewise, some cultures are confused as to why the child needs to have a certificate with their name on it when they have already been named and are recognised by their community. Indeed, traditional naming rituals may not be compatible with birth registration systems. In a situation where the naming ritual extends beyond the set deadline for birth registration, the need to allow late or temporary registration without enforcing fines has not been recognised by government.

Lack of Resources

Due to the fact that immediate needs often outweigh the perceived benefit of birth registration, the cost of registering a child has a negative impact on birth registration rates. Costs may not only include the price of the birth certificate itself, but where the birth registration system is highly centralised, the expense associated with having to travel to the nearest civil registration office; a particular consideration for parents living in rural or inaccessible areas where the infrastructure for roads and the availability of public transport are lacking.[71]

Plan Togo successfully negotiated with government a two-thirds reduction in the cost of late registration.

On the Day of the African Child in 2003, Plan Guinea Bissau successfully advocated for government to reduce the cost of birth registration in one area.

In addition to this will also be the loss of a day's income and difficulties finding child-minders. This is further aggravated by inconvenient opening hours, staff absenteeism, shortages of materials and language barriers since those speaking local languages might not be able to communicate with staff or fill in the necessary forms without help.

Furthermore, where infant mortality is high, the incentive to go through a costly registration process is minimised and even delayed deliberately until the child has grown to a surviving age.

> **A child who took part in a Plan Cameroon consultation for a birth registration campaign told staff: "None among my seven brothers and sisters have a birth certificate; our parents decided to register our births only when we will be about 10 years old, as they do not want to waste time in declaring births of babies who might die at any moment."**

Yet, whilst late registration may be simple and inexpensive in some cases, in others, the procedure for registering a child late may be extremely complicated and more expensive in the long run.

> **Plan Nicaragua is working with the non-governmental organisation Asociación para el Desarrollo de los Pueblos (ADP) to register children under the age of one. Resource limitations mean that the campaign cannot target children over this age because of the incredibly complicated procedures for late registration. Dr. Guerrero of ADP explains why: "After the first year the inscription can't be carried out immediately. One has to visit the office of the registrar who prepares a document called a 'negative' indicating that the child is not registered. With the 'negative', one must start legal procedures for the so-called 'petition of omission'. This petition goes to the courts and a judge must issue an order for registration. A lawyer is required from the start of the procedure and, shuffling from paper to paper, the procedure can take up to a year. Nobody wants to do it because it implies a lot of legwork and legal expenses."**

Another deterring factor is that families often lack a safe place to store the certificate and prevent damage by floods or insects. It is often the case that if a certificate is lost or damaged, a replacement charge may be enforced. This makes investing in the process all the less attractive.

National Level

Lack of Political Will

Despite their obligation to register every child at birth, many governments do not recognise birth registration as a priority. Limited understanding of birth registration means that governments are often passive about the issue and do not pay sufficient attention to promoting it in their countries.

Lack of political will translates into weak enforcement with civil registration documents rarely demanded and little coordination and cooperation between the different ministries that have a stake in the system's operation. This can lead to there being no clear responsibility for birth registration and no centralised authority existing at the national level to oversee it and ensure its integration such as in Bangladesh.

The lack of political will for birth registration may be a deliberate effort to minimise the representation of particular ethnic or religious groups in population figures. This is motivated by political leaders who are aware of the significance of birth registration and who wish to systematically exclude these particular groups and block their enjoyment of rights, such as voting, in order to promote the interests of a predominant group.[72]

Lack of Resources

Economic hardship and lack of political will for birth registration will lead to inadequate resources being allocated to birth registration both in the creation of effective civil registration systems and their sustainability.

This manifests itself in insufficient numbers of poorly trained civil registry personnel who underestimate the importance of their duties because they have little understanding of why birth registration is important. Inadequate support, low salaries and low status act as a disincentive to civil registrars in fulfilling their duties and means that they are unable to deal with any registration problems. This may lead to corruption in the form of bribery or producing fake certificates for illegal adoption.

A lack of resources also leads to poorly equipped offices and shortages of materials, including application forms, pens and even the certificates themselves. In the absence of computerised systems it may also be the case that there is nowhere safe to store registration documents. In fact in some cases registrars in Cameroon have had to throw away civil registers that have been severely damaged by insects.

Legislative Barriers

The legacy of colonialism in some countries and the lack of connection between central authorities and citizens in others, means that many countries are operating within legislative systems that are not compatible with local realities or international law.

Not only are they out-of-date, but they may be complex and ineffective in obtaining valuable statistics. This may be because, in the absence of clear and detailed rules and regulations, laws do not cover the whole country and are simply not consistent or complimentary, serving to further undermine the integrity of the birth registration process.

In other cases, civil registration laws contradict or are negatively affected by other laws. In China, for instance, the Family Planning Policy is considered to hinder birth registration since parents who have an additional child might not report the birth of the child for fear of being fined.[73] In Nepal, where polygamy is against the law, a child who is the product of a polygamous relationship will also not be 'declared' to the authorities by their parents who fear prosecution.

International Level

Lack of Recognition, Support and Priority

The international community clearly has an interest in achieving birth registration. In 1989, the United Nations Statistics Division with the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), the World Health Organization (WHO) and the International Institute for Vital Registration designed an International Program for Accelerating the Improvement of Civil Registration and Vital Statistics in Member States.[74]

In addition, UNICEF, the UN Statistics Division, WHO, the UNFPA and the UN Regional Commissions have worked on building capability for civil registration by promoting partnerships between the registrars general of a number of countries. This work has involved training workshops and seminars, the production of methodological guidelines and handbooks and the promotion of Vital Statistic Systems to enhance international comparability.[75]

International organisations like Plan, including World Vision, Save the Children, the International Confederation of Midwives and the International Council of Nurses, are also promoting birth registration in the communities that they work in.

As a result of these initiatives, the issue of birth registration is slowly climbing up the international agenda and receiving priority at events such as the 2002 United Nations Special Session on Children (UNGASS) and the 2004 Council of Europe's Third European Conference on Nationality. Increased emphasis is also being put on birth registration rates by the Committee on the Rights of the Child in its observations and recommendations to state party reports.[76]

Yet, despite the recognition given to birth registration by the international community, the issue is still not sufficiently recognised beyond human rights conventions and texts. Like national governments, the international community has a limited understanding of the importance of birth registration. Consequently, birth registration fails to gain widespread support and priority and is not integrated across all activities.

Lack of Implementation and Action

Apart from the mechanism used by the Committee on the Rights of the Child, little pressure is put on nation states to ensure appropriate and effective civil registration systems. Countries that have ratified the CRC but have reservations about Article 7 are also not challenged.[77] This is because the issue of birth registration is rarely incorporated into international programs and policies, nor is it commonly made a condition of international aid and partnerships. Furthermore, the international community does not provide enough direct assistance in terms of resources to national governments for birth registration activities.

Case Studies of Plan's Work on Birth Registration

"We haven't done 100 per cent; today a child is born in my village and is not yet registered."

Monorom Commune Chief, Cambodia

Plan's Work with UNICEF on Universal Birth Registration

Plan and UNICEF have been working closely together in their efforts to achieve universal birth registration. Their collaboration has adopted an integrated strategy built on each party's respective strengths. UNICEF, as a UN agency, attracts high political attention at the global, regional and national levels, whilst Plan has many years of significant experience of working with partners at the grassroots level and recognising children themselves as an important stakeholder group.

Asia - The Unregistered Children Project

The Unregistered Children Project (UCP) was launched by Plan and the NGO Committee on UNICEF in 1998 in order to tackle the issue of non-registration. Its aim is to assess the situation regarding the registration of children in south and south-east Asia and to develop realistic strategies and networks for action that will promote the achievement of universal birth registration in the shortest time possible.

The First Phase

The first phase of the UCP was designed to assess the magnitude of non-registration, raise awareness of major stakeholders and the public at large, forge national and regional committees on birth registration and spur resource mobilisation. The process started with an in-depth assessment on the status of and barriers to birth registration.

This exercise was initially implemented in three countries: Indonesia, the Philippines and Vietnam during 1998 and 1999. The countries then met for a National Workshop in Manila, Philippines, in early 1999. Other countries also attended including Thailand, who provided resource support.

Later the same year, Plan organised the Asia Civil Registrars General Convention on Birth Registration in Bangkok, Thailand which was held to commemorate the 10-year anniversary of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). Around 20 countries attended, among them Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka who joined the project and conducted their own in-depth studies.[78]

It was this meeting that acted as a catalyst for Plan's collaboration with UNICEF on the issue of birth registration. The process culminated with a National Workshop for all stakeholders in each of the eight countries, co-hosted by Plan, the Civil Registry and UNICEF. Each National Workshop discussed the findings of their assessments and mobilised political will for the project, leading, in all cases, to the development of a 'birth registration declaration' and a national action plan to take the issue forward.

Another important outcome was the establishment of the Asia Birth Registration Committee (ABC), an Asian network of professionals committed to the promotion of birth registration. This committee was formed to monitor and support Pan-Asian progress and to expand collaboration on the issue to other parts of the world.

Jenny Matthews

The Second Phase

Successful completion of the first phase of the UCP has been followed by the actual implementation of interventions, from the regional and national levels right down to the grassroots. The Plan Asia Regional Office and UNICEF's East Asia and Pacific Regional Office and South Asia Regional Office have organised two more regional conferences, facilitating space for the participants of the project to come together with practitioners from other Asian countries and providing valuable opportunities through which to explore new ideas and exchange best practices and lessons learned. These include the 2000 Workshop on Practices for Improving Birth Registration in Surabaya, Indonesia and the 2003 Third Asia Regional Conference on Birth Registration – A Child's First Right, held in Bangkok, Thailand.

Strengths of the UCP

An evaluation of the Unregistered Child Project in 2003[79] reveals a number of strengths to this approach. First of all, birth registration has been 'repositioned' from an administrative act to a more meaningful child rights issue, which involves policy and legal reform and institutional capacity building.

Secondly, the project is conducted on different, but mutually reinforcing levels. This has connected regional and global level advocacy and awareness-raising to national and grassroots activities. The project has been taken more seriously and has attracted more 'buy-in' because of its multi-country and multi-partner character.

A further strength is that the project has consistently been based on a four-partite partnership between Plan, the NGO Committee on UNICEF, UNICEF and the civil registrars at country level. In addition, it has drawn in participation from regional and head offices as well as from other countries. Countries have embarked on their own parts of the project when the time is right for them. They have run their own part of the project, thereby achieving maximum ownership. Related to this has also been an emphasis on 'South-South' exchange. The excellence in civil registration of a country like Thailand (which has acted as a resource country right from the beginning of the project) is providing useful culturally appropriate lessons.

Finally, a unique characteristic of the project is its clear focus on the issue. Birth registration is usually a clearly demarcated government responsibility for which only one or two government departments in each country are responsible – even though it is linked to other sectors, such as health, education and the judicial and legislative systems. This means that it is relatively easy to establish effective channels of communication.

Success of the UCP

Together with other stakeholders, Plan and UNICEF have achieved remarkable results over the past five years. Their efforts have led to the registering of 3.2 million children in India's state of Orissa and more than 4 million children in Bangladesh alone. The number of countries involved in the project continues to grow.

Val Burton

Examples of Current Joint Initiatives

In Bangladesh, Plan works in four districts on birth registration in partnership with local government and other organisations. Plan and UNICEF are developing a joint communication strategy to further increase awareness of the issue.

Plan and UNICEF have been working together on birth registration in Indonesia since 2003 and have collaborated with the Directorate General of Population and Administration on the draft of a new civil registration law which has been passed on to the President's office for submission to the Parliament. They have worked with the Directorate General of Population and Administration to develop a training manual for civil registrars and carry out this training. In addition they conduct awareness-raising on the importance of birth registration.

As a member of the consortium on birth registration, Plan Indonesia has also been involved in the organisation of national conferences on birth registration alongside UNICEF and the German Agency for Technical Co-operation (GTZ). The aim of the conference has been to communicate the importance of birth registration to the newly elected members of Parliament and other stakeholders.

Plan and UNICEF are working together in Nepal to raise awareness on birth registration and to facilitate local and central level registration. They are also part of a steering committee on birth registration formed by the Ministry of Local Development along with Save the Children Japan and Save the Children US. Furthermore, a meeting has recently taken place between Plan Nepal and UNICEF, the ILO and the WHO to discuss a partnership approach to producing an awareness-raising film on birth registration.

Plan, UNICEF, the government and other non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in Thailand have formed a birth registration taskforce to take forward the issue of unregistered children.

In Timor-Leste, Plan and UNICEF are in the planning phase of a birth registration campaign to register all children under five in two pilot districts.

Victor Brott

Africa

Following the success of their collaborative efforts in Asia, Plan and UNICEF have more recently committed to expand their work together by tackling the issue of birth registration in Africa. Plan lent experience and support to the UNICEF-sponsored 2002 Africa Workshop on birth registration in Kampala, Uganda, hosted by the Ministry for Gender, Labour and Social Development. They will jointly lead a major regional conference with UNICEF in 2005.

Adam Hinton

In West Africa, Plan and UNICEF have also joined forces and, on the Day of the African Child in 2003, launched a high profile birth registration campaign. The regional offices of Plan and UNICEF went on to organise the First West and Central Africa Conference in Dakar, Senegal, in 2004 in collaboration with the UNFPA.

The major outcome of the Dakar Conference was the formation of 24 national committees in which Plan and UNICEF, if present in that country, play an active role. In addition, country action plans were developed and acted upon.

Adam Hinton

Adam Hinton

Examples of Current Joint Initiatives

Plan and UNICEF in Ghana have met the Minister of Local Government and Rural Development to give a report of the conference and to solicit support for programs to improve birth registration coverage across the country. This meeting led the National Office of the Birth and Deaths Registry to convene a meeting of management and all regional registration officers in which priority areas were identified to help improve existing practices. The Ministry is now in the process of helping introduce the Community Population Register Scheme in 20 pilot districts.

In Burkina Faso, Plan and UNICEF are involved in a joint venture with three government ministries to launch a mass birth registration campaign in 14 of the 45 provinces in the country. They are also working with the UNFPA and a Coalition of Voluntary NGOs on a broader project to advocate for the effective implementation of birth registration systems. The group is appealing to the government to consider making a number of amendments to the present registration system.

Plan and UNICEF, along with the UNFPA, have finished a national survey in Mali on birth registration. A workshop is now planned to discuss the results and to make recommendations to the National Committee on Registration Reform who are currently reviewing the national registry law.

In Sierra Leone, Plan and UNICEF are collaborating with the Ministry of Health and Sanitation on the need for birth registration. Two districts have been identified for the implementation of a birth registration program over 12 months. A workshop is planned for October 2005 where Plan, UNICEF, the Law Officers' Department and other relevant stakeholders will work on advocacy to repeal laws that inhibit the birth registration process in Sierra Leone.

Plan and UNICEF are working with Senegal's National Child Rights Protection Unit on birth registration. This includes producing a UBR baseline, mapping of National Registry offices, developing sensitisation and planning tools and a National Plan of Action.

In Cameroon, Plan joined UNICEF to provide funding and technical support to the Ministry of Social Affairs to run a Birth Registration Stakeholders' Workshop in Bandjoun, West Province. Participants included government organisations such as social services, rural animation units, primary education inspectors and magistrates, traditional leaders, civil registrars and mayors. After sharing their experiences and learning more about the legal aspects of birth registration, they developed a National Action Plan to coordinate future birth registration interventions from 2004-2007.

Plan and UNICEF are working together in Uganda on a taskforce with the government to scale up activities related to birth registration. Regular meetings review progress and discuss best practice and a Strategy Paper for Strengthening and Harmonising Birth and Death Registration has been developed. The taskforce has also produced a training of trainers course which is being rolled out across 26 districts.

Plan Malawi is working with UNICEF, the National Council for Child Welfare and Save the Children Sweden to raise awareness of birth registration.

Plan Sudan in collaboration with the National Council for Child Welfare, UNICEF and Save the Children Sweden launched its birth registration campaign on the Day of the African Child. One campaign activity took place in a Plan program area where drama, songs and an exhibition were organised along the birth registration theme.

The Americas

Plan and UNICEF aim to expand their collaboration to the Americas and a regional wide initiative is envisaged. However, the two agencies are already undertaking joint initiatives on birth registration at the national level. One such example is in Bolivia where, working with the Bolivian Government, Plan and UNICEF are working to register as many children as possible, aged up to seven years, before December 2006.

Plan's Work with Governments on Birth Registration

Advocacy

Plan advocates to governments at the local and national levels to increase political will for birth registration. For instance, Plan Albania employs a multi-level approach to advocacy efforts which involve promoting the importance of birth registration to the Ministry of Health, health directorates at the district level and local government.

Likewise, Plan Indonesia has targeted government at the national, provincial and municipal levels on birth registration through hearings with government and legislative bodies. Positive outcomes include birth registration fees being abolished in Makassar and reduced in the neighbouring municipality.

Plan Guinea Bissau has also been able to convince the government to reduce the cost of birth registration for children after it ran a pilot birth registration project in a Plan program area and found that the costs of registering the child were discouraging parents from doing so.

As a result of advocacy efforts by Plan Kenya, the government has recently enacted a Children's Act and is currently reviewing the National Constitution to ensure it complements birth registration efforts.

As part of its advocacy efforts in Sudan, Plan organised a national workshop on birth registration which resulted in a set of recommendations for change in legislation. These were then raised to the Sudanese national assembly by the National Council for Child Welfare.

Furthermore, in Belgium, Plan's advocacy efforts contributed to the inclusion of birth registration as one of the top priorities in the government's new international development policy plan.

Technical Support

Plan provides technical support to governments who wish to make civil registration legislation more effective. This work includes strengthening structures through which birth registration can be delivered and enhancing the capacity of government officials and other relevant parties to undertake the process. In this respect, Plan may provide training or help to resolve issues related to the lack of adequate material resources.

Adam Hinton

In Bangladesh, for example, the Births and Deaths Registration Act of 1873 put in place a legal framework for registration. Yet Bangladesh has no civil registration authority at the national level, nor is there a central level of responsibility to oversee these vital tasks. Plan is working with government bodies to improve this situation by giving technical support to the government bodies of three districts and forming stakeholder committees to drive the process forward.

Plan Vietnam is working with the government's Ministry Of Justice to improve the country's birth registration rate by helping to develop a standardised birth registration system. Legislation is continually reviewed and amended. Steering committees at various levels have been formed with the participation of representatives from the Commission for Population, Family and Children (CPFC) and Health, Education and Public Security departments to assist with these decisions.

Furthermore, in collaboration with UNICEF, Plan Vietnam has facilitated training courses on birth registration for civil registrars in nine provinces and provided birth certificates and registration books so that children could be registered free of charge. Since 1998, the two organisations have also conducted several national workshops as part of the Unregistered Children Project (UCP). These national workshops have provided a valuable forum through which to exchange best practices and lessons learned and enabling the success stories of countries such as Thailand and Sri Lanka to share their knowledge.

Plan Pakistan is working with local government and the Rural Development Minister to make birth registration a priority in pilot project areas. Birth registration rates have since increased from 30 to 80 per cent in these areas, assisted by the Minister's instruction that union councils regularly review and discuss birth registration efforts in their area meetings. To aid the effectiveness of birth registration, Plan has organised a training of trainers session and has provided all the town municipal administrations with computers in order that they could develop electronic databases and link their systems with the National Database and Registration Authority.

Partnership

Plan has recently established a partnership to work on birth registration with the Justice Department in Senegal and this has resulted in the government organising a period of three months for free registration across the country. Plan Ghana has also successfully gained minister support for birth registration and has been collaborating with the government since 2004. A national action plan for birth registration is being developed which sets out a number of goals and aims to increase rates of birth registration by 2006.

Adam Hinton

Plan's Awareness-Raising Work on Birth Registration

Plan is present in the poorest countries that have the most serious birth registration problems. The communities with which Plan works are often unaware of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and the responsibility of governments who have ratified the CRC to ensure that every child is registered immediately after birth.

In order to raise public awareness of birth registration, Plan engages in a wide range of activities. These vary from country to country depending on the national and local context. Plan's development approach involves working with children and their communities and aims to ensure that the methods adopted are relevant and culturally appropriate.

At the local level, a successful approach is to conduct community based awareness-raising sessions. For example, Plan Zimbabwe found that communities were suspicious about birth registration and did not see how providing proof of identity would benefit them. After Plan staff shared their knowledge about the importance of registering births for effective national planning and provided practical illustrations of situations where proof of age is needed, communities gained new understanding about the issue and birth registration increased.

Another approach is to promote birth registration through existing local structures such as community based organisations. Awareness about the importance of birth registration is raised in Village Development Committees by Plan Nepal. This includes initiating discussion about birth registration in women's savings and credit groups as well as in mother's groups, an approach that Plan has also applied in Ghana and Nicaragua.

In Indonesia, Plan and civil registry staff joined community leaders to discuss birth registration. As a result, village leaders have formed teams of youth volunteers in sub-districts and hamlets. Accompanied by Plan staff, each team goes door-to-door to inform villagers about the rights of the child, the advantages of proving identity and the procedures of registering a birth. The volunteers are instrumental in assisting families, especially those who are illiterate, complete birth registration forms and obtain documents from the administration confirming their identity. The concept of birth registration is now no longer strange and data is being collected about the public perception of civil registration in order to improve procedures.

Teachers are a respected and influential stakeholder in promoting birth registration and Plan Senegal has organised orientation sessions for teachers on the importance of birth registration. Teachers now assist with registering their students, taking simple forms to the local council so that they can be officially recorded.

Health professionals are another key stakeholder in promoting birth registration. Plan Albania has found that the strategy of raising awareness about birth registration through local community health networks works well. Similarly, Plan Kenya raises awareness of birth registration with traditional birth attendants who play an instrumental role in encouraging parents to register their children.

In other countries, community capacity for birth registration is built. This has been carried out in Togo where Plan has trained members of Village Development Committees in 23 communities about how to register children at birth.

In Bangladesh, Plan engages religious leaders on the issue of birth registration. With the help of the Islamic Foundation, it supports a District Resource Team in organising orientations on birth registration at Upazila levels for the Imam Society. This has led Imams to play a significant role in promoting birth registration by speaking about it through the mosque microphone before and after prayers as well as through personal contact.

Other innovative awareness-raising activities adopted by Plan include organising rallies, puppet shows, street plays, messages displayed on community notice-boards and focus group discussions on birth registration. All these methods were recently used by Plan India during a 'birth registration week' attended by civil registration officials who issued birth certificates there and then. A similar activity was carried out by Plan Burkina Faso in the district of Noumbiel. Again, the local authorities were actively involved in the week's activities and a total of 5,250 birth certificates were issued as a result.

Activities such as these attract the attention of the media which plays a pivotal role in communicating birth registration messages. For example, Plan Thailand took the opportunity to promote the concept of birth registration during the inauguration of a Plan-supported mobile registration unit. A public ceremony was arranged and the media was invited to join some 3,000 community members, Plan staff and government officials to witness the ceremony.

Realising the reach of radio and print journalism, Plan Guinea Bissau organised a workshop for local journalists in order to build up understanding of the issue. This event also facilitated the establishment of a journalist and press correspondent network on birth registration.

Likewise, Plan Benin facilitated a national network of journalists on the rights of the child. Journalists and communicators from across the country gathered for a three-day workshop on birth registration which focused on the same issues that were covered by the international journalist network set up at the Plan/UNICEF/UNFPA 2004 first West and Central Africa Birth Registration Conference in Dakar, Senegal. The journalists went on to develop their own national plan of action.

Plan also directly employs the medium of media in awareness-raising work. As part of its program on registering the births of orphans and vulnerable children, for instance, Plan Uganda developed simple radio-spots in English and three local languages. These were broadcast intensively on a local FM radio with a wide coverage area, informing local communities about birth registration and encouraging them to obtain birth certificates for their children and to register deaths.

Adam Hinton

Media is also used by Plan Philippines in collaboration with the Philippine Information Agency. Short 'infomercials' about the advantages of having a birth certificate have been broadcast on radio and shown on television networks and cinema screens across the country.

Another initiative employed by Plan Philippines has been to engage high profile celebrities in delivering messages about the importance of birth registration. In 2003, Carmelita Ericta, a high profile celebrity, acted as a panellist at a press conference on birth registration. She was joined by representatives from the government and other non-governmental organisations including World Vision and the Christian Children's Fund.

Similarly, the first West and Central Africa conference on birth registration organised a separate workshop for African musicians, including many popular artists such as Miriam Makeba, Didier Awadi and Alphe Blonde. At the end of the week, a free music concert was held in Dakar's Iba Mar Diop stadium to raise awareness of birth registration activities.

Adam Hinton

Plan's Work with Children in Promoting Birth Registration

Plan's approach to development encourages children's meaningful participation in promoting birth registration. Experience has shown that this positively impacts four realms: the personal, the familial, the communal and the institutional.

In the personal realm, children's participation in promoting birth registration builds their capacity to influence their own welfare and development. For example, children in the Philippines participate in the Plan-UNICEF Unregistered Child Project (UCP) by teaching their communities about the importance of birth registration and distributing birth registration forms. The children's involvement in the project makes them feel recognised and appreciated in their schools and communities. It has also motivated them to share the skills they have acquired with their peers.

Children's participation in birth registration activities has also been used to overcome divisions by acting as a unifying principle among different stakeholders. A child-centred project initiated by Plan Philippines, covering eight regions and 110 different tribes, successfully brought together a range of groups and leaders across ethnic and religious groups who had at first perceived the project negatively.

In the familial realm, older children are able to use their knowledge to persuade parents to register new babies and other siblings who do not have birth certificates. In the communal realm, children's activities also influence the behaviour of their communities. For instance, in the Philippines, children have formed two theatre groups which perform in front of various audiences to raise awareness and encourage community members to register their children.

Young people in Togo have produced and broadcast a Plan-supported radio show called 'I am a Child but I have my Rights too'. Through writing a story about the importance of birth registration, the children are successful advocates on the issue, encouraging community members not only to talk about birth registration but to actually implement it.

With the support of Plan Nepal, child journalists are also advocating that every child's birth should be registered by writing about the issue in their newspaper. Likewise, Plan in Cameroon supports children's clubs and has helped publicise their magazine called 'Eyeke' which also advocates for birth registration.

Children in the Dominican Republic helped produce a comic book developed as part of a birth registration campaign in collaboration with World Vision. Plan used ideas from the children's feedback to improve the final edition of the publication, ensuring that it reflected their views. Young people were also asked to participate in the filming of a television spot for the campaign, providing another chance for their voices to be heard.

Child participation in birth registration efforts not only draws the undivided attention of the general public, but also civil servants and politicians in the institutional realm. Child journalists in Haiti persuaded an official staff member from the civil court to take part in a radio program called 'Every Child Has the Right to a Name!' which was broadcast to promote the importance of birth registration.

Jenny Matthews

In 2002, children involved in the Philippines UCP participated in the National Children's Congress on the First Right of the Child based on the theme: My Name, My Right. Around 100 children from all regions of the country representing local government units, majority and minority communities gathered to advocate for birth registration. One of the major outputs of the Congress was a resolution that contained the children's appeal and specific recommendations to the Legislative and Executive Branch of the government to effect state obligations to register all children.

Representatives of the African Movement for Working Children and Youth participated in the Plan/UNICEF/UNFPA 2004 First West and Central Africa Birth Registration Conference. Eighteen young people took part in plenary sessions, ran parallel workshops and discussions and produced concrete proposals for action on the final day. These proposals included: reinforcing the importance of birth registration by meeting communities, leaders and the media; using techniques such as radio, television and drama to raise awareness; working with authorities and decision makers to ensure that birth registration is free; insisting on the building and equipping of hospitals and birth registration centres; appointing well trained registrars; and computerising the registration system. They were presented in the young people's final report and distributed to government officials.

Finally, at the international level, Plan developed a children's participation initiative in the run-up to the May 2002 United Nations General Assembly Special Session on Children (UNGASS) in cooperation with UNICEF, the International Save the Children Alliance, World Vision International, the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC) and Netaid.org Foundation. Plan facilitated the participation of 17 child delegates in the Special Session who promoted birth registration in a number of forums including meetings, press conferences, radio and television interviews and panel discussions. The result was that birth registration received priority in the Action Plan – a remarkable achievement given that it was not even mentioned at the 1990 World Summit for Children.

Adam Hinton

Plan's Work on Mobile Registration

Plan promotes the use of mobile registration units to reach populations living in inaccessible areas. Mobile registration provides the opportunity for these populations to register at a convenient place and within a stipulated period of time. As a strategy, mobile registration also helps to increase awareness of birth registration, provides a mechanism through which to collect public feedback on civil registration processes and creates an opportunity though which to clear birth registration backlogs.

To date, much of Plan's work with mobile registration units has taken place in south and south-east Asia. In Thailand, for example, Plan is working with the government to register the births of children in Chiang Rai. This area borders with Myanmar (also known as Burma) and is difficult to reach because of its mountainous terrain. As such, an estimated 10,000 children living in Chiang Rai have yet to be registered.

As part of the Plan-government collaboration, Plan Thailand has funded a fully furnished mobile birth registration unit which was formally handed over to the Department of Local Administration in January 2003. This unit is now helping to deliver registration services not only in Chiang Rai, but also to minority groups in the rural areas of 39 provinces.

In Sri Lanka, Plan is working with the Registrar General to facilitate mobile registration in the Passara District. One initiative involved asking plantation supervisors to give workers leave so that they could visit a mobile registration unit which was based at a local school. The result was that over 1,000 workers came to register themselves, their children and other family members. The Registrar General has since returned on a further two occasions to follow the process through.

Plan also supports mobile birth registration in the Philippines, particularly during the national Civil Registration Month of February when local civil registry offices focus their efforts on the most remote barangays (villages) and those where the lowest birth registration rates have been recorded over the 12 month period. In addition, Plan has secured permission for mobile registration units to enter high-security areas in the south of the country where ongoing military operations between armed groups and the government are taking place.

Another mobile registration initiative is currently underway in Cambodia where Plan is working in collaboration with the government, the Asian Development Bank and United Nations' Volunteers. Building on the new Civil Registration Sub-Decree implemented in August 2002 and the government's commitment to registering the entire population within three years, the aim of the mobile registration campaign is to overcome the disappointing outcome of 2003 when only 2–5 per cent of the 12 million individuals who make up the population came forward to register.

The campaign, launched in October 2004, also builds on work undertaken by the Asian Development Bank who, having identified civil registration as the fourth component of its Commune Civil Development Project, has been working to increase the capacity of the government's Office of Civil Registration and providing support to Commune Councils.

Plan Cambodia's role in the mobile registration strategy has been the establishment of a project office with an international adviser/coordinator to manage the field operation and the funding of 27 United Nations' Volunteers – one for each Cambodian province. Through the United Nations' Volunteers, Plan Cambodia is also working to educate and sensitise communities so that they are fully informed about the advantages of birth registration.

In addition, Plan has been providing technical advice and support to the Cambodian government in order to maximise the effectiveness of the mobile registration campaign. This has involved helping in the preparation of the National Plan of Action for country-wide implementation of mobile registration and encouraging the government to introduce amendments to the Sub-Decree on Civil Registration by waiving the registration fee throughout the mobile registration campaign, removing the requirement for a court judgment if the child is registered more than 30 days after birth and deferring fines for late registration.

Furthermore, the Cambodian Ministry of Interior has issued a detailed policy document to all the provinces in light of the recommendations made by Plan Cambodia clarifying the roles and responsibilities for birth registration at all levels of the government structure.

Jenny Matthews

Recommendations

"We believe in a frank collaboration between children's associations, NGOs, governments and international institutions for the deliverance of [a] life passport for each child and each citizen."

The children group's synthesis report on the 2004 First West and Central Africa Birth Registration Conference 'Universal Birth Registration – The Way Forward' Plan/UNICEF/UNFPA

Achieving universal birth registration is possible and the new figures on birth registration show positive improvement since 2002 when UNICEF estimated that 40 per cent of births every year went unregistered.[80] Yet they also demonstrate that there is still a long way to go. Current efforts need to be increased.

Plan commits to continuing work with children and communities, non-governmental organisations, local and national governments, UN agencies and other international organisations to ensure that every child is registered at birth. This will involve expanding our program and advocacy activities in Asia, Africa and the Americas and ensuring that we regularly bring stakeholders together at the national, regional and international levels in order to share best practices and lessons learned. Plan also makes the following recommendations:

International Level

Plan urges the international community including UN agencies, multilaterals, bilaterals, donor governments and non-governmental organisations to increase their efforts to achieve universal birth registration. Specifically:

1. Prioritise and Support Universal Birth Registration

The international community as a whole must prioritise birth registration as a child rights issue and recognise its importance in monitoring the Millennium Development Goal of reducing under-five mortality by two-thirds.

Where possible, this should include providing support for the development of sustainable birth registration systems in nation states.

2. Incorporate Birth Registration into Appropriate Policy

International organisations that do not already do so should incorporate birth registration into policy. This includes relevant global economic organs.

3. Make Birth Registration a Reporting Requirement

International organisations that provide funding to nation states with poor levels of birth registration must make birth registration a reporting requirement.

4. Advocate for Universal Birth Registration

The UN should establish an international day for the 'Unregistered Child' on which to call for free or affordable, compulsory, non-discriminatory, safe, permanent and continuous birth registration worldwide.

Adam Hinton

National Level

Plan urges the ratifying states of the Convention on the Rights of the Child to renew their commitment to register the child immediately after birth. Specifically:

5. Increase Political Will for Birth Registration

National states must make birth registration a priority and increase political will for the immediate registration of births. This political will should be matched with sufficient resources in human, financial and material terms.

6. Match Legislation on Birth Registration with Local Realities

Legislation and civil registration systems should reflect and be consistent with local realities and systems. This may require passing new legislation, reviewing existing laws and eliminating the possibility of corruption and fraud at every level.

7. Build Trust for Birth Registration

Nation states need to build trust for birth registration. This means finding ways to discourage the fear of registering births among groups such as refugees, asylum seekers, displaced persons and marginalised groups.

The information requested for birth registration purposes must be used responsibly and should not discriminate by geography, economic circumstances, gender, ethnicity, status of parents and nationality.

8. Engage in Advocacy on Birth Registration

Advocacy for birth registration should take place at the local level so that the nation understands the importance of securing the rights of children.

Local Level

Finally, Plan recommends that grassroots organisations working directly with children and their communities at the local level should:

9. Raise Awareness of Birth Registration

All organisations working within communities at the local level should ensure there is understanding of the long-term impact of not registering children. This will involve encouraging birth registration to be taught in schools and non-formal settings.

10. Demand Action from Government on Birth Registration

Local stakeholders must demand that states live up to their responsibility for providing accessible birth registration.

11. Build Capacity of Local Systems for Birth Registration

Organisations working within communities at the local level should ensure that birth registration systems are designed in consultation with community members so that they are compatible with local systems and are culturally appropriate and trusted.

12. Ensure Participation in Birth Registration Activities

Every member of a community should be given the opportunity to participate in birth registration activities, including children themselves.

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