



Unequal at Birth

Disparities in Birth Registration in East Asia and the Pacific

Unequal at Birth: Disparities in Birth Registration in East Asia and the Pacific

Cover photograph: © UNICEF/UKLA2014 - 1831/Alcock

© UNICEF East Asia and Pacific Regional Office (EAPRO) 2015

Any part of this document may be freely reproduced with appropriate acknowledgement.

Suggested citation: United Nations Children's Fund, *Unequal at Birth: Disparities in Birth Registration in East Asia and the Pacific*, UNICEF EAPRO, Bangkok, 2015.

ISBN: 978-974-685-147-3

Contents

Acknowledgements	i
Acronyms and abbreviations	ii
Executive summary	1
1 A rights-based approach to birth registration	1
1.1 Birth registration as a part of CRVS.....	1
1.2 Birth registration and children’s rights	3
2 Disparities.....	4
3 Patterns of inequity and the situation of marginalised groups	9
4 Critical changes to overcome birth registration disparities	12
4.1 Measures and innovations to reach the hardest to register: Country examples	12
4.2 The way forward	13
4.3 Regional Action Framework for Asia and the Pacific.....	15
5 Conclusion: The right systems and the right approaches for the right reasons ...	16
References	18

List of figures

Figure 1: Birth registration rate in East Asia and the Pacific, latest available data.....	5
Figure 2: Rural/urban disparities in birth registration rates, various years	6
Figure 3: Birth registration rates and percentage of children without a birth certificate, various years	7
Figure 4: Birth registration characteristics of low income women and girls in Indonesia	8
Figure 5: Birth registration disparity by wealth quintile, East Asia and the Pacific.....	9

Acknowledgements

This report was commissioned by UNICEF East Asia and Pacific Regional Office to support regional work on birth registration, with funding from the European Commission. Jaap van der Straaten, Kristen Wenz and Stephen Blight authored the report. UNICEF colleagues supported their work and provided valuable insights. The authors express their thanks to the following people:

UNICEF Headquarters: Kendra Gregson, Claudia Cappa and Nicole Petrowski

UNICEF Pacific: Amanda Bissex and Carmen Monclus Girones

UNICEF Myanmar: Cristina Roccella, Mona Korsgard and Gillian San San Aye

UNICEF Malaysia: Sivaselvi Supramaniam

UNICEF Cambodia: Kosalvathanak Yi

UNICEF Philippines: Sarah Norton-Staal

Acronyms and abbreviations

ADB	Asian Development Bank
CRVS	Civil Registration and Vital Statistics
CRC	Convention on the Rights of the Child
ESCAP	United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific
RAF	Regional Action Framework (for Asia and the Pacific)
UNHCR	Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNICEF	United Nation's Children Fund
WHO	World Health Organization

Executive summary

Every child is born with the right to a name and an identity, yet 230 million children under the age of 5 have not had their birth registered. Data released by UNICEF in December 2013 showed that 135 million children in Asia and the Pacific remain unregistered, representing 59 per cent of the global total. Without birth registration, children may face exclusion from essential services such as health care, education, social services and protection. An effective civil registration and vital statistics (CRVS) system helps secure a person's legal identity and tracks the major life events such as birth, adoption, marriage, divorce, death and cause of death. Through the production of relevant statistics, CRVS systems are essential for planning, measuring and monitoring the progress of development. Civil registration can also be a means of empowerment and is strongly linked with equity and inclusive development.

Article 7 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) states that every child is born with the right to a name and an identity. All countries in the Asia-Pacific region are parties to the CRC, through which they have committed to protect and realize children's rights and have agreed to hold themselves accountable for this commitment before the international community. Of the 27 countries in UNICEF's East Asia and Pacific Region¹ only seven have achieved birth registration completeness.² At the national level, many countries have high registration coverage but disparities become evident when reviewing data on subnational registration. For example, Lao PDR has an average coverage of 75 per cent, however registration rates vary between 98 per cent and 6 per cent in different parts of the country. Similarly, Myanmar has a total registration rate of 72 per cent, with subnational rates ranging between 95 per cent and 24 per cent.

Often it is the poorest, most marginalised and most vulnerable children whose births are not being registered. The equity gap closes slowly and critical challenges exist in improving the overall situation of these children, realizing their rights and ensuring that they can access effective and efficient State services that meet their needs. The East Asia and Pacific region has the largest 'mobile population' in the world, which includes stateless people and many children. The region is also the most disaster-prone area in the world sustaining 61 per cent of all losses to disasters globally in the past twenty years and a total population of no less than 1.6 billion people affected during that time. Many minority groups and vulnerable populations reside in the most disaster-prone areas.

A historical lack of investment in civil registration reform and development is coupled with current competing demands from initiatives related to identity (ID) management and voter registration. The latest technologies have been introduced for national IDs and biometric voter registration in many countries in the region, but the foundational system — civil registration — is still done as it was decades ago with pen and paper. The civil registration process remains disjointed and disconnected, and often functions as a household registration systems for stable, immobile populations. Central management is either absent or accountabilities are shared by various

¹ Cambodia, China, Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Indonesia, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Malaysia, Mongolia, Myanmar, Pacific Island countries (Cook Islands, Fiji, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Micronesia, Niue, Nauru, Palau, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tokelau, Tonga, Tuvalu and Vanuatu), Papua New Guinea, Philippines, Thailand, Timor-Leste and Viet Nam.

² Defined as a birth registration rate of 90 per cent or higher. These countries are: DPR Korea, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Mongolia, Philippines, Thailand and Viet Nam.

ministries. Civil registrars perform their work tasks diligently but these legacy systems are no longer fit for purpose. The use of scarce government resources for expensive national IDs and the use of costly technology for more frequent elections and voter registration updates may impact the government's capacity to keep birth registration commitments to children that are enshrined in key instruments of human rights and children's rights. Across the region discriminatory laws associated with the conferral of legal identity and/or nationality may combine with discriminatory birth registration practices to increase the marginalisation of the poorest and most vulnerable sections of society.

The stakes for birth registration are, however, being raised. The global development agenda is moving beyond the Millennium Development Goals towards a new, wider-reaching set of Sustainable Development Goals. The United Nations General Assembly Open Working Group on Sustainable Development goals has proposed to include a specific commitment in the development agenda beyond 2015: *by 2030 provide legal identity for all, including birth registration.*

This paper shows that improving birth registration in the region and tackling inequities present in many national registration practices requires a comprehensive, multi-sector and multi-dimensional response. It requires effective integration of governance, technical standards and operational practice, and investment in civil registrars as a critical human resource working with present-day equipment and information and communication technology. Work to strengthen CRVS systems must also build on a solid understanding of the current barriers to improvement and of emerging good practice.

Neither the target of legal identity for all nor the production of reliable vital statistics can be achieved in the region unless thorough reform of legacy civil registration systems is undertaken. Civil registration reform cannot be done in isolation from investment in national ID systems and frequently held electoral registration campaigns without running the risk of civil registration investment and the systems themselves falling by the wayside. The statistical and legal (domestic and international) function of civil registration cannot be assumed by national ID systems for which they are neither internationally recognized nor designed to meet all the requirements of a full CRVS system.

Building on the Regional Action Framework (RAF) drafted for the 2014 Asia-Pacific Ministerial Conference on CRVS, there is a need to raise the status of civil registration services, to improve operational effectiveness against agreed and measurable targets, and to improve interoperability between CRVS systems and the work of government in other areas such as civil identification (national ID, voter registration), health and social protection.

As a way of continuing the momentum for CRVS strengthening in the Asia-Pacific region, this paper makes a series of recommendations with regard to overcoming current barriers to improving birth registration in the region. The general thrust of these recommendations is that registration completeness in the region — namely a legal identity for all — can only be achieved by addressing the problem of under-registration in the region. The strategy undertaken by UNICEF is to target the most vulnerable which will imply a solution for all. Tailored approaches set out in this paper will be needed, beginning with a thorough mapping of the problem of non-registration across the region.

1 A rights-based approach to birth registration

1.1 Birth registration as a part of CRVS

Birth registration is the continuous, permanent and universal recording within the civil registry of the occurrence and characteristics of birth, in accordance with national legal requirements. It establishes the existence of a person under law and lays the foundation for safeguarding civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights. As such, it is a fundamental means of protecting the human rights of the individual. As well as providing the individual with legal proof of identity, birth registration also plays a crucial role in the generation of vital statistics. Birth registration is part of national civil registration systems that also record marriages and deaths. CRVS systems provide demographic data governments need to track the size, differentials and trends of their populations.

When complete and accurate, civil registration facilitates democratic governance. It enables governments to develop policies and plans for basic service delivery and social and economic development that responds to the needs of different sectors of their populations. Through these mechanisms, civil registration facilitates the access of children and adults to protection under the law, to services and entitlements and to social and economic opportunities, and can improve their ability to exercise their civil rights.

In countries with weak vital events registration systems alternative sources are often used to obtain vital statistics, such as population censuses, sample surveys and demographic surveillance. These alternative data collection methods aim to produce reliable statistics but they do not have the merits of universality, continuity, and sustainability of CRVS. Nor do they offer individuals the documentation they need to support their claims to identity and family relationships. Such methods have been described by the United Nations as short- to medium-term measures that cannot replace functional CRVS systems.³

Moreover, national identity documents and voter registration are not replacements for CRVS systems. Over the period 2011—2014, 14 of the 28 countries in the region (excluding China) were in the news for their new national identity documents. They account for no less than 98 per cent of the population of the region and 93 per cent of regional GDP.⁴ One market research firm estimated that Asia as a whole would spend \$38 billion on national identity documents over the 2013—2018 period.⁵ There is concern that this could result in the reallocation of resources away from civil registration systems. Indeed, the Government of Viet Nam considered whether civil registration could be discontinued altogether (but the National assembly decided it could not).

The cost of implementing CRVS systems is an important issue. The World Bank has estimated that the amount of investment needed for sustained improvement in functional civil registration systems

³ United Nations Statistical Commission, 2013, para. 507.

⁴ Civil Registration Centre for Development (CRC4D) research data.

⁵ Cf. <http://www.biometricupdate.com/201407/global-aid-revenue-to-reach-54-billion-says-acuity> [Accessed 19 October 2014]. Excluding China, and assuming that only those 18 years old and above would get a new card, the investment would be \$14 billion in East Asia and the Pacific, as compared to an investment of less than \$1 billion required for civil registration.

ranges between \$1 and \$4 per capita, with an average investment of \$1.43 per capita.⁶ With 700 million people in the region (excluding China), an investment in civil registration is needed of less than \$1 billion. The required investment would likely be even less, given that 79 per cent coverage of civil registration has already been achieved in East Asia and the Pacific (excluding China). Investment in CRVS systems can yield savings in the cost of national identity (ID) systems and elections (voter registration) would be a multiple of this civil registration investment. The region has seen a steady increase in democracy and peaceful leadership change through elections, and a reliable CRVS system can reduce the cost of elections and voter registration. In countries with complete civil registration, the production of the voter register can be done for as little as \$5 per voter, yet the cost reached \$63 per voter in Papua New Guinea (which has only a nascent civil registration system) for its elections in 2012.⁷

In recent years, governments in the region have accorded much higher priority to improving performance in birth registration, death registration and the registration of other vital events. Attention has been focussed on the potential benefits to children of interoperability, namely synergising the directions and operations of CRVS systems with the work of social protection, health, education and civil identification (national ID and voter registration). For that reason, governments of countries in which registration rates are the lowest are coming together with development partners to improve civil registration systems. Regional United Nations agencies are providing technical guidance, and increased global attention is reflected in political declarations and in recent proposals for targets on legal identity, including birth registration in the proposed United Nations development agenda beyond 2015.

Most recently in the Asia-Pacific region, a Ministerial meeting on CRVS was convened in November 2014 in response to a request from member States under resolution 69/15 of the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP). The aim of this Conference was to agree on a Regional Action Framework (RAF) of goals, targets and areas of action for accelerating and focussing efforts to improve CRVS systems in Asia and the Pacific. The Ministerial Conference brought together ministers for the interior or home affairs, ministers of health, heads of national statistical offices, as well as senior representatives of development partners. The Conference was co-organized by ESCAP, UNICEF, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the World Health Organization (WHO), the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and Plan International.⁸

While regional CRVS-strengthening initiatives are gaining traction, new attention is being paid to related issues of identity management, including CRVS, national ID and voter registration. The International Conference on Identity Management, held in Seoul in September 2014, issued a statement acknowledging “the need for comprehensive national identity policies to support decision making tools as well as for the protection of all individuals, enabling them to access their civil, legal, social and political rights, as well as the services for which they are eligible.”⁹ National governments and international agencies were urged to “acknowledge the urgency of universal birth and death

⁶ Cf. World Bank and World Health Organization, 2014, pp. 22–23. Average \$1.43 per capita for 73 priority countries.

⁷ Cf. <http://devpolicy.org/pngs-elections-the-most-expensive-in-the-world-and-getting-worse-20140512/> [accessed 15 January 2015].

⁸ Information about the conference is available from: <http://www.unescap.org/events/ministerial-conference-civil-registration-and-vital-statistics-asia-and-pacific> [Accessed 2 January 2015].

⁹ *Seoul Statement*, 2014, para. 2. Cf. <http://globalidm.org/media/seoul-statement/> [Accessed 2 January 2015].

registration as a foundation for secure identity and identification systems that will strengthen vital statistics systems and underpin public sector policies and programs.”¹⁰

1.2 Birth registration and children’s rights

The right to birth registration and the right of everyone to recognition as a person before the law is a human right, first acknowledged in article 6 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) and specifically recognized in article 24, paragraph 2 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966), which states that every child shall be registered immediately after birth. In its general comment No. 17 on the rights of the child,¹¹ the Human Rights Committee stated that article 24, paragraph 2 should be interpreted as being closely linked to the right to special measures of protection, and that the main purpose of the obligation to register children after birth is to reduce the danger of abduction, sale of or traffic in children, or of other types of treatment that are incompatible with the enjoyment of the rights provided for in the Covenant.

Birth registration in the context of the specific discourse on children’s rights is enshrined under Article 7 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) of 1989.

United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 7

The child shall be registered immediately after birth and shall have the right from birth to a name, the right to acquire a nationality and, as far as possible, the right to know and be cared for by his or her parents.

In addition to being regarded as a fundamental right in and of itself, birth registration is also a foundation right, meaning that birth registration can both directly and indirectly impact children’s enjoyment of their rights with regard to protection, nationality, access to social and health services, and education. Inequality in birth registration rates may compound inequalities in access to basic services,¹² besides heightening discrimination and vulnerability. An effective civil registration system is therefore an important and necessary step in ensuring the protection of children.

On numerous occasions, the CRC Committee has expressed concern at cases of children without a birth certificate being refused schooling, in violation of their right to education under article 28 of the Convention. Concerning health, in its general comment No. 3, the CRC Committee stated that birth registration is necessary to minimize the impact of HIV/AIDS on the lives and human rights of affected children, and in particular to protect children from abuse and exploitation, especially where they have been separated from their family as a result of the disease.¹³

Non-registration and lack of a birth certificate can also have a particularly negative impact on marginalised or vulnerable children, including on children living in especially difficult circumstances. For example, birth registration is fundamental to the prevention and reduction of statelessness. Not all children without birth registration are stateless; but for those born in certain situations (for

¹⁰ *Seoul Statement*, 2014, para. 3.

¹¹ Official Records of the General Assembly, Forty-fourth Session, Supplement No. 40 (A/44/40), annex VI, para. 7.

¹² Cf. UNICEF, 2013a, p. 20.

¹³ CRC Committee, *General Comment 3*, 2003, para. 32.

example, in a migratory setting) lack of birth registration can result in statelessness.¹⁴ Migrant children without birth registration or a birth certificate are vulnerable to smuggling and trafficking, especially if they are travelling informally or illegally. Similarly children whose births are not registered are particularly vulnerable to exploitation such as illegal adoption, child marriage and the sale of children. Issues related to child adoption, including poorly drafted legislation and/or incomplete record keeping are repeatedly raised as matters of concern by the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child in their Concluding Observations to reports submitted by East Asian and Pacific States Parties.¹⁵

Asia and the Pacific is also the region of the world most prone to natural disasters.¹⁶ The number of disasters is increasing as a result of climate change and more people are being affected, particularly those in Pacific Island States or poorer populations living in other geographically and ecologically precarious locations. Disasters often create a need for vulnerable populations to relocate temporarily or permanently from their homes and communities. Over the past two years 700 natural disasters worldwide were registered, affecting 450 million people.¹⁷ The region sustained 61 per cent of all losses to disasters globally in the past twenty years, with a total population of 1.6 billion people affected during that time.¹⁸

Birth registration is of great importance in the reunification and reintegration process for children (and adults) in post-conflict situations. Proof of age may deter or prevent under-age marriage, child labour and under-age conscription into the armed services and provide a legal basis for children to seek redress — as children — should such an abuse of their rights occur. Finally the importance of birth registration is clear during and in the aftermath of emergency situations. In such situations, the separation of children from their parents and communities is common, and non-registration can be a significant barrier to family tracing and reunification. Clearly any barriers to family reunification add to the trauma caused by the emergency event itself.

Registration of a birth also provides proof of age, which can protect against child marriage. The United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women and other treaty bodies require States to register births and marriages as a means of monitoring the age of marriage and to support the effective implementation and enforcement of laws on the minimum age of marriage.¹⁹ This is based on the strategy that child marriage can be prevented by verification of age through a birth record or certificate. Current conditions in several of the countries where child marriages are prevalent indicate that a broader strategy may be required.

2 Disparities

Critical challenges exist in improving the overall situation of children. A multi-dimensional deprivation analysis in East Asia and the Pacific has shown that severe disparities exist between

¹⁴ Cf. UNHCR and Plan International, 2012, p. 5.

¹⁵ Further examined in section 3 of this paper.

¹⁶ The Philippines is especially prone to tropical storms, landslides and earthquakes. The country's registration system creates a central backup of every vital event entry. Vital event records can be retrieved from two locations, and a third record is kept electronically. Cf. <https://i-deals.org.ph/>.

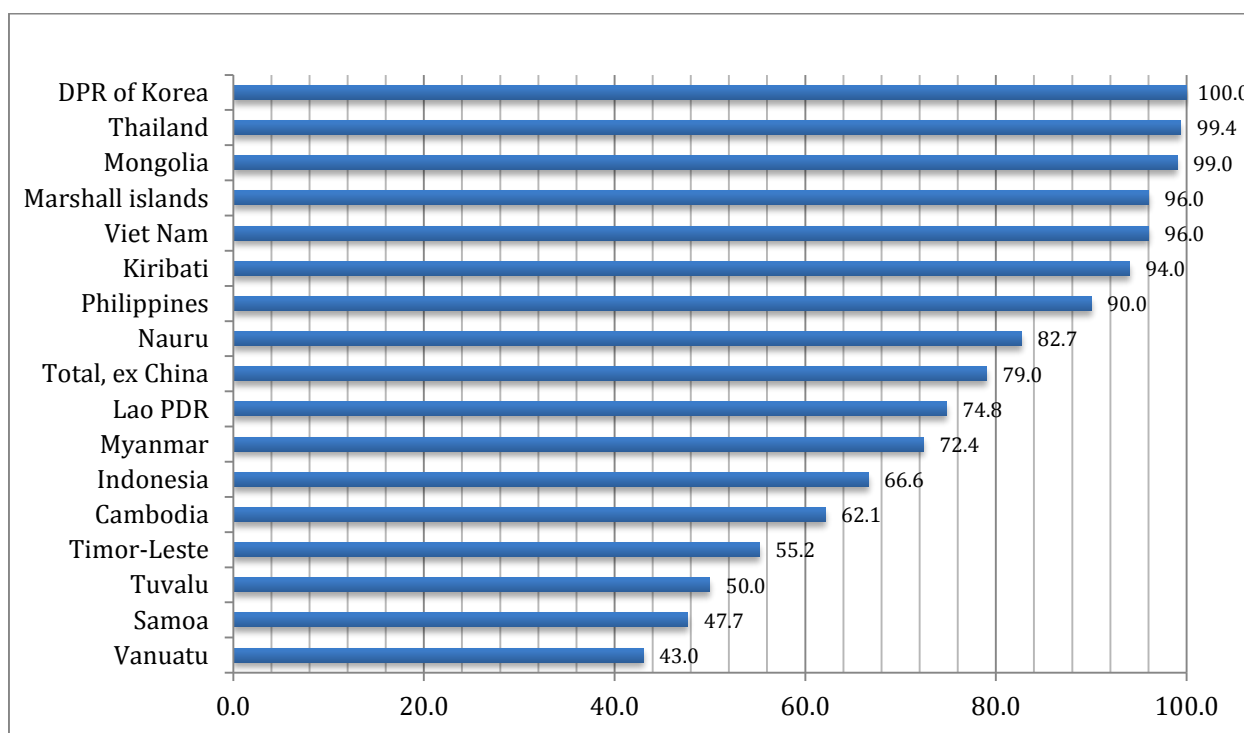
¹⁷ International Monetary Fund, <http://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/survey/so/2012/new101012a.htm> [Accessed 2 January 2015].

¹⁸ World Bank, <http://visual.ly/natural-disasters-east-asia-pacific-region-risk>. [Accessed 2 January 2015].

¹⁹ Cf. A/HRC/26/22.

rural and urban areas, between provinces and subnational regions, between different ethnic groups, between small and large household and between households headed by well-educated and poorly educated adults.²⁰ Children from the poorest and second poorest wealth quintiles are most likely to experience extreme deprivation, including with regard to realizing their rights and accessing essential government services.²¹ Disparities in birth- and civil registration service coverage tend to be most severe either when overall civil registration coverage is low (below 30 per cent birth registration) or when it reaches completeness levels (above 80 per cent birth registration). Figure 1 shows that the average registration rate (79 per cent) in the region has almost reached that critical level of 80 per cent.²²

Figure 1: Birth registration rate in East Asia and the Pacific, latest available data



Source: UNICEF, 2014a.

Birth registration data is available in disaggregated form for 11 countries in the region, allowing an examination of disparities. In the countries in East Asia and the Pacific registration rates differ between urban and rural populations; it is exceptional to find that urban rates are lower than rural rates. This is generally because registration services are more easily accessible in urban areas, the population may be better educated and more aware of the benefits of birth (and death) registration. Urban populations may have more need for documentation to access public and private services.²³

²⁰ UNICEF East Asia and Pacific Regional Office, 2011, p. 8.

²¹ Ibid.

²² In 2005 the average rate was 65 per cent. Cf. UNICEF, 2005.

²³ UNICEF, 2005, pp. 6–7; UNICEF, 2012, p. 28; and International Monetary Fund and World Bank, 2013, p. 1.

Figure 2: Rural/urban disparities in birth registration rates, various years

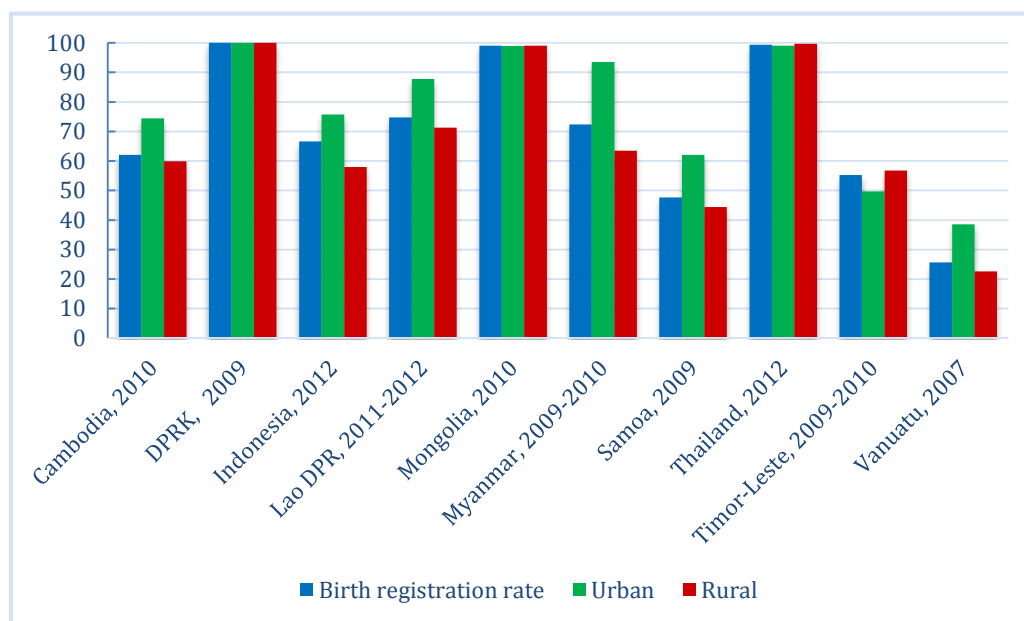


Figure 2 shows that Timor-Leste is the only country that has higher birth registration rate in the countryside than in urban areas. Government programmes carried out with UNICEF, Child Fund and Plan International that focussed on rural areas more than on urban areas may be responsible for the higher rural rate of registration. The countries that have reached birth registration completeness levels, especially when they are at (or close to) 100 per cent, have no urban/rural disparity, as is visible for DPR Korea, Mongolia and Thailand. Relatively large differences exist in urban and rural rates in Indonesia, Myanmar, Samoa and Vanuatu. For the island nations like Samoa and Vanuatu, the geographical challenges of providing government services from the main island to remote islands with small populations is a likely reason for the urban/rural disparity. Innovative approaches to the delivery of government services are needed in such situations.

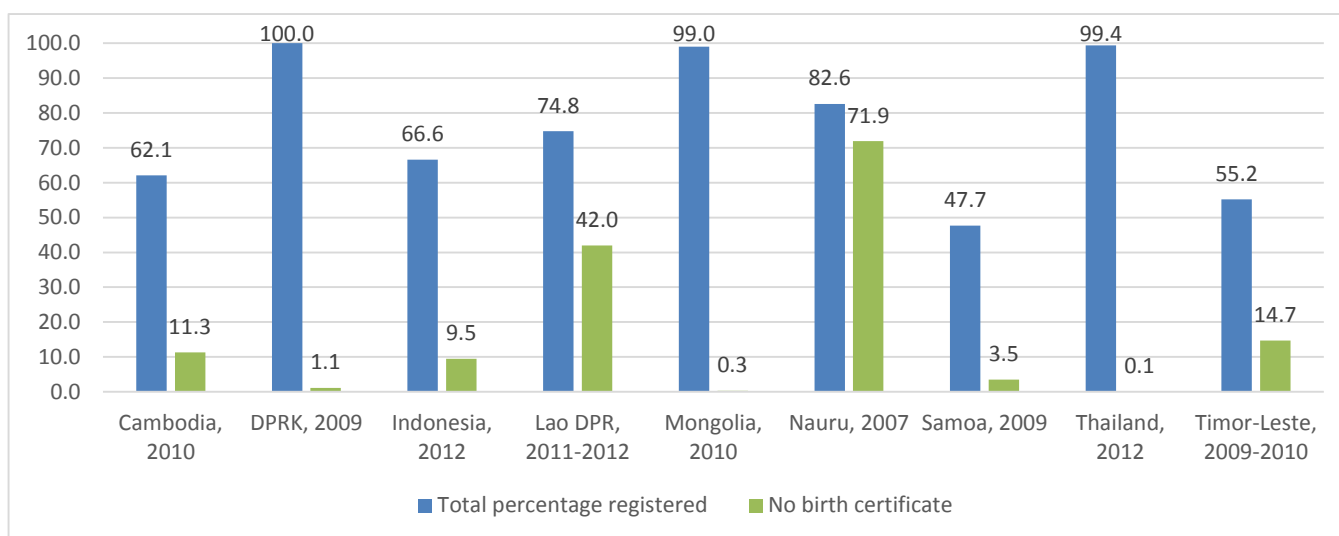
Whether one lives in the countryside or in an urban area has an impact on registration rates, but also on the proportion of registered children who also have a birth certificate (see figure 3). Often a late request for a birth certificate, or the replacement of a lost or destroyed certificate can be very costly and so complicated that only the most affluent and educated can succeed. Also, given that registration processes continue to be antiquated in many countries in the region, not having a birth certificate can be virtually equivalent to not having been registered. This is a large problem in Nauru where 82 per cent of children are registered but 79 per cent of them do not have a birth certificate. In Lao PDR 75 per cent are registered, but 42 per cent do not have a birth certificate, and in Timor-Leste 55 per cent are registered but 15 per cent do not have a birth certificate.²⁴ In Cambodia 62 per cent are registered but 11 per cent do not have a birth certificate, while in Indonesia²⁵ 67 per cent are registered but 10 per cent do not have a birth certificate. People in rural areas are more likely to be without a birth certificate than their counterparts in urban areas. There may be a number of factors that contribute to this disparity. People with lower education levels may not know to ask for a birth certificate at registration. They may not know how to replace lost certificates, although

²⁴ This was before a campaign in 2011 that raised registration above 90 per cent.

²⁵ In Indonesia duplicates (extracts) of birth certificates are not given unless the loss of a birth certificate is reported to the police and an affidavit by the police is carried to the registration office.

the risk of loss in the countryside may be higher (fire, rain, floods and so on). Furthermore, registrars in rural areas may lack sufficient stock to issue the certificates upon request.

Figure 3: Birth registration rates and percentage of children without a birth certificate, various years

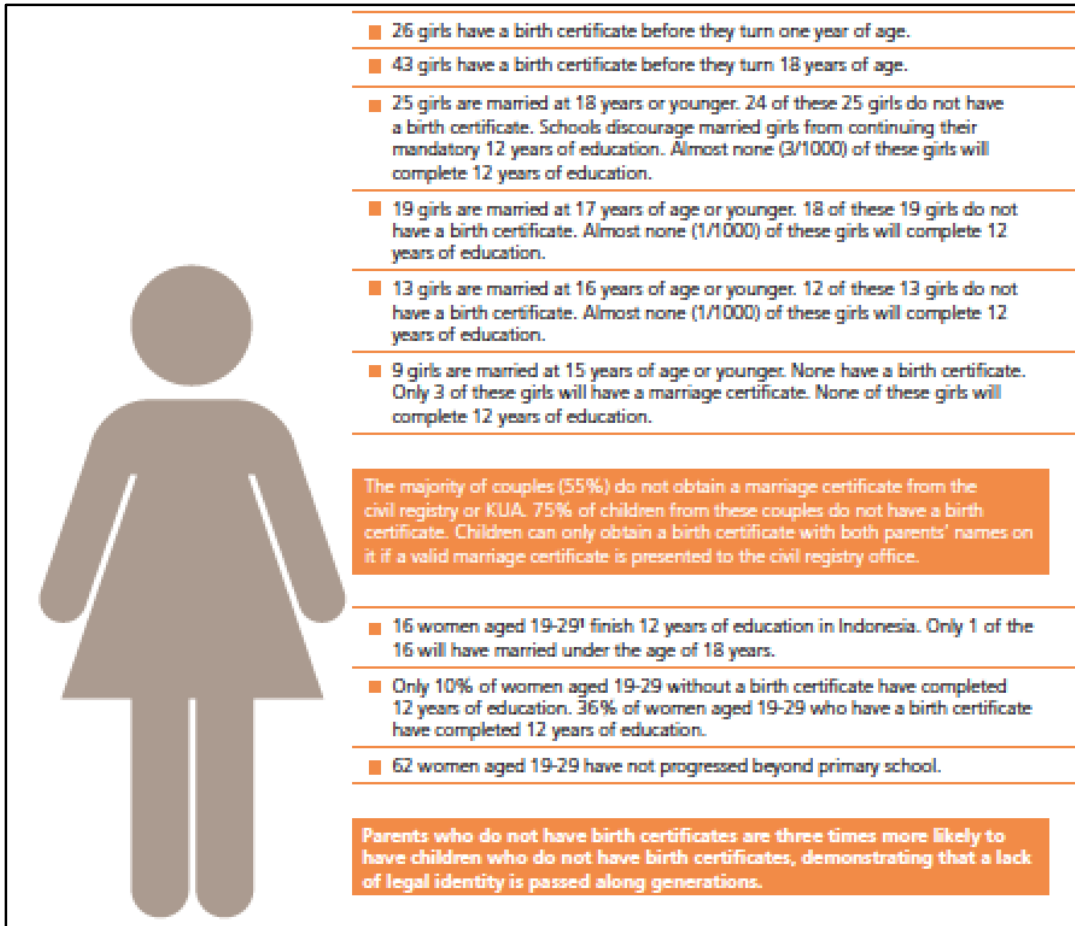


Educational levels of parents are a major factor in determining the likelihood of children being registered. This is especially the case in Indonesia where parents with the highest level of education are about five times more likely to register a child than parents with the lowest level of education. Indonesia has a hybrid system of household registration and civil registration. Semi-government officials perform household registration at the neighbourhood level. Civil registration offices are comparatively inaccessible. Many parents do not know that birth- and death registration are compulsory, and the cost may be another reason that some parents do not register their children.²⁶ The disparity in registration by educational level is also substantial in Lao PDR, Myanmar and Vanuatu. The lack of knowledge of how and where to register children is correlated with other factors contribute to lower registration rates for certain groups within a population.

Figure 4 illustrates some of those factors in Indonesia, including the intergenerational aspect, particularly the correlation between under-age marriage and non-registration of children. The diagram shows that one of the most influential characteristics that affects whether children are registered: the income of the parents measured in terms of their wealth.

²⁶ Cf. note 23.

Figure 4: Birth registrations characteristics of low income women and girls in Indonesia



Source: Asian Indonesia Partnership for Justice, 2014, p. iii.

Note: Figures are for women and girls in the bottom 30 per cent of the population by household income.

Figure 5 shows that disparity in registration rates by wealth quintile varies between countries.²⁷ Disparity here is measured by an index value between 0 (minimum disparity) and 1 (maximum disparity). Countries with complete or nearly complete birth registration have very low disparity indexes: Kiribati, the Marshall Islands, Mongolia, Thailand and Viet Nam. By contrast, Timor-Leste, a country that with its registration rate of 55 per cent, would be expected to show much more difference in registration rates between wealth groups, yet programmes supported by the government, UNICEF and others may be responsible for the anomalous results. Higher disparities are found for three island nations, Nauru,²⁸ Samoa and Vanuatu, as well as Cambodia and Lao PDR. The largest disparities in registration rates by wealth quintile, however, are found in Indonesia and Myanmar. In Myanmar the registration rate of the poorest 20 per cent of children is 50 per cent, while almost all children of the richest 20 per cent are registered: 96 per cent. In Indonesia the gap is even larger: only 23 per cent of the poorest 20 per cent of children are registered, while 84 per cent of the richest children are reportedly registered by the *catatan sipil* (civil registration). These differences are also found for registration rates by region within most countries. In Indonesia the

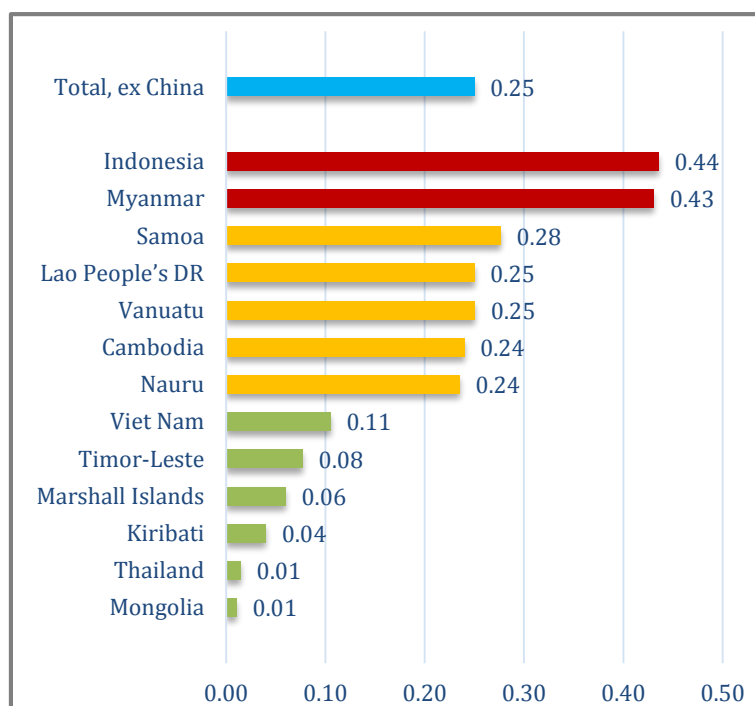
²⁷ Wealth quintiles are established by dividing a population into five groups of equal number according to wealth. The first quintile are the poorest 20 per cent, while the fifth quintile are the richest 20 per cent.

²⁸ Nauru, with 83 per cent registration, shows a rather unusual pattern. The middle wealth group has the highest registration rate, yet the sample for Nauru is so small (319 children) that the registration rates per wealth quintile are unlikely to be statistically reliable.

highest registration rates are found on Java, with the special province of Jogjakarta having the highest rate in the country (94 per cent), while the lowest rates are found in the outer islands in the eastern part of the country (19 per cent). Similarly, Myanmar has a total registration rate of 72 per cent, with subnational rates ranging between 95 per cent and less than 25 per cent.²⁹ The largest disparity is in Lao DPR, with rates by province ranging from only 6 per cent of children registered to over 98 per cent.³⁰

Figure 5: Birth registration disparity by wealth quintile, East Asia and the Pacific

(Maximum disparity=1, minimum disparity=0)



3 Patterns of inequity and the situation of marginalised groups

This section draws a distinction between institutional arrangements for CRVS and the day-to-day realities of operational practice. In individual country contexts these two dimensions are closely linked, yet they are treated separately here in order to distinguish between barriers or challenges at a governance level (laws, policies and strategies), and management challenges associated with the efficiency and effectiveness — and accountability — of the government bureaucracy associated with civil registration. An assessment of CRVS systems was recently completed in the region with the support of WHO, and the Committee for the CRC is another authoritative source for assessments of birth- and civil registration systems. The Committee releases observations on the periodic reports

²⁹ UNICEF, 2013b, p. 27.

³⁰ Lao Ministry of Health, Statistics Bureau and Ministry of Education and Sports, 2012.

of States Parties on compliance with the Convention. These sources help to identify patterns of inequality in CRVS practice and ways to reduce the exclusion of marginalised groups.

The consequences of failing to extend CRVS services to all were eloquently expressed by the Executive Director of UNICEF on the occasion of the twenty-fifth anniversary of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (box 1).

Box 1. Children’s rights, equity and our common future

“[The] very national statistical averages we use to prove our progress far too often mask the plight of far too many children. When we disaggregate these broad averages, disparities and even widening gaps emerge, revealing all the children who are not benefiting. Children who are being left behind because they live in hard-to-reach area — in isolated rural communities or urban slums, or in communities torn by conflict or catastrophes. Children who are victims of systemic prejudice and discrimination based on gender, ethnicity, disability, religion or skin colour. Children who want for nearly everything.

We cannot claim that children’s rights are being upheld when 17,000 children under the age of 5 die every day, largely from causes we know how to prevent. When a girl in Afghanistan is kept home from school to perform household chores while her brothers gain an education. When a mother in Pakistan cannot access a simple polio vaccination for her child because they live in a remote community. When about one in four American children lives in poverty. When children are torn from their families, recruited into armed groups, and made to fight and die for causes they can barely understand.

These deprivations and adversities are violations of children’s rights and cruel betrayals of children’s hopes and dreams for a better life.

This betrayal often begins at the beginning, in the earliest years, when critical neural connections are being formed in the developing brains of the youngest children. Research shows that these connections are deeply affected by deprivation, poor nutrition, trauma and toxic stress, further undermining the ability of children to reach their full potential. This loss is felt most by individual children and their families, but the long-term impact on their societies is tremendous.”

Source: UNICEF, 2014b.

Many factors hinder effective CRVS implementation in Asia and the Pacific and contribute to patterns of inequality. These factors are outlined below.

Governance and management

Regarding governance and management, the Committee has expressed concern with under-investment in civil registration and in wider CRVS structures and systems, in training and in raising the awareness of the general public and government officials. The Committee also expressed concern at a lack of decentralization in the operational and management structures of civil registration.³¹

Cost as deterrent of registration

Registration and/or birth certificates are often not free. Travelling to registration locations carries opportunity costs for families and penalties for late registration can deter families from registering older children. The Committee has commented that the cost to families and also governments of improving civil registration across Pacific Island States is especially high. Improving CRVS systems

³¹ The CRC Committee’s view on decentralization contrasts with the guidance of the United Nations Statistics Division (the technical agency tasked with setting operational procedures and standards for civil registration) that the preferred option is central management and a deconcentrated organizational structure.

is especially problematic in situations where patterns of discrimination exist between the main islands and outlying, remote islands often populated by different ethnic groups to the dominant island state population. This challenge is not unrelated to economic challenges island states must overcome. In non-island countries of a similar development and income level the purchasing power of the population is higher than in island states because basic commodities are produced at low cost (especially because of low wage cost). Yet the majority of goods must be imported to island states with high transportation cost for small volumes. Thus, innovative approaches are needed to deliver government services. This includes ensuring the interoperability of as many government services as possible, and harnessing the use of new technology, especially mobile phones, satellite communication and the Internet.

Registration in emergencies

Children in Asia are negatively affected by conflict, natural disasters and socio-economic upheaval, and this is a critically important issue. Floods, typhoons and other natural disasters occur with increasing frequency on account of global climate change. These events place enormous strain on national governments and the international agencies that come to their assistance. Routine functions are disrupted and all the resources and attention are focused on emergency relief and rehabilitation efforts. One of the impacts of emergencies like tsunamis or the sudden onset of conflict can be loss of important family and personal documentation. The loss of vital possessions like identity and land documents can have severe consequences. Often children become separated from their families and efforts for reuniting them with their parents are complicated in the absence of any proof of identity. The CRC Committee has noted in its comments to State Parties the lack of progress on its previous recommendations regarding improving birth registration and serious impacts of incomplete birth registration on children under extreme circumstances (e.g. abducted children and children recruited by armed forces or groups). The Committee has commented that this is a priority issue given the increasing number of children negatively impacted across the region by conflict and natural disasters. The Philippines, a country prone to typhoons, earthquakes, floods and landslides as well as ongoing civil conflict, exemplifies good practice for the way its civil registration archiving system is organized: for every local record a duplicate national record is kept.

Data collection

The primary concern of the CRC Committee is for disaggregated data on children, including marginalized children and children with disabilities, to facilitate the better delivery of health, education and protection services. At the same time the Committee comments in nearly all country cases on the inadequacy and lack of completeness of information available from civil registers especially in areas of emerging concern to the Committee. This is also true especially for disparity in birth registration: only 11 of the 27 countries in the region have survey data that break down registration rates, for example by residence (urban/rural, region/province), education of the mother and wealth quintile. There is also a problem of circularity: because civil registration is not complete and vital statistics are not produced in sufficient frequency, volume and quality, the problems of non-registration are not fully mapped and understood. Hence, measures to achieve registration completeness lack the evidence base for effective implementation.

Disparity and discrimination

The CRC Committee found that a lack of harmonization between different laws affecting registration, together with discriminatory practices by some registration officers³² can reinforce

³² The Committee has called attention to countries that lack effective non-discrimination legislation.

discriminatory practice and further marginalise excluded populations, such as refugees, asylum seekers, migrants, unwed mothers and so on. The general pattern across the East Asia and Pacific region, as understood by the Committee, is one of public administration procedures which reinforce discrimination against minority groups, especially ethnic and/or religious minority groups, because the denial of the right to birth registration leads to the denial of the right to enjoyment and other rights. This finding points to the core problem for the region: despite good progress on lifting people out of poverty, income inequality has increased, and despite good progress in civil registration, countries now face a growing disparity in who will be registered and who will not.

Emerging issues: children at the centre of the non-registration problem

Children are the most vulnerable to the problems that beset civil registration in Asia and the Pacific, including adopted children for whom legislation is often incomplete and registration and recordkeeping require much improvement, and children in institutions, including children's homes, orphanages and foster care facilities. Moreover, better CRVS systems are essential for children in especially difficult circumstances: children affected by natural disasters; children of migrants, asylum seekers and refugees; children living and working on the streets and sexually exploited children; and children that are trafficked and sold. The CRC Committee has serious concerns regarding statelessness and the inability of children to prove their legal identity and age.

4 Critical changes to overcome birth registration disparities

“We have a responsibility now to find new ways of tackling the challenges we have not yet overcome, to reach the children we have not yet reached, and to put equity and children’s rights at the centre of an agenda of action for all children. . . . Studies show that when we design policies and programs not around the easiest to reach, but around the hardest to reach, we can achieve more results. There are additional costs in doing so, but our analyses show that these costs are well outweighed by the additional results.”³³

This section outlines initiatives that target disparities in birth registration in the region. It presents country-level examples of progress and good practice from selected countries in East Asia and the Pacific. It also outlines efforts of the United Nations, UNICEF and other international development partners, to strengthen CRVS processes in the region.

4.1 Measures and innovations to reach the hardest to register: Country examples



Cambodia: The use of cloud data storage has enabled an easy-to-use mechanism to perform services such as retrieving and searching client data and printing certificates.

Client satisfaction has improved as a result of decreased waiting time for data retrieval and an easier procedure for printing and signing multiple birth certificates. Benefits of using a cloud-based CRVS database include reducing transcription workload, avoiding duplicated registrations, designating unique ID numbers, and compiling and analysing data more frequently to enable more robust monitoring and evaluation.

³³ UNICEF, 2014b.



Philippines: The Philippine Civil Registration System (PhilCRIS) was developed by the Philippine Statistics Authority for free use by local civil registrars, hospitals, churches and other end-users. The PhilCRIS software ensures accuracy and allows easy encoding of relevant information from civil registry documents, it provides storage of vital data queries, transmittal of civil registry files from local offices to the central office, and data management and maintenance of the local civil registry database. It has also simplified the process of preview and direct printing of certified copies of encoded civil registry documents. The system ultimately empowers village officials to assist local civil registrars and provides a systematic process of reporting and monitoring vital events such as birth, marriages and deaths at the village level.



Thailand: Thailand offers near universal health coverage through a low cost national health security programme for the general population, social security and civil servant medical benefits. Access to these services requires a government issued personal identification number (PID). Individuals who receive medical treatment through the Antiretroviral Therapy programme are also required to have an identification number for the National AIDS Program Monitoring System (NAP); this number is then linked to an encrypted PID to ensure privacy at the time of registration. The NAP database is linked to the birth and death registration database managed by the Ministry of Interior.



Vanuatu: The introduction of decentralized services and a nationally owned data management system since January 2013 has led to a 13 per cent increase in the birth registration of children under 5 years of age within one year. The Office of the Civil Registrar, under the Ministry of Home Affairs, developed the low-cost, open-source database system to link to outer islands to ensure the transfer of timely, accurate and secure data. Geographical challenges have been mitigated with faster transfer of data to remote locations throughout the country. The introduction of photo documentation that includes the mother with the newborn baby on the birth certificate has also generated public interest.

4.2 The way forward

In 2010, the Office of the Secretary-General of the United Nations issued a global call for increased investment in maternal- and child health care under the Global Strategy for Women's and Children's Health — Every Woman Every Child Initiative. This global strategy called for strengthened, country-led health plans underpinned by “increased, predictable and sustained investment.”³⁴

In addition to focusing major investment onto maternal- and child health care in the world's poorest 49 countries (by income), the call was for a multi-sector approach that improved the efficiency and effectiveness of coordination across different health departments and between Ministries of Health and other stakeholders.³⁵ Subsequently, the First Report of the Independent Expert Review Group on Information and Accountability regarding delivery of the global strategy has called for increased investment in CRVS within the broader global investment strategy for health. It has also called for

³⁴ Office of the United Nations Secretary-General, 2010.

³⁵ Ibid.

the establishment of specific performance measurements that include levels of investment in and actions taken to deliver country-level CRVS multi-sectorial improvement plans.³⁶

As an additional strengthening initiative in support of the Global Strategy for Women's and Children's Health, the Every Newborn action plan led by UNICEF, WHO and other United Nations partners, sets out a clear vision of how to improve newborn health and prevent stillbirths by 2035.³⁷ Included in the specific actions to be undertaken in realizing this vision is a commitment to "count every newborn through measurement, programme tracking and accountability."³⁸ As a precondition of measurement and accountability the action plan acknowledges the imperative to register every newborn.³⁹ In order to achieve this it is seen as an obligation of "organizations in the United Nations system and other multilateral agencies," to "ensure that multilateral investment ... is sustained in the post-2015 development era."⁴⁰

The United Nations High-Level Panel on the development agenda beyond 2015 has indicated links between birth registration, the effective operation of civil registration systems and good governance. In particular Goal 10 and Target 10 (a) explicitly recognize civil registration as an essential prerequisite for good governance. The global thematic consultation on governance and the post-2015 development framework that informed the work of the United Nations Panel, recognized responsible and effective governance as a means to achieve development goals and also as an end in itself wherein citizens can interact and exercise their rights. Working with the goals and targets drafted by the High-Level Panel, the Open Working Group on Sustainable Development Goals has issued a proposed target to ensure legal identity for all, along with birth registration, by 2030. The Open Working Group has included this as an indicator towards achieving the broader Sustainable Development Goal 16 to "promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all, and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels."⁴¹

Effort are underway to discuss how governments can achieve this target for legal identity and birth registration. The First International Identity Management Conference was held in Seoul in September 2014, and called for an integrated approach to CRVS aligned with the development of adult identification systems (including national IDs and voter registration). Specifically, the Seoul Statement issued subsequent to the Conference recognized "the centrality to evidence of identity of breeder documents such as birth certificates," and "acknowledge[d] the urgency of universal birth and death registration as a foundation for secure identity and identification systems that will strengthen vital statistics systems and underpin public sector policies and programs."

The WHO and World Bank's Global Plan for Scaling-Up Civil Registration and Vital Statistics covers activities over a ten-year period from 2015 to 2024 and also raises a global call for enhanced investment in CRVS strengthening. The Global Plan contemplates a series of actions towards a goal of "universal civil registration of births, deaths, marriages, and other vital events, including

³⁶ WHO, 2012, p. 61.

³⁷ WHO and UNICEF, 2014.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 6.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 10.

⁴¹ United Nations General Assembly, 2014, p. 22.

reporting causes of death, and access to legal proof of registration for all individuals by 2030.”⁴² In order to realize this goal the World Bank considers that investment from domestic and international sources are required, amounting to an estimated financing gap of approximately US\$199 million per year in the 73 low and middle-income countries prioritised in the plan.⁴³ The three main components of the investment plan cover (i) national CRVS systems strengthening; (ii) strengthening international support for CRVS; and (iii) sharing knowledge and building the evidence base for CRVS systems.⁴⁴

Most recently, in his address to the sixty-ninth session of the United Nations General Assembly, the Prime Minister for Canada, Stephen Harper, announced funding for a “Global Financing Facility for Every Woman Every Child” during the Every Woman Every Child panel discussion on maternal, newborn and child health.⁴⁵ The Global Financing Facility builds on financial commitments and strategic partnerships generated around the 2014 ‘Saving Every Woman Every Child: Within Arm's Reach’ summit held in Toronto. In his address to the General Assembly, Prime Minister Harper emphasized the importance of CRVS systems across the developing world as key to ensuring the health and survival of women and children. In this context, the Global Financing Facility is a concrete step towards strengthening CRVS and providing the financial infrastructure and capital to secure necessary improvements to maternal, newborn and child health.⁴⁶

4.3 Regional Action Framework for Asia and the Pacific

Most of the countries in Asia and the Pacific do not have universal and responsive CRVS systems. This hampers development in the region and progress towards achieving development goals. In response, governments and development partners in the region have come together as part of the ‘Get every one in the picture’ regional initiative.⁴⁷ This initiative aims to accelerate and focus efforts to improve CRVS systems in the region by forging political commitment, regional cooperation and accountability, facilitating exchange of knowledge and technical assistance, raising awareness, development of innovations and making tools and resources available. As part of this initiative, the regional action framework provides a framework for Governments and development partners to focus and accelerate their efforts to realize a shared vision. The regional action framework facilitates collaborative action at local, provincial, national and international levels by enabling multiple stakeholders to align and prioritize their efforts, as well as to monitor progress towards achieving shared results.

Goals and targets

The three goals of the regional action framework on CRVS for Asia and the Pacific address the three essential outputs of CRVS systems: the civil registration of vital events (a precursor to the other two goals); the provision to individuals and families of legal documentation as evidence of the occurrence and characteristics of vital events; and the production and dissemination of vital statistics based on civil registration records.

⁴² World Bank and World Health Organization, 2014.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Government of Canada, 2014.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ www.getinthepicture.org [Accessed 2 January 2015].

The targets are designed to enable monitoring and evaluation in ways that are objective, efficient, technically sound and time bound during the decade 2015 to 2024.

Members and associate members set their own national value for each target (either the percentage or the year, depending on the target) based on their ambition and capacity, and in accordance with their comprehensive multi-sector national CRVS strategy, if one exists.

Goal 1: Universal civil registration of births and deaths.

Goal 2: All individuals are provided with legal documentation of civil registration of births and deaths, as necessary, to claim identity, civil status and ensuing rights.

Goal 3: Accurate, complete and timely vital statistics (including on causes of death) are produced based on registration records and are disseminated.

Focus areas for action

1. Political commitment;
2. Public engagement and participation;
3. Coordination;
4. Policies;
5. Legislation and implementation of regulations;
6. Infrastructure and resources;
7. Operational procedures, practices and innovations; and
8. Data quality, production, dissemination and use of vital statistics.

Guiding principles

- (a) Countries take the lead;
- (b) A stepwise approach;
- (c) Flexibility and responsiveness;
- (d) Building on local expertise;
- (e) Consistency with international human rights and legal principles; and
- (f) Coordination and alignment.

5 Conclusion: The right systems and the right approaches for the right reasons

“The Convention does not deal in averages or aggregates: the rights it enumerates and elucidates apply to every child in the human family.”⁴⁸

“Birth registration should not be implemented in isolation. Any birth registration initiative should be integrated with other measures to fulfil children’s rights, such as governance, protection, education and health care and should be part of a comprehensive CRVS system.”⁴⁹

This paper has looked at progress made towards realizing the child’s right to birth registration, with particular attention to the situation across East Asia and the Pacific.

⁴⁸ UNICEF, 2014c, p. 52.

⁴⁹ Coram Children’s Legal Centre, International Observatory on Statelessness and Plan International, 2014, p. 7.

A review of quantitative data as well as qualitative research has indicated that despite considerable progress across the region as a whole, significant differences in performance exist between and within countries. Birth registration practices and many of the associated national laws perpetuate discrimination against already marginalised sections of society and reinforce broader socio-economic disparities. Major population movements within and between countries of the region, including the movement of unaccompanied children, present major challenges for birth registration and the registration of other vital events. Currently civil registration systems in the region are failing mobile populations, many of whom cannot access government services and face the risk of exploitation and abuse of their rights.

Lack of investment in civil registration reform coupled with competing demands on ID management and voter registration may delay overdue investments to replace antiquated pen and paper systems with state of the art civil registration systems. Lack of investment has prevented governments from delivering on birth registration commitments to children enshrined in key human and children's rights instruments which they themselves have ratified. These investments will aid in the production of demographic data and vital statistics.

At the level of strategic governance interoperability must also include the harmonization of currently competing trends towards ID management and voter registration to ensure proper sequencing of these systems and that they are built on low cost, effective and sustainable civil registers. The example of progress made in Malaysia and Thailand, to quote just two examples, provides insights into how work may be developed in other countries.⁵⁰

To continue the momentum for CRVS strengthening in the Asia-Pacific region, this paper made specific recommendations with regard to overcoming current barriers to improving birth registration in the region.

Registration completeness in the region, namely to ensure a legal identity for all, can only be achieved by addressing the problem of under-registration. UNICEF targets the most vulnerable which leads to a solution for all, going beyond "leave no one behind". Ensuring birth registration for all will require tailored approaches as have been set out in this paper, which must begin with a thorough mapping of the problem of non-registration across the region.

Neither the target of legal identity for all nor the production of reliable vital statistics can be achieved in the region unless thorough reform of legacy civil registration systems is undertaken. Many of them are household registration systems designed for stable, immobile populations. Civil registration reform cannot be done in isolation from investments in national ID systems and frequently held electoral registration campaigns. Integrated approaches are needed to avoid the risk that civil registration investment and the system itself will fall by the wayside. The targets cannot be achieved unless the rights of children and human rights inform the identity systems that will govern people's lives in future.

⁵⁰ Since 1963, Thailand has incrementally improved the sophistication of its national ID card. Cf. <http://globalidm.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/Mr.-Vichian-Chidchanognarth-Director-of-Technology-Bureau-of-Registration-Administration-Ministry-of-Interior-Thailand.pdf> [Accessed 5 January 2015]; Malaysia has increased interoperability between civil registration and national ID systems. Cf. <http://globalidm.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/Mr.-Zakaria-Bin-AwiICT-Head-National-Registration-Department-Malaysia-.pdf> [Accessed 5 January 2015].

References

- Asian Indonesia Partnership for Justice. *Indonesia's missing millions*. AIPJ Baseline study on legal identity. Jakarta (2014).
- Coram Children's Legal Centre, International Observatory on Statelessness and Plan International. *Birth registration and children's rights. A complex story*. Woking (2014).
- Government of Canada. *Prime Minister Harper Addresses the 69th Session of the United Nations General Assembly*. Available from <http://www.pm.gc.ca/eng/news/2014/09/25/pm-highlights-canadas-leadership-role-world-stage> [Accessed 2 January 2015].
- International Monetary Fund and World Bank. *Global Monitoring Report 2013*. Washington (2013).
- Lao Ministry of Health, Statistics Bureau and Ministry of Education and Sports. *Lao social indicator survey 2011-12*. Vientiane (2012).
- Office of the United Nations Secretary-General. *Global Strategy for Women's and Children's Health — Every Woman Every Child Initiative*. New York (2010).
- UNICEF. *State of the World's Children 2006*. New York (2005).
- UNICEF. *State of the World's Children 2012: Children in an urban world*. New York (2012).
- UNICEF. *A passport to protection: A guide to birth registration programming*. New York (2013a).
- UNICEF. *Every child's birth right: Inequities and trends in birth registration*. New York (2013b).
- UNICEF. *State of the World's Children 2015*. New York (2014a).
- UNICEF. *Essay by Anthony Lake, UNICEF Executive Director, on the occasion of 25th anniversary of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child*, (2014b). Available from <http://www.unicef.bg/en/article/Children-s-rights-equity-and-our-common-future/788> [Accessed 2 January 2015]
- UNICEF. *25 Years of the Convention on the Rights of the Child*. New York (2014c).
- UNICEF East Asia and Pacific Regional Office. *Child Poverty in East Asia and the Pacific: Deprivations and Disparities*. Bangkok (2011).
- United Nations General Assembly. *Open Working Group proposal for Sustainable Development Goals*. New York (2014). Available from <http://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/focussdgs.html> [Accessed 2 January 2015].
- United Nations Statistical Commission. *Principles and Recommendations for a Vital Statistics System*. New York (2013).
- UNHCR and Plan International. *Under the Radar and Under Protected*. Geneva and Woking (2012).

World Bank and World Health Organization. *Global civil registration and vital statistics scaling-up investment plan 2015—2024*. Washington and Geneva (2014).

World Health Organization. *First Report of the Independent Expert Review Group on Information and Accountability for Women's and Children's Health*. Geneva (2012).

World Health Organization and UNICEF. *Every newborn, an action plan to end preventable deaths*. Geneva (2014).

For more information contact:
United Nations Children's Fund
East Asia and Pacific Regional Office
19 Phra Atit Road
Bangkok 10200
Thailand
Tel: (66 2) 356 9499
Fax: (66 2) 280 3563
Email: eapro@unicef.org
www.unicef.org/eapro

© UNICEF 2015