

**LATIN AMERICAN AND CARIBBEAN GOVERNMENTS AND CIVIL SOCIETY AIM TO
ELIMINATE UNDER-REGISTRATION OF BIRTHS BY 2015**

Panama City, 21 September 2011. Today 250 representatives of governments, civil society and cooperation organizations from 26 countries attended the 2nd Regional Conference of Latin America and the Caribbean on the Right to an Identity and Universal Birth Registration, in order to move forward in their plans to eliminate birth under-registration by 2015.

Participating in the opening session of the event were Felipe Solís Díaz, President of the Electoral Tribunal of Panama; Bernt Aasen, Regional Director of UNICEF; Tomás Bermúdez, IDB Representative in Panama; Roland Angerer, Regional Director of Plan International for Latin America and the Caribbean; and Abigaíl Castro de Pérez, OAS Representative in Panama, who joined in declaring the importance of reaching the goal of free, universal and timely birth registration for all children in the region.

UNICEF's estimates indicate that in recent years there has been important progress in the Latin American and Caribbean region in terms of the right to an identity and birth registration, declining from an under-registration rate of 18% among children under 5 in 2006 to a current rate of 10%. However, there still are countries with disturbing under-registration figures.

Bernt Aasen, UNICEF's Regional Director for Latin America and the Caribbean, emphasized the existing inequities, stating that "the low birth registration rates seem to affect certain categories of children more heavily. It's no coincidence that these children belong to the poorest and most marginalized segments of the population. They are indigenous, Afro-descendant, and migrant children, or the children of migrants or single mothers. They are the children of poor families living in rural, remote or international border areas. This fact leads one to ask why the lack of birth registration affects certain groups and not others, and, what is keeping them from being registered".

According to the IDB, 1.3 million births are not registered officially each year. Overall, there are 6.5 million children without birth certificates – a number equal to the combined populations of Uruguay and Panama.

"Countries that do not have universal birth registration lack information and vital statistics for developing programmes and adequate public policies for poverty reduction. The IDB has invested more than \$100 million to strengthen the civil registries and promote the universal registration of births", affirms the IDB's Representative in Panama, Tomas Bermudez

Major barriers frustrate the registration of the births of all children, and in some cases make it impossible. Examples of such barriers are geographic location, with families living in rural areas often lacking access to registration services; lack of budgets for civil registries; parents' lack of identity documents; civil registries that are insensitive to the cultures of indigenous populations or the migratory status of children or their parents; and the lack of information or awareness of the importance of civil registration among the general population.

"The barriers facing the last 10% will not be so easy to overcome, especially because these barriers are related to the dynamics of discrimination and exclusion. That's why all the strategies that we may propose in these days for addressing the problem will have to begin with two basic human rights principles: the universal scope of human rights, and non-discrimination in their application", said Roland Angerer, Regional Director of Plan International for Latin America.

The OAS Representative in Panama, Ambassador. Abigail Castro, said the link between the struggle against under-registration and the Millennium Development Goals is clear. "Access to identity is a necessary condition to enjoy rights and services that help our citizens overcome the conditions of exclusion that lead to poverty, she said. Therefore, if we improve registration rates in the region, we will come closer to meeting the eight MDGs", Amb. Castro she said.

Other themes to be dealt with include legislation, administrative and technological modernization; strategies for combining birth registration with other services like education, health, prenatal care, qualified birth attention and immunization in order to increase coverage and social inclusion; strengthening of partnerships, and awareness raising.

"It is the duty of the States, civil society and all citizens to ensure that the door to universal, timely and cost-free registration is open and accesible", said Gerardo Solís, Chief Justice of Panama's Electoral Tribunal.

The Conference has been organized by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), Plan International, and the Organization of American States (OAS) in collaboration with the Electoral Tribunal of Panama and the Government of Korea. The first Conference was held in Asunción, Paraguay, in 2007.

For information or to coordinate an interview with the participants, please communicate with any of the press contacts:

UNICEF: Irene Sánchez, Communications Specialist.
Tel +507 64060165 Email:isanchez@unicef.org

Plan: Marti Ostrander, Communications Specialist
Tel + 507 66707718 Email:Marti.Ostrander@plan-international.org

IDB: Ángela Fúnez, Communications Specialist
Tel +507-206-0912 Email: angelaf@iadb.org

Tribunal: Jorge Bravo, Sub-Director of Information and Public Relations
Tel.+507 62150397 Email: jbravo@tribunal-electoral.gob.pa

OAS: María Pomes, Communications Specialist
Email: mpomes@oas.org