



# World Day of Prayer and Action for Children

## **ABCs for Action and Advocacy**

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## **A Note On Universal Birth Registration**

World Day of Prayer and Action for Children Secretariat New York  
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## OVERVIEW

Launched in 2008, the World Day of Prayer and Action for Children is an opportunity for all sectors of society to work together to promote the well-being of children. Working together, governments, secular and faith-based organizations can have a greater impact on child protection than organizations working alone. The World Day is an opportunity for people of faith to join multi-faith and secular efforts to protect children, and for individual religious communities and leaders to be part of a larger global initiative while reaffirming their religious teachings and values.

The current theme of the World Day activities is to stop violence against children. The World Day highlights three proven child protection strategies: 1) protecting children through free and universal birth registration, 2) promoting positive parenting and non-violent discipline, and 3) ending child marriage.

This informational Note for Action and Advocacy was written to support religious communities that wish to work with other sectors of society in promoting Universal Birth Registration. It outlines and explains the need for universal birth registration and provides examples of practical action, which religious communities can take all year long to promote the birth registration of every child in their society.

## INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>

***“The child shall be registered immediately after birth and 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.” – 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), Article 7***

Imagine what life would be like if you could not use your name on forms, or prove your age. Worse, imagine that according to the law, ***you did not exist***. This is the situation globally, where 49 per cent of children under the age of five are not registered at birth.<sup>2</sup> In 25 per cent of the developing countries with available data, fewer than half of all births are recorded.<sup>3</sup> Nearly 65 per cent of the children born in 2007 in Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia were not registered.<sup>4</sup> Birth registration is the first right of all children and having a birth certificate can be necessary for them to exercise other rights, including education, healthcare and other social services.

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<sup>1</sup> This section is based on UNICEF's "Birth Registration: UNICEF Child Protection from Violence, Exploitation and Abuse." See [http://www.unicef.org/protection/57929\\_58010.html](http://www.unicef.org/protection/57929_58010.html)

<sup>2</sup> UNICEF, "State of the World's Children 2012: Children in an Urban World" p. 123. Available from [www.unicef.org/sowc2012/pdfs/SOWC%202012-Main%20Report\\_EN\\_13Mar2012.pdf](http://www.unicef.org/sowc2012/pdfs/SOWC%202012-Main%20Report_EN_13Mar2012.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> UNICEF, "Progress for Children: A Report Card on Child Protection," No. 8, September 2009, p. 5. Available from [http://www.unicef.org/protection/files/Progress\\_for\\_Children-No.8\\_EN\\_081309\(1\).pdf](http://www.unicef.org/protection/files/Progress_for_Children-No.8_EN_081309(1).pdf)

<sup>4</sup> Ibid

Nearly 80 per cent of the people in the world profess a religious belief and the vast majority of these faithful belong to an organized religion. Most major religions have a long tradition of celebrating the life cycle, particularly the birth of a child. This means that religious leaders are uniquely positioned as moral voices to lead a call to extend birth registration to all children. Religious communities<sup>5</sup> can help raise awareness about the importance of birth registration, which is a first step in providing new-borns with a safe and healthy future.

## THE BIG PICTURE<sup>6</sup>

### Birth Registration: Name and Nationality are Human Rights<sup>7</sup>

Birth registration – the official recording of the birth of a child by a government – is a fundamental human right and it is essential to protecting a person’s identity and nationality, which is determined by place of birth or by the nationality of a child’s parents. Every child has the right to an identity. Article 7 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child acknowledges the importance of birth registration and the right to an identity, including a name and nationality.

Governments must make birth registration free, accessible and available to all children (including asylum seekers, refugees and immigrants). Birth registration helps prevent children from becoming stateless. It secures the necessary legal documentation for family reunification in the event of a natural disaster, armed conflict or other emergency. A birth certificate can support identification of unaccompanied and orphaned children. In effect, birth registration can be a “passport to protection.”

*“Who am I? Where did I come from? What’s my nationality? All I know is that my name is Murni, but I don’t have proof for that.”*

*Child in Indonesia*

*(Reference: Please see footnote 6)*

<sup>5</sup> “The term ‘religious communities’ broadly refers to both female and male religious actors and to systems and structures that institutionalize belief systems within religious traditions at all levels – from local to global. These include:

- Local worship communities (e.g., churches, mosques, synagogues, temples, etc.)
- Denominational leadership (e.g., bishops, clerics, imams, lamas, etc.)
- Scholars, theologians and religious educators
- Mission workers
- Youth faith or inter-faith groups
- Women of faith networks
- Faith-based or faith-inspired organizations
- Denominational, ecumenical and intra-religious institutions, umbrella organizations and networks
- Inter-faith institutions

UNICEF, “Partnering with Religious Communities for Children,” New York, 2011, p. 7.

<sup>6</sup> Quote from Plan International Website. See <http://plan-international.org/where-we-work/eu-office/news/count-me-i-have-the-right-to-birth-registration>

<sup>7</sup> UNICEF, “Child Protection: Birth Registration.” See [http://www.unicef.org/protection/57929\\_58010.html](http://www.unicef.org/protection/57929_58010.html)

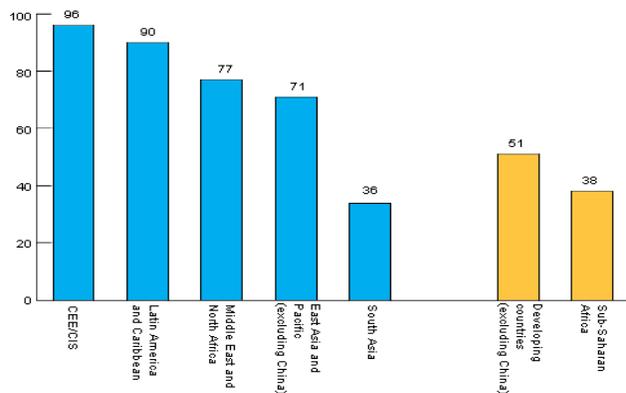
Birth registration is more than a fundamental right. It also provides the population data needed to plan services such as healthcare and education, so it is a cornerstone for other rights. The African Child Forum calls birth registration the door to other rights, and says that societies must have it in order to protect children from exploitation and abuse.<sup>8</sup> Authorities can only avoid treating children as adults in the justice system if they know their ages. Authorities also must know the age of children in order to protect them from child labour, forcible conscription in armed forces, child marriage and trafficking.

## Regional Facts: Birth Registration Around the World

Registering a child’s birth is a vital step towards his or her protection, yet the births of approximately 51 million children in 2007 were not registered.<sup>9</sup> The vast majority of these unregistered children were in less developed countries. The percentage of birth registration varies tremendously by region. In South Asia, 64 per cent of 24 million children were not registered by their fifth birthday in 2007. In sub Saharan Africa this rate is 62 per cent. Countries in armed conflict or civil war encounter multiple problems registering children and maintaining these records. State mechanisms that are linked to registration – national birth registration programmes, national census, population-based household surveys and small-scale surveys – are likely to be threatened, destroyed or suspended.<sup>10</sup> The vast majority of births in industrialized countries are recorded.<sup>11</sup>

**Figure 1:**

**Percentage of children under five who are registered<sup>12</sup>**  
*(Estimates based on 108 countries<sup>13</sup>) UNICEF 2011*



<sup>8</sup> Child Protection International. Available from <http://childprotectioninternational.org/AboutUs/History/History.html>

<sup>9</sup> UNICEF, “Progress for Children: A Report Card on Child Protection” Number 8, September 2009, p. 4.

Available from [www.unicef.org/rosa/PFC\\_report\\_2009.pdf](http://www.unicef.org/rosa/PFC_report_2009.pdf)

<sup>10</sup> UNICEF 2007, “Birth Registration and Armed Conflict.” Available from [www.unicef-irc.org/publications/pdf/insight-br-eng.pdf](http://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/pdf/insight-br-eng.pdf)

<sup>11</sup> UNICEF global databases 2010, from Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS), Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS), vital registration data and other national surveys.

<sup>12</sup> UNICEF global databases 2010, from Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS), Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS), vital registration data and other national surveys. Data first published in: UNICEF, “The State of the World’s Children 2011,” United Nations Children’s Fund, New York, 2011.

<sup>13</sup> This estimate does not include China because data on Chinese birth registration is not available in UNICEF databases.

Many factors influence the percentage of birth registration in a country, including national commitment to free and universal registration; social norms and the value that individuals, families and society place on birth registration; the existence of an adequate legislative framework; fees for birth registration and birth certificates; and the existence of an administrative infrastructure that supports registration.<sup>14</sup>

Children from the poorest households are twice as likely to be unregistered as children from the richest households.<sup>15</sup>

The unregistered, who tend to live in rural areas, may have limited access to healthcare and they tend to suffer from malnutrition, both of which leads to high mortality rates.<sup>16</sup> The unregistered are frequently born without the support of a health professional or midwife. Their mothers tend to have limited formal education and subsequently are not well informed about childhood illnesses and HIV/AIDS transmission<sup>17</sup>.

“When the soldiers came to my house I had no choice but to go with them. My father was killed during a raid and I was left caring for my younger siblings and therefore wasn’t in school. Although I was tall for my age, I was only 15 years old, but I didn’t have anything [birth certificate] to prove to the soldiers that I shouldn’t be in the army. They told me it was mandatory that I serve the cause. I left my mother and sister that day and sadly, have never returned.” – 16 year old boy; Sri Lanka

## A Passport to Protection<sup>18 19</sup>

Birth registration – the official recording of a child’s birth by a government – enables a person to obtain a birth certificate, a personal document issued to an individual by the state. The registration of a birth and the issuing of a birth certificate are, therefore, two distinct yet interlinked events,<sup>20</sup> both of which are necessary for a child to enjoy future rights.

Birth certificates are an important proof of identity and they often are required to obtain other documents such as passports and driver licenses. More important, birth certificates may be necessary to register for school and health care. They also can help authorities protect children from exploitation and abuse. It is true that birth registration is not the solution to the myriad of

<sup>14</sup> UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre, “Birth Registration: Right from the Start”, Innocenti Digest No. 9, UNICEF Florence, March 2002. Available from [www.childinfo.org/files/birthregistration\\_Digestenglish.pdf](http://www.childinfo.org/files/birthregistration_Digestenglish.pdf)

<sup>15</sup> UNICEF, “Progress for Children: Achieving the MDGs with Equity” No. 9, September 2010. Available from [www.unicef.org/publications/files/Progress\\_for\\_Children-No.9\\_EN\\_081710.pdf](http://www.unicef.org/publications/files/Progress_for_Children-No.9_EN_081710.pdf)

<sup>16</sup> The “Rights” Starts to Life. A Statistical Analysis of Birth Registration. UNICEF, Division of Policy and Programming, UNICEF 2005, pg. 19. Available from [www.unicef.org/publications/files/R55BirthReg10a.pdf](http://www.unicef.org/publications/files/R55BirthReg10a.pdf)

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. pg 18.

<sup>18</sup> Child protection from violence, exploitation and abuse.

Available from [http://origin-www.unicef.org/protection/57929\\_58010.html](http://origin-www.unicef.org/protection/57929_58010.html)

<sup>19</sup> Quote from Plan International, “Count Me In: Global Campaign for Birth Registration Interim Report 2005-6”, Plan Ltd, October 2006. Pg. 6

<sup>20</sup> UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre, “Birth Registration: Right from the Start”, Innocenti Digest No. 9, UNICEF Florence, March 2002. Available from [www.childinfo.org/files/birthregistration\\_Digestenglish.pdf](http://www.childinfo.org/files/birthregistration_Digestenglish.pdf)

problems facing children, but it is an important first step towards promoting child rights and the hope of a better life.

**The right to health care.** Millions of young children die every year from preventable causes. Ineffective birth registration systems play a role in this crisis, as unregistered children are harder to reach for community healthcare workers and may be overlooked entirely in public health planning. As such, these children may not gain access to immunization programs and other important healthcare programs. Even where a child's family can provide access to community health centres, a birth certificate may be required to obtain free or subsidized immunizations, thus illustrating the importance of early birth registration for all children.<sup>21</sup>

*"I don't have a birth certificate because my father believes that a piece of paper does not feed me, that farming activities are more useful for me than lengthy administrative procedures."* *Cameroonian child*  
(Reference: Please see footnote 19.)

**The right to an education.** Without a birth certificate, children may be denied educational opportunities. Birth certificates are required for enrolling in school in certain countries. Thus, a child whose birth was not registered may be unable to obtain an education. In other countries birth certificates are not required to enroll in school but are required to apply for educational scholarships. This type of economic obstacle has a greater impact in poorer regions, which also generally have lower birth registration rates. Elsewhere, birth certificates are needed to obtain a primary school diploma and thus advance to secondary school or are required in order to sit for exams. In each of these cases, unregistered children are at a disadvantage and may find it impossible to overcome these obstacles to obtaining an education.<sup>22</sup>

**Protection from child labour.** Birth registration can play a critical role in the fight against hazardous child labour. Establishing a legal minimum age for work is a first step, of course,<sup>23</sup> but authorities have to be able to confirm a worker's age. This makes birth registration a prerequisite for the implementation of child labour laws.

**Protection against child marriage.** In the developing world, one out of three women under the age of 50 were married before they turned 18. One in seven women under the age of 50 were married before they were 15.<sup>24</sup> Whether it happens to a girl or a boy, child marriage is a violation of human rights. It eliminates the child's freedom to choose when and whom to marry.<sup>25</sup> Because of social norms and customs, it is very difficult for many governments to enforce a

<sup>21</sup> Todres, J. "Birth Registration: An Essential First Step toward Ensuring the Rights of All Children, Human Rights Brief, 2003, pp 33-34. Available from <http://digitalcommons.wcl.american.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1422&context=hrbrief>

<sup>22</sup> Ibid

<sup>23</sup> ILO Convention 182 Concerning the Worst Forms of Child Labour Available from [http://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=1000:12100:0::NO::P12100\\_INSTRUMENT\\_ID:312327](http://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=1000:12100:0::NO::P12100_INSTRUMENT_ID:312327) and ILO Convention 138 on the Minimum Age for Admission to Employment and Work Available from [http://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=1000:12100:0::NO::P12100\\_INSTRUMENT\\_ID:312283](http://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=1000:12100:0::NO::P12100_INSTRUMENT_ID:312283)

<sup>24</sup> UNICEF, "State of the World's Children 2011, Adolescence: An Age of Opportunity." Available from [http://www.unicef.org/sowc2011/pdfs/SOWC-2011-Main-Report\\_EN\\_02092011.pdf](http://www.unicef.org/sowc2011/pdfs/SOWC-2011-Main-Report_EN_02092011.pdf)

<sup>25</sup> United Nations, "Secretary General's Report on the Girl Child" (A/66/257, 2011). Available from [http://www.un.org/ga/search/view\\_doc.asp?symbol=A%2F66%2F257&Submit=Search&Lang=E](http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A%2F66%2F257&Submit=Search&Lang=E)

minimum age for marriage.<sup>26</sup> However, a birth certificate is a prerequisite to knowing a girl's age when she marries and a system to register births must be in place before a country can even begin to enforce minimum-age laws.

**Protection against child trafficking.** A successful birth registration system can help authorities protect children from trafficking within countries and across international borders. When people migrate, but lack legal documents, they are more likely to fall into the hands of illicit intermediaries and traffickers. Birth registration can also make it easier for trafficked children to prove their identities.

**Protection in the juvenile justice system.**<sup>27</sup> Due to insufficient birth registration processes, it is often difficult for children to prove they were under the minimum age of criminal responsibility when they committed an offense. Children who come in contact with the justice system may be prosecuted as adults if they cannot prove their age. In order to ensure a fair juvenile justice system, a government must be able to accurately determine the age of an accused.

**Children with disabilities.**<sup>28</sup> Children with disabilities are often excluded from mainstream society and its services. In certain countries, there is a high degree of stigma associated with being disabled, therefore often making parents or families reluctant to reporting their child has a disability. Furthermore, many of these children have not had their birth registered, making them invisible to health, social services, and schools.

**Children who have lost their parents.** Civil registration is critical for children who have lost one or both of their parents. A child's birth certificate along with his or her parents' death certificate may be needed to inherit land or property. Rates of death registration, like birth registration, are shockingly low in most developing countries. Approximately 38 million deaths a year (two-thirds) go unregistered.<sup>29</sup>

## Registering Births: What Are the Obstacles?

There are many reasons that parents do not register their children immediately after birth. They include a lack of awareness of registration procedures among families and communities and limited government resources to establish and sustain an efficient system. Even when available and easily accomplished, birth registration often is not a priority for a variety of social and economic reasons.

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<sup>26</sup> UNICEF Office of Strategic Information Management, "The 'Rights' Start to Life: A Statistical Analysis of Birth Registration," 2004. Available from [www.unicef.org/protection/BirthReg10a\\_rev.pdf](http://www.unicef.org/protection/BirthReg10a_rev.pdf)

<sup>27</sup> Children's Legal Center and UNICEF, "Guidance for Legislative Reform on Juvenile Justice," 2011, p. 95. Available from [www.unicef.org/policyanalysis/files/Juvenile\\_justice\\_16052011\\_final.pdf](http://www.unicef.org/policyanalysis/files/Juvenile_justice_16052011_final.pdf)

<sup>28</sup> UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre, "Promoting the Rights of Children with Disabilities", Innocenti Digest No. 13, UNICEF Florence, 2007 (Page 4). Available from [www.unicef-irc.org/publications/pdf/digest13-disability.pdf](http://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/pdf/digest13-disability.pdf)

<sup>29</sup> Plan, "Count Every Child, the Right to birth Registration," 2009, p. 27. Available from [plan-international.org/files/global/publications/campaigns/Count%20Every%20Child%20report%202009.pdf](http://plan-international.org/files/global/publications/campaigns/Count%20Every%20Child%20report%202009.pdf)

## Local Level

**Lack of awareness.** In many countries, parents and families are unaware of the importance and benefits of birth registration. For many families struggling against poverty or living in remote rural areas, registration is too costly in terms of both time and money.<sup>30</sup> Often, benefits are only recognized when parents find their children in situations, which require a proof of identify. Families living in poverty, with little or no access to services, may feel that birth registration provides no tangible benefits. Furthermore, when infant mortality rates are high, there is little incentive to name and/or register a child's birth until survival is assured.

**Fear of discrimination and persecution.** Some parents (particularly those from ethnic minorities, migrant groups, religious minorities, indigenous groups or who are internally displaced or refugees) may not register the births of their children, because they fear discrimination. Language barriers prevent illiterate parents as well as those from ethnic communities, and marginalized communities from accessing information on birth registration process, procedures, and requirements. In areas of current or former ethnic or regional conflict, parents may not register the births of their children because they fear for their children's safety

**Gender discrimination and conflicting cultural/social traditions.** A survey conducted by Plan International suggests that even when legislation gives women an equal right to register their children, lack of implementation of those laws, prejudices and traditional customs mean that women are sometimes prevented or deterred from doing so.<sup>31</sup> In some societies, the process of birth registration conflicts with traditional attitudes and practices following the birth of a baby. Mothers may not be allowed to leave their home for a fixed period of time after giving birth. In other instances, unmarried women may be reluctant to register their children.

**Economic and logistical problems.** The cost of birth registration is an obstacle for many families living in poverty. In some countries, parents must pay a significant amount of money to register a birth. Even if they do not have to pay direct fees, parents have to bear implicit and explicit opportunity costs, including taking time off from work (usually with no pay), transportation and communications. When registration is delayed, fees and opportunity costs tend to be even higher. Logistics also affects birth registration, especially when parents must travel to a central location. Even where district level infrastructure exists, public transportation services may not exist. Parents in rural communities, or remote areas, may have to make long, expensive and unsafe journeys to register their children. Authorities in tropical countries with rainy seasons and extreme humidity often find it impossible to protect vital documents such as civil registrars and birth certificates. In times of conflict and war, records may also be destroyed.

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<sup>30</sup> Plan, "Count Every Child, the Right to birth Registration," 2009, p. 27. Available from [plan-international.org/files/global/publications/campaigns/Count%20Every%20Child%20report%202009.pdf](https://plan-international.org/files/global/publications/campaigns/Count%20Every%20Child%20report%202009.pdf).

<sup>31</sup> Mother to Child: How Discrimination Prevents Women Registering the Birth of Their Child. Plan International, 2012. Available from <https://plan-international.org/files/global/publications/campaigns/mother-to-child-how-discrimination-english>

## National Level<sup>32</sup>

**Lack of political space.** In the face of competing priorities birth registration may be lower on the agenda. When there is no centralized national authority, local authorities rarely enforce birth registration regulations. In some countries, government passivity may be a deliberate choice. Even when birth certificates are available, they sometimes are not respected by authorities.

**Lack of resources.** National governments may lack the economic and human resources needed to run a birth registration system. This may stem from limited resources, the government's inability to allocate proper resources, or a weak financial infrastructure. Often it is a combination of the three. Some States, which give a low priority to birth registration, assign registration to a small ministry with little or no resources. In other countries, there may be political will but not enough funds to ensure that human and administrative resources are in place.

Resources play an essential role in ensuring that systems are operating efficiently. Without sufficient resources, registration offices are unlikely to have computers and photocopiers. They may lack such basic materials as pens, and application forms all of which hinders staff from registering births. Worse, they may lack the secure paper required to make official documents. Poor working conditions and lack of appropriate staff support can lead to weak registration processes, including inaccurate registration records, corruption and fraud. In some countries, officers have charged illegally for birth registration even when registration is free.<sup>33</sup>

**Complex administration procedures and inefficient systems.** Many countries now have a civil registration system, which is not always effectively organized. These systems are rarely digital, which slows processing time and adds a risk that birth records and certificates will not be processed at all. Paper records are hard to retrieve and they may be damaged by insects, fires, flood or destroyed on purpose during periods of conflict and unrest. Birth registration must be part of the civil registry. While there may be many different offices involved in the birth registration process, unless there is a well functioning civil registry, there is little coordination.

Launched in 2005, Plan's Universal Birth Registration campaign has worked with grassroots organizations, government and international agencies to raise awareness about every child's right to registration. From 2005 to 2009, Plan helped over 40 million people, mostly children, in 32 countries to register. Their advocacy work led to improved laws in ten countries making 153 million children eligible for free birth certificates.

(Reference: Please see footnote 31.)

<sup>32</sup> Quote from "Count Every Child: The Right to Birth Registration," Plan International, 2009, p. 15. Available from <http://plan-international.org/files/global/publications/campaigns/Count%20Every%20Child%20report%202009.pdf>

<sup>33</sup> "Count Every Child: The Right to Birth Registration," Plan International, 2009, p. 65. Available from <http://plan-international.org/files/global/publications/campaigns/Count%20Every%20Child%20report%202009>

## NOTES FROM THE FIELD

Governmental and non-governmental efforts to improve birth registration rates have led to the following insights.

**Rural poverty may negatively affect numbers of registered children.** When a large percentage of children are not registered in a country, it is important to identify and target the most excluded population groups. Increasing access to the national system of birth registration at the local level, removing fees and penalties, and encouraging a public awareness campaign can help reduce the number of children who are not registered. Successful efforts have included innovative programmes such as mobile birth registration units, house-to-house registration campaigns and integrating mobile telephone technology into the national registration system.

In Mozambique 1.8 million children were registered between 2006 and 2008, and in Cambodia 8.6 million children registered in 15 months due to mobile birth registration campaigns with national coverage.<sup>34</sup>

**Improving mothers' knowledge and education to promote registration.** There is a positive correlation between the mother's education level and her child's likelihood to be registered. The data also suggest a statistical association between a mother's health-related knowledge and children's levels of birth registration. A mother's knowledge of acute respiratory infection, HIV/AIDS and signs of a child's illness increase the likelihood of a child being registered at birth. This creates an imperative for programming around the education of girls and interventions to provide information to and increase the knowledge of women and families.<sup>35</sup>

**Integrating birth registration and health services.** Midwives and traditional birth attendants are often the first to be in contact with a mother and her baby. They are ideally placed to act as community birth registration officers. In Zambia they have been trained to fill out relevant forms.<sup>36</sup> They also give talks on birth registration to new mothers attending antenatal clinics.<sup>37</sup>

In 2011, UNICEF worked with more than 85 countries, supporting programs to increase birth registration. UNICEF estimates that these programs led to the registration of 22,991,704 births in 2011.

In many countries – such as Colombia, Ghana and Thailand – UNICEF is promoting the modernisation and computerisation of systems for birth registration, such as the introduction of mobile technology in order to reach out to the parents children not born in hospitals.

In Ghana, where only 40 per cent of births in rural areas are registered (compared to 80 per cent in urban areas), UNICEF is supporting Ghana's Births and Deaths Registry to implement the Community Population Register Programme (CPRP). As a result of this programme, 25 communities have seen birth registration rates surge to 100 per cent.

Source: UNICEF, Thematic Report 2011, Child Protection from Violence, Exploitation and Abuse, UNICEF New York, 2012.

<sup>34</sup> UNICEF, "Good Practices in Integrating Birth Registration into Health Systems" (2002-2009). Case Studies: Bangladesh, Brazil, The Gambia, and Delhi India. United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) New York, NY 2009, p. 2. Available from [www.unicef.org/protection/Birth\\_Registration\\_Working\\_Paper\(2\).pdf](http://www.unicef.org/protection/Birth_Registration_Working_Paper(2).pdf)

<sup>35</sup> UNICEF, "Child Info: Monitoring the Situation of Children and Women." Available from [http://www.childinfo.org/birth\\_registration.html](http://www.childinfo.org/birth_registration.html) Accessed 2 August 2012.

<sup>36</sup> "Count Every Child. The Right to birth Registration," Plan International, 2009, p.42. Available from <http://plan-international.org/files/global/publications/campaigns/Count%20Every%20Child%20report%202009.pdf>

**Integrated programmes can benefit birth registration rates.** Children who are registered frequently are the same ones who are vaccinated, receive vitamin A supplements and are treated by health care professionals when ill. There is potential to integrate birth registration into maternal and child healthcare programmes, early childhood development programmes, education and social services. It is important to devise programmes in such a way that children and caregivers who seek health care, education and social services are given information on how to obtain birth registration documents.

In Bangladesh, birth registration was included in the 2005 national Expanded Program of Immunization (EPI). This number of children under the age of five who were registered increased from 10 per cent in 2006 to 40 per cent in 2008. In addition, the government developed an electronic birth registration software package, which resulted in increased birth registration and immunization rates.<sup>38</sup>

In Bolivia, the Ministry of Health developed a national database to integrate registration into the National Health Information System. Advocacy efforts persuaded the government to remove birth registration fees for all children under seven.<sup>39</sup>

**Mass communication.** Illiteracy can be a serious barrier in achieving universal birth registration. Given the high rates of illiteracy in many countries, radio and other forms of mass media have proved to be a key communication tool for raising awareness on child rights, and in particular birth registration.<sup>40</sup>

In Malawi, public service announcements that encouraged birth registration were made at soccer matches.<sup>41</sup>

TV advertisements and films that advocated birth registration were produced in Vietnam and Nepal.<sup>42</sup> Special radio programmes made by children were broadcast in ten West African countries, including Benin, Burkina Faso, Ghana, Guinea, Mali, Senegal, Sierra Leone and Togo.<sup>43</sup>

In Mali, a guide to registration was produced in five languages and it was distributed as a leaflet. It also was distributed in audio and video formats.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> UNICEF, "Good Practices in Integrating Birth Registration into Health Systems" (2002-2009). Case Studies: Bangladesh, Brazil, The Gambia, and Delhi India. United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) New York, NY 2009. Available from [www.unicef.org/protection/Birth\\_Registration\\_Working\\_Paper\(2\).pdf](http://www.unicef.org/protection/Birth_Registration_Working_Paper(2).pdf)

<sup>39</sup> Ibid. Pg 79

<sup>40</sup> Plan International, "Count Every Child: The Right to Birth Registration," 2009, p. 34. Available from <http://plan-international.org/files/global/publications/campaigns/Count%20Every%20Child%20report%202009.pdf>

<sup>41</sup> Ibid. p. 16.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid. p. 34.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid. p. 16.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid. Questionnaire response from Plan Mali, May 2009.

**Community leaders and children as advocates.** Working with community leaders and celebrities is also effective. The effort to increase birth registration can be strengthened by enlisting the help of highly regarded community members such as village elders and locally elected councilors<sup>45</sup>.

In Pakistan influential Ulema (Muslim religious scholars) in northern parts of the country are promoting birth registration at the community level. In Guinea, religious leaders are spreading messages about the importance of birth registration during sermons.<sup>46</sup> In Uganda, a coalition promotes birth registration, saying it is essential in the fight to protect children against sexual abuse. Hundreds of primary school children presented a petition to Parliament calling for birth registration to be made mandatory and for birth certificates to be free.<sup>47</sup>

**Programming to increase birth registration rates.** Mapping levels of birth registration can help governments and civil society actors decide where to launch new birth registration initiatives. It is also useful to track progress by comparing birth registration levels at different points in time. In countries where the initial cost or late fees are barriers to registration, the national government may decide to adjust or abolish fees in order to increase registration rates. In countries where the population perceives distance to be the main barrier, mobile units may be employed to reach rural populations. Collaboration with religious organizations, national and international non-governmental organizations and the civil service can support government efforts.

In Brazil, the government amended the existing laws to remove fees associated with birth registration and issuance of birth certificate. This change in 1997 contributed to achieving significant increase in birth registration.<sup>48</sup>

**Legal reforms.** Varying capacities of relevant local government authorities and institutional constraints, such as the lack of coordination among ministries, are a concern in improving birth registration. Legal reforms are important steps in streamlining the birth registration systems.<sup>49</sup>

In Paraguay, a large number of school children were without birth certificates until the Ministry of Education and Culture required education authorities to ensure that all schoolchildren are registered. Now the principals of educational centres must ensure that every school child has a birth certificate. In Indonesia, a judicial review ended colonial laws that discriminated against minority groups. Indonesians lobbied the government to decentralise registration services and achieve universal birth registration.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid. p. 35.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid. Pg. 35

<sup>47</sup> Ibid. Pg.81

<sup>48</sup> UNICEF, “*Good Practices in Integrating Birth Registration into Health Systems (2000-2009)*.” Case studies from Bangladesh, Brazil, The Gambia, and India (Mariana Muzzi), p. 26. Available from [www.unicef.org/protection/Birth\\_Registration\\_Working\\_Paper\(2\).pdf](http://www.unicef.org/protection/Birth_Registration_Working_Paper(2).pdf)

<sup>49</sup> Ibid. 2. 30.

<sup>50</sup> “Count Every Child. The Right to birth Registration” (Plan International, 2009). Summary Report, pg 5. Available from [plan-international.org/birthregistration/files/count-every-child-2009](http://plan-international.org/birthregistration/files/count-every-child-2009)

# TAKE ACTION

## What Can Religious Communities Do?

Civil society, faith based organizations, NGOs, governments and international agencies are working with parents, families, and communities to design effective strategies to register more births.

For example, as part of 2011 World Day in Nigeria<sup>51</sup>, UNICEF organized a national workshop with key religious leaders to engage religious communities as advocates for universal birth registration. The workshop developed a joint work plan with the National Population Commission to improve birth registration in local communities.

The success of initiatives such as these during the past few years are encouraging. With continued efforts, we can achieve our goal of making birth registration compulsory, timely, free and accessible for all. Religious leaders and faith-based organizations have a unique opportunity to promote the timely registration of children. Here are five recommendations to consider as you plan take action activities for the World Day.

### 1. Learn About Birth Registration

Religious leaders and faith-based organizations are encouraged to learn about the process of birth registration in their respective communities according to their local laws.

The responsibility for overseeing birth registration should lie with a country's Civil Register. Civil registration is the system by which a government records the vital events of its citizens and residents. The resulting repository or database is called civil register or registry, or population registry. In some countries, a special division of the civil registry is called the family registry. Usually, the administration and maintenance of the civil registry is managed at a local level, through offices in regional or municipal authorities, and these are the best first point of contact for religious communities to learn more about the process of birth registration in their country.

### 2. Inform and Raise Awareness

- Raise awareness and emphasize the importance of birth registration through sermons and educational forums.
- Encourage birth registration when children are brought in for baptism, bris ceremonies, christenings, naming ceremonies, and when other solemn rite of passages rituals are observed (i.e. communions, confirmations, weddings, etc.)
- Incorporate messages about birth registration during counselling sessions.
- Enlist the help of highly regarded community, religious, and traditional leaders to promote birth registration. Where possible, enlist national celebrity ambassadors to do the same.

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<sup>51</sup> Learn more about World Day in Nigeria 2011 <http://www.dayofprayerandaction.org/events/2011/nigeria/world-day-activities-in-nigeria>

- Use the media (i.e. radio, television, film) and public information campaigns to raise public awareness of the importance of birth registration.
- Raise young people's awareness through information, education, and communication activities and media campaigns. Encourage youth groups, and children's clubs to create opportunities for children's voices to be heard. Ensure that children's voices are heard and included in the development of strategies and plans.

### **3. Assist with the Process**

- Develop information packages that explain the existing registration laws and the steps involved in the registration process.
- Organize opportunities for people to register. (i.e. coordinate transportation to the civil registry office, etc.)
- Assist families through the birth registration process by helping civil registrars to develop user-friendly information packages in local languages. Ensure that translators are available for users of local languages during the registration process.
- Use the local language and accept indigenous names. Create bilingual options to ensure that officials in other countries can understand your birth certificates.
- Encourage the reduction of registration fees and/or assist people who cannot pay them.

### **4. Keep Records**

- Religious leaders and faith-based organizations have an important role in keeping the records that are related to their rites and rituals involving children. If you are responsible for a place of worship, make sure to keep records of all rites of passage celebrations: baptisms, communions, confirmations, marriages, funerals and all other occasions which require record keeping.
- It is often helpful to have the exact date (date/ month/ year) and the age of the individual for whom the ceremony took place.

### **5. Advocate for Government Accountability and Change**

- Religious communities can encourage the government to update and simplify legislation to ensure that birth registration and the issuance of birth certificates are universal, and are performed free of charge. Encourage the abolition of all indirect fees (such as procedural fees and late registration penalties).
- Lead parents, community leaders, and service providers to demand universal and free birth registration.
- Advocate for birth registration to be integrated into national development plans of action and poverty reduction strategies.
- Encourage the government to allocate adequate public funds for sustainable and efficient registration systems.

- Advocate for UN agencies, multi- and bilateral donors and multinational corporations to increase resources to strengthen civil registration systems. Recognize that birth registration is essential to achieving the Millennium Development goals for generating accurate population data to help plan services and track progress.
- Work together with civil society and government partners on campaigns to raise awareness to clear the backlog of unregistered children, and then continue with a sustainable, on-going system of registration.
- Collaborate with local officials to organize activities to clear the backlog of unregistered children.
- Collaborate with birth registry officials and social services such as health, nutrition and basic education.
- Establish interfaith networks and coalitions to promote birth registration rights with special attention to indigenous, peasant, migrant, displaced and rural community populations.
- Develop pilot initiatives with the civil registry to target hard-to-reach families of unregistered children.
- Encourage the authorities to establish inter-institutional coordination, and clarify roles, responsibilities and reporting lines.

## Conclusion

Religious communities have deep roots in society and they have a long history of supporting the most vulnerable, especially children. We ask you to share the information in this note as well as the suggested action ideas with others. The World Day of Prayer and Action for Children (Universal Children's Day, 20 November) provides religious communities with an opportunity to raise awareness and press for universal birth registration. Work with volunteer groups in your community, or overseas, to protect children. Raise awareness and provide leadership where you can. Your advocacy can save lives and promote the well-being of children, parents and families!

See [www.dayofprayerandaction.org](http://www.dayofprayerandaction.org) for more information, including the Planning Guide if you are thinking of planning a World Day activity. Remember, World Day is not meant to be an excuse for one-time events. Rather, it should be viewed as an opportunity to strengthen on-going work or as a catalyst to create new projects and activities.

World Day of Prayer and Action for Children would like to hear from you about your experiences, so that we may share them with others. This is a working document subject to revision based on feedback. All are invited to submit comments to: [mail@dayofprayerandaction.org](mailto:mail@dayofprayerandaction.org).

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