United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) Background Paper

Topic: Addressing The Lack of Children's Birth Documentation in Conflict-Driven Regions

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Addressing The Lack of Children's Birth Documentation in Conflict-Driven Regions

United Nations Children's Fund

Overview:

A birth certificate is an important document that helps tell you a child's identity, nationality, age and their guardians/parents. However, conflicts can ruin and destroy legal birth documentation and cause families to escape/flee without their credentials. Children born during conflicts usually never are officially registered.

Without sufficient documentation, people can encounter obstacles when requiring education, healthcare and even sometimes housing. UNICEF's 2024 report stated: 'The world is home to over 200 million children under 5 without a birth certificate: this includes 150 million unregistered children and 55 million children whose births are reported as registered but lack

proof in the form of a birth certificate.' Furthermore, we need to ensure that children affected by war can gain and maintain their birth documents.

Historical Background:

- In 1948, the UDHR (Universal Declaration of Human Rights), assured that everyone has a right to nationality,
- A few developments followed, where in 1989 the UNGA embraced the CRC (Convention on the Rights of the Child)
- Later, the UNSC boosted its child-protection ideas through resolutions like 1612 and 2427.

Although these actions and developments have progressed, wars continue to interfere with registration services and the preservation of documents, causing children to lose the documentation needed for them to prove their identities.

Present circumstances:

The lack of birth documentation is still a serious concern for children worldwide and will affect them sooner or later. It has affected hundreds of thousands of children and will continue to affect them if humanitarian organisations, UNICEF, UNHRC, UNHCR, and OHCHR do not work to help these vulnerable, innocent children.

An example of this is Sudan, UNICEF's 2025 report showed how Sudan has had efforts to improve access to birth registration, regardless of conflict and funding issues. Even so, the displacement and loss of records still makes it harder for families, so it is imperative for organisations to start helping out.

Difference Between UNHRC & UNHCR

The UNHCR is the UN refugee agency where it focuses on delivering aid to refugees, asylum-seekers and internally displaced persons; it delivers water, food, shelter and medical care. As well it manages camps and handles resettlements. While the UNHRC is a body in the UN. It is not operational like the UNHCR and instead focuses on diplomacy and oversight. Additionally, it addresses human rights, themes and violations worldwide.

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The UNHRC is a body in the UN, it is not operational like the UNHCR and instead focuses on diplomacy and oversight. Additionally it addresses human rights, themes, and violations worldwide. While the OHCHR is composed of professional staff and an administrative office rather than a voting council of states. As well, provides secretariat support to the UNHRC.

How Do People Register Births and What Are The Obstacles They Need To Tackle?

Birth registration usually starts when a child is born in a hospital or maternity clinic, where staff record the birth and tell the important information needed for registration. Then the guardian tells the state/country's civil registration authority, providing the information previously stated. However, in war-torn areas, hospitals and other healthcare infrastructure might be destroyed or government offices might be hard to access / demolished. Additionally, families might need to flee without important documents or that the government's procedures are really annoying and specific.

How Does UNICEF Report These Statistics and Find Out Specific Information?

UNICEF collects statistics and birth registration records by several sources, including national records, censuses and surveys. There are 2 main survey programmes are the MICS (Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys) and DHS (Demographic and Health Surveys). In these surveys, parents are asked if children under five have been registered with the government and if they have a birth certificate.

UNICEF analyses information from these sources to get registration rates across countries and compare progress over time.

Role of UNICEF:

UNICEF plays an imperative role in addressing the lack among children's birth documentation by assisting governments and helping families access crucial services. Its work can include birth registration into programmes, support mobile registration services and aid with the retrieval of records.

UNICEF also collaborates with organisations and governments to guarantee that displaced children are not left out of the equation. With international coordination and better systems, we can help children affected by war to be able to prove their identity.

Relevant Treaties and Resolutions:

Birth documentation in war-struck regions has been acknowledged through several treaties and resolutions, such as:

1. Convention on the Right of the Child (CRC): Articles 7 & 8 (protects children's right, especially towards legal identity, nationality and registration)
2. UNGA Resolution 44/25 (adopts the CRC)

3. International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR): Article 24 (A child's right to acquire a nationality)
4. Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR): Article 15 (defines legal standings for every civilian especially about nationality)
5. UNHRC Resolution 33/22 (Talks about universal birth registration)
6. SDGs goal 16.9 (provide legal identity for all by 2030)

Countries affected

Child registration and documentation is crucial in any society. Children who are not registered are likely to be locked out of the society, denied official identification documents when they grow up, and their nationality might not be established. Some of the countries where births are least likely to be registered and officially documented are:

Malawi

In Malawi, birth registration is voluntary, and there is no legislation regulating child birth registration. The current birth recordings in Malawi are very low, and this has prompted the National Registration Bureau to conduct a mass registration of children. Only one out of 16 children are registered by the relevant child registration authority in Malawi representing only 6% of total registration.

Zambia

Zambia is one of the leading countries in Africa where most births are not registered. The authorities have records of only 11% of the births in the country out of the population of 14.5 million people. Low birth registration has been linked to the registration office making it difficult for most of the people to access registration offices and that the government has not highlighted the importance of birth registration.

The main countries affected are as followed:

Country	% of Births Officially Registered With Authorities
Malawi	6%
Zambia	11%
Chad	12%
Tanzania	15%

Guinea-Bissau	24%
DR Congo	25%
Liberia	25%
Nigeria	30%
Uganda	30%
Yemen	31%

Possible solutions

- Establish mobile registration in refugee camps, underdeveloped countries and in slum-like areas,
- Free birth registration and replacement certificates if the past ones got lost, destroyed or never done before,
- Create secure digital data backups so if certificates, records and/or documents get lost or destroyed they can be restored. It stops permanent loss and damage to child's identity
- Introduce emergency and late-registration procedures for children born outside hospitals
- Integrate birth registration into healthcare and humanitarian services, so children can be registered even when government services are unavailable.

Conclusion:

Failure to provide proof of children's birth in war is a significant issue, which may lead to failure of identifying the children and accessing their basic rights. War leads to the destruction of registers and families fleeing without carrying their documents, thus making it hard for the children to show evidence of their age, parentage or nationality.

UNICEF, UNHCR, governments, and other humanitarian organizations should work towards strengthening systems, restoration of records, and protection of information of children. Special considerations should be made to those children who do not have their parents or any documents.

Glossary:

- Displacement: The forced movement of people from their homes because of conflict, violence, or other crises.
- Legal identity: Official recognition of a person as an individual under the law.

- Civil registry: A government system that records births, deaths, and other important life events.
- Birth registration: The official recording of a child's birth by a government authority.
- Parentage: a person's lineage from their parents, as well as the legal relationship between a parent and a child
- Secretariat support: the administrative governance services that keep boards & committees running smoothly

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