

## Birth Registration

When's your birthday?

For most children in the West this is a simple question. It's something you just know, and even if you forgot you could easily look at your birth certificate and find out.

But for many children around the world it is not so easy. They were not registered when they were born, so don't have a birth certificate, and their exact date of birth has been lost in the mists of time. UNICEF think that around 50 million babies each year are not registered or given a birth certificate, but they can't be certain of the exact number because, obviously, there is no record! In some countries they think as many as 6 out of every 10 children do not have a birth certificate.

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

How old do you think the child in this picture is?

But does this really matter? If you don't celebrate on your exact birthday or think you are a couple of years younger or older than you really are, then it's not going to do you any harm, is it?

Yet the Convention on the Rights of the Child says in Article 7 that every "*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*".

Over to you

Why did the UN think the right to a birth certificate was important enough to put in the convention?

## WHY IS A BIRTH CERTIFICATE SO IMPORTANT?

A birth certificate is a citizen's first link with its government. It is the proof that parents have told the government about their new baby, called registering a

child. A birth certificate show where the baby was born and who its parents are, which decides its nationality.

It says,

“I exist and I’m a citizen of this country!”

Of course, the 50 million children born each year who aren’t given a birth certificate still exist and generally still feel and act like a citizen of their country.

But a birth certificate gives you a legal identity. A legal identity gives you your legal rights and legal protection. If the law doesn’t know you exist it can’t make sure you are getting what you should have or protect you from crime or abuse.

### Real Life

Sudhama was born in Nepal but when she was six years old she was married to an Indian man who took her to live in India. By the time she was twelve her husband had divorced her. Because Sudhama cannot prove her age or nationality it is impossible for those who forced her to marry before the legally permitted age to be prosecuted.

International law protects people under 18 from child trafficking, child labour, child soldiers, early marriage and sexual exploitation. Children who commit crimes are not normally given the same punishments as adults, they have special, less harsh, prisons and are rarely given the death penalty.

Without a birth certificate you can’t prove your age.

If your parents die, you need to legally prove you were their child to inherit their property and money. A record of whose child is whose is important when reuniting families when children are separated from their parents in a crisis, like a natural disaster or a war. Without it anyone could come and take any child and use them for child labour or other forms of abuse.

If there is no record that a child existed then it is difficult to prove a child has been kidnapped.

Without a birth certificate you can’t prove who your parents are and they can’t prove you exist.

Even when you are an adult, not having a birth certificate can cause big problems.

You normally need to prove you are a citizen of a country to vote and be elected, to work, to open a bank account, to marry, to receive welfare benefits, to use public services like schools and hospitals, to get a passport to travel and perhaps just to show you have the right to live where you live.

### Real Life

Manmaya went missing in 1994, when she was fifteen years old. Three years later her friends and family in Nepal discovered Manmaya had been taken by human traffickers to work in an Indian brothel. But Nepalese police say they cannot investigate her abduction. This is because Manmaya’s birth was never registered and there was no proof of her existence or her citizenship.

There are currently an

Without a birth certificate you can’t prove your nationality.

Governments make plans to provide services for their citizens. They might want to vaccinate all children against measles or other dangerous diseases. How can they

### Real Life

Alfred Lim was a presidential candidate in the Philippines in 1998, but his eligibility for the candidacy was challenged because he had no birth certificate and could not prove that he was a Filipino citizen.

know how much vaccine to buy or if all children have been vaccinated if large numbers of children aren't on their register? If a child's parents die and there is no other family, they may easily be forgotten about if the government doesn't even know they exist.

Without a birth certificate your government can't help you.

to count, they have to be counted”

Mr. Harry Belafonte, UNICEF Ambassador.

There are no stories about these children. No one knows who they are or where they are.

Many of the countries where many children do not have birth certificates have high levels of HIV/AIDS, meaning thousands of children are orphaned when they are young as their parents die early from this disease. If they are lucky other members of their family will be able to look after them, but if they aren't... who knows?

## WHY DON'T CHILDREN HAVE BIRTH CERTIFICATES?

The percentage of children with birth certificates is very different from country to country. According to UNICEF, in the industrialised or Western countries around 2% of children do not have a birth certificate. In the world's least developed countries a huge 71% are not registered.

### Over to you

Why are children in developing countries less likely to have a birth certificate?

Plan works in Cameroon with the Baka people, an ethnic minority. They think that up to 98% of children in Baka communities do not have a birth certificate.

When they were asked why they don't have one, the reasons Baka children gave were similar to un-registered children all over the world.



Here are some of the reasons:

*“I don’t have a birth certificate because my father believes that a piece of paper does not feed a child, and that farming activities are more useful for children.”*

*“I don’t have a birth certificate because my father used it, like any piece of paper, to roll a cigarette.”*

Many parents, especially those without a birth certificate themselves, don’t realise how important it is to get one for their children. Even some governments don’t think it is important for all their citizens to be registered. Some countries haven’t even passed laws to make all parents register their children. In Malawi, for example, it is only compulsory to register children whose parents are of non-African origin. Many more countries haven’t organised a specific system for registering births.

*“I don’t have a birth certificate because my parents could not afford to pay for one.”*

### Real Life

In Bolivia it costs around £6 for a birth certificate, a lot of money in Bolivia which could buy a whole lamb or 132lb of potatoes. The registration officials who give out the birth certificates are not paid by the government, so they usually charge another £2 on top of the legal price.

When poor families have to choose whether to spend money on a birth certificate or on food for their children, their children will not get birth certificates!

Many governments don’t have the money to pay for birth registration systems or see birth certificates as a way to make money. This means that for poor families getting a birth certificate could be just too expensive. In fact, children in the richest 20% of any country are much more likely to have a birth certificate than the rest of the population.

*“I don’t have a birth certificate because the registrar for my village is illiterate.”*

In many countries the system of government offices is weak and under funded. Staff may not be properly trained in the procedures or may not have the equipment they need, including pens, application forms and even the certificates themselves!

*“I don’t have a birth certificate because my father argued that the registry office is 15 km away from our village. “*

For many families, going to the office to get a birth certificate can be difficult and they simply don’t bother, especially if they don’t fully understand how important it is to get one.

For others who live in rural areas going to the office can mean travelling to the capital. Poor families in particular may not be able to afford the transport costs or the time off work to go.

*“I don’t have a birth certificate because my father is afraid to deal with a law court or any other government officer.”*

Some parents simply won’t deal with the government in any way. Parents in ethnic minorities are more likely to feel this way, especially when the government has traditionally treated their ethnic group badly.

Sometimes, the government make it difficult for children from ethnic minorities to have a birth certificate. They want to pretend these ethnic minorities are smaller than they really are and deny these people their rights. For example, authorities in Bosnia and Herzegovina have often refused to register Roma children and in Syria, Kurdish children may find it difficult to be registered.

*“I don’t have a birth certificate because my mother is a single parent. My grandparents decided that they would not register me until after my father shows up and pays for the dowry.”*

Many children aren’t registered because in some societies single parents or children whose parents aren’t married are looked down on. The families don’t want to officially recognise the child because it is socially embarrassing.

*“I don’t have a birth certificate because we had no-where safe to keep it and it was eaten away by white ants.”*

For many people, especially in poor communities, keeping documents can be a practical problem. Also, if they don’t have computers, officials may find it difficult to keep the government’s records of births safe, especially in tropical areas or other places with extreme weather conditions.

*“None of my brothers and sisters has birth certificates because my parents decided to wait until they have the number of children they want, and then register all our births at the same time.”*

In some countries it is possible to register children long after they are born. In many areas babies often die from disease so some parents don't want to go to the trouble and expense of registering children until they are older.

But many countries have inflexible systems where this is not possible. In Bolivia, many children die before they are 2 so parents often choose not to register them until they are older. However Bolivian law says children must be registered before this age or they have to follow an extremely expensive legal system. Many families pretend their children are younger than they really are to avoid this cost, but that means there is a lot of confusion about how old the children really are.

It can also be very difficult for orphaned or abandoned children to be registered because their parents are not there to say where and when they were born. Children without a fixed address, like street children or children in nomadic communities (who move from place to place regularly), may not be able to be registered either.

## WHAT CAN WE DO?

The ultimate goal is **universal birth registration** (every single child having a birth certificate). How can we achieve this?

We need to overcome all the problems explained in the last section to make sure every single child has a birth certificate.

There are lots of changes that need to happen to get universal birth registration but here are some of the most important ones:

### Make it Free! Make it local!

In Indonesia, around 60% of children are not registered – one of the worst rates in the world. Getting a birth certificate for your child involves a huge number of forms and going to a major city. This means many families have to pay middle men up to \$80 (a huge amount of money for most Indonesians) to get a birth certificate.

In Pakistan, trial registration centres in some rural areas have raised registration rates from 30% to 80%. Another good idea is letting local birth attendants (mid-wives) register children, meaning their parents don't even have to leave their house to get a birth certificate. In some countries 95% of children are registered this way.

In Ghana only about 28% of children had birth certificates. The Ghanaian government set itself a goal in 2004: for all children in Ghana to be registered by 2010. By 2005, nearly half of Ghanaian children had a birth certificate.

One of the main steps in achieving this improvement was making registering a child under 12 months old free.

## Tell people about it!

Making it easier to register children won't work unless parents understand why their children need a birth certificate. Many charities run workshops with community groups to explain to parents how important this is. They may do this through talks, films or plays showing examples of when birth certificates are needed. Poster campaigns have also worked well. In Indonesia, Plan has helped start groups of local youth volunteers who go door-to-door in small villages to tell people about birth registration and children's rights in general.

Here are some young people presenting their film which deals with the issues around birth registration to the FESPACO bi-annual pan-African film festival. Five films about birth registration written by young people in Burkina were included:

1. **My life goes up in Smoke** – shows the scene of a child who tries to prevent his father from using his birth certificate to make cigarettes. This is based on a true story from Cameroon adapted for Burkina.
2. **The Official** – tells the story of a rural family that travels a long journey to make the registration of their child only to be confronted by corruption and bureaucracy. In the story the clerk, to the official registrar, is reprimanded and the parents obtain the certificate.
3. **"Ne vers"** – Shows the humorous / tragic side of how a child feels when [s]he can not celebrate a birthday because they don't know when they were born.
4. **"Le Deshonneur"** – This story involves the whole community that celebrates the fact that a local child is chosen for a prize and will journey abroad to collect it. The great honour for the African village is almost lost however when people realize the child can not travel because he has no birth certificate and therefore no passport. Everything works out in the end.
5. **The death of the ghosts** - This story tells of a class room where the teacher talks to imaginary children – the children that should be there, but are not because they do not have a birth certificate and therefore can not attend school!

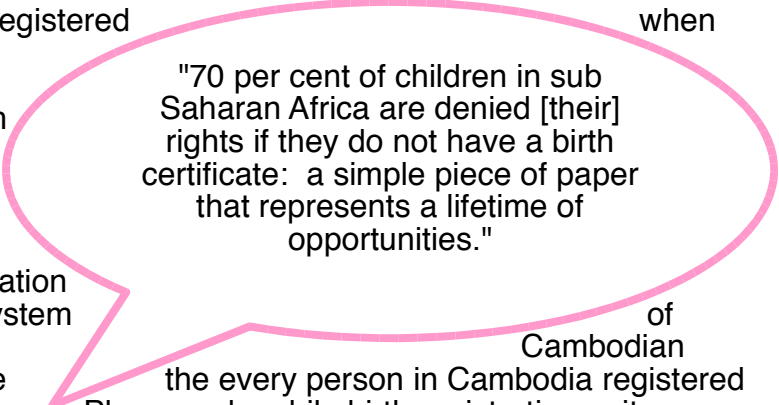
Plan, UNICEF and the UN Population fund organised a West and Central Africa Conference on birth registration. Politicians from across the region met to discuss how they could make improvements in their countries. Artists, writers and musicians joined the conference to help get the message to ordinary people.

Senegalese rap artist Didier Awadi said:

Archbishop Desmond Tutu launched Plan's campaign "Write me down!" in 2005. He met with Kofi Annan, the head of the UN, and spoke out about what he called Africa's 'lost' children.

## Register people!

Children have not been registered when they were born for many years, so now lots of adults do not have a birth certificate. This means there is a lot of catching up to do!



"70 per cent of children in sub Saharan Africa are denied [their] rights if they do not have a birth certificate: a simple piece of paper that represents a lifetime of opportunities."

Cambodia had no registration system under their old system of government. The current government aims to have the every person in Cambodia registered within 3 years. They, with Plan, used mobile birth registration units, which travel around the country to issue people with birth certificates. Within 8 months, 5.7 million Cambodians (46% of the population) had received a birth certificate, including the children in this picture.

## Tell the world!

Universal birth registration isn't as well known as other issues, like world hunger or HIV/AIDS. Until quite recently people didn't think children not having birth certificates was a serious problem and many governments and international organisations still don't see it as one of the most important issues. In the picture people in Sierra Leone are on a march to raise awareness.

Internationally, there are no clear guidelines or rules on how to improve birth registration. Eight different UN agencies, the International Labour Organisation and various charities, such as Plan, Save the Children and many more, all work on this issue. Although they do a lot of good work, having so many people all working on the same issue without international co-ordination means things can easily become confused.

Different agencies don't always work efficiently with national governments or with each other. If all the different organisations worked together and in the same way they would have a far bigger effect. Many want the UN be a stronger leader for universal birth registration campaigns and to write clear laws and guidelines about how to work to get more children birth certificates.

## Real Life

Plan wanted the European Union (EU) to give more help to reach universal birth registration. So, in 2005 they asked the European Commission an official question about what it was doing to increase the number of children with birth certificates. This was to make them think about the issue.

The Commission admitted this wasn't part of their work on children's rights at that time. Now, the money the Commission gives to support children's rights projects can be used in campaigns for more birth registration. More organisations like the EU need to make universal birth registration a priority, one of their most important

## TAKE ACTION!

Sign Plan's online petition for Universal Birth Registration and find out other ways to help the campaign. Explain to your friends why they should sign too. [www.writemedown.org/act/](http://www.writemedown.org/act/)

Hear Desmond Tutu's speech launching the "Write Me Down" campaign (link at the bottom of the page) and get lots of other information about the latest developments in this campaign. [www.writemedown.org](http://www.writemedown.org)

Register a child! Buy a birth certificate for £6. Perhaps you can think of some fundraising ideas to raise money to do this, how many children can you register? [www.gifts4life.org](http://www.gifts4life.org)

Look again at the film plots used in the FESPACO festival. Can you develop one of these into your own film or play? Have you got any other ideas for a short drama to raise awareness about birth registration?