



Information Note

Inequality assessments

Many countries experience low civil registration completeness rates among certain population groups or geographic areas. To ensure progress in registration is truly universal and fully inclusive, the Ministerial declaration to “Get Every One in The Picture” in Asia and the Pacific recognized the need to address disparities in the civil registration coverage of hard-to-reach and marginalized populations. Hence, the Regional Action Framework on Civil Registration and Vital Statistics (CRVS) in Asia and the Pacific calls upon members and associate members of the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) to assess any CRVS-related inequalities experienced by population subgroups.ⁱ Doing so is an essential step to getting every one in the picture and ensure universal registration, but very few countries have so far performed specific studies on who is left behind.

Registration inequalities

Australia: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders have been identified as specific groups at risk of not being registered. Often living in remote areas, indigenous people lack easy access to registration services, and are not always aware of their importance. Through active monitoring of the situation and the establishment of special committees such as National Indigenous Reform Agreement Performance Information Management Group of the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, the progresses achieved thanks to outreach and awareness campaigns are regularly mapped and the remaining challenges monitored.

Many factors can hinder access to civil registration including gender, income, ethnicity, religion and geographic location. Marginalized groups, such as people living in rural, remote, isolated or border areas, minorities, indigenous people, migrants, non-citizens, asylum-seekers, refugees, stateless people, and people without documentation, may be further excluded from society if they are not able to attain key benefits linked with registration. These groups often experience lower access due to barriers such as cost, physical distance, different languages and cultures, discrimination or legislative barriers.

Despite these inequalities and the negative impacts they have on marginalized groups, this problem often remains a blind spot in CRVS policies in Asia-Pacific. The groups affected remain largely invisible if the matter is not specifically investigated. To address this problem the Regional Action Framework includes active monitoring and

targeting of marginalized populations as an essential measure to achieving universal registration. In Asia-Pacific, only 5 (Australia, Lao People’s Democratic Republic, Philippines, Vietnam and Kiribati) of the 42 countries reporting for the baseline of the CRVS Decade indicated they were conducting research to identify the particular challenges in accessing civil registration by subgroups and only four countries set national targets for subgroups (Australia, Kiribati, Thailand and Viet Nam).ⁱⁱ This lack of information on hard-to-reach and marginalized groups, and on the impact of their exclusion, hinders countries from developing efficient action plans to ensure no one is left behind. Even though countries in Asia and the Pacific are making progress in their overall registration, none can reach Goal 1 of the Regional Action Framework on universal civil registration without addressing these issues. The latest study from the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) on birth registration addressed some of those inequalities, showing that children’s characteristics, as well as

Philippines: Persons of Indonesian Descent were identified by the Government of the Philippines as one of the populations at risk of exclusion from the civil registration system due to their undocumented status. As a response, a special agreement was made with the Indonesian government, with support from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, for the assessment of the legal status of Indonesian descendants living in Mindanao. Starting from 2011, a special mapping of such unregistered persons took place, to help formulating policies aiming at reducing the risk of statelessness. Since then, thousands have received an official proof of their nationality from one of the two countries.

those of their mothers, could affect their registration. It showed, for example, that about “80 per cent of children under age 5 whose mothers have at least a secondary education have their births registered compared to just 60 per cent of children whose mothers have no education”.ⁱⁱⁱ This highlights the need for countries which are currently developing plans to increase their registration coverage to specifically address the question of inequality.

Kiribati: The main challenge towards universal registration is geography. Many of the outer islands experience significantly lower registration rates, because of the difficulty to provide services to very small and isolated communities. As a response, the government has trained Medical Assistants and Assistant Social Welfare Officers and Clerks in the Outer islands to improve their understanding of legal and practical aspects of civil registration. It has also turned to digitization to facilitate the transmission of records.

Global data on civil registration completeness also indicates that migration status, residence location and income quintile have large impacts on registration rates. UNICEF’s study on birth registration also highlighted some of those inequalities, showing that globally, children from the lowest income household quintile are one-quarter less likely than their highest counterpart to be registered.^{iv} In South Asia, 86 percent of children under 5 are registered in the richest households, but that proportion falls to 53 for the poorest. Migrant families and rural communities are also identified as more prone to exclusion.

Why should countries assess their inequalities?

Indeed, birth registration is usually the first official document recognizing a person’s legal identity and is often used as a basis for issuing following identification documents. Registration, especially of birth, is therefore a key enabler of the “right to recognition everywhere as a person before the law”,^v a fundamental human right often referred to as the “right to have other rights”.^{vi} Without a legal identity, individuals are never granted formal recognition by the nation, and they are thus barred entry to countless social and economic opportunities.^{vii} As a prerequisite for reaching social benefits, providing universal registration is decisive in the fight against other inequalities.

Civil registration, and especially birth registration, is fundamental for accessing many services and benefits as well as a basic human right. Only by being recognized can individuals claim their right to equal chances and welfare. As such, assessing the challenges of subgroups in being registered and addressing them is essential for human rights. Registration can also be a unique opportunity to provide protection to vulnerable groups such as refugees, stateless persons, or women and girls. Even if not automatic, the relationship between civil registration and legal identity illustrates what is at stake in the registration of vital events.

Civil registration is also crucial not only as an opportunity for citizens to access other services but as an essential tool for measuring many of the indicators of the targets of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG). Indeed, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development repeatedly mentions the need for “quality, accessible, timely and reliable disaggregated data”,^{viii} and a universal and well-functioning CRVS system can contribute to all these elements.^{ix} More specifically, it can be used to produce statistics on 67 of the 232 indicators, especially under Goals 3, 4, 16 and 17.^x As such, universal civil registration coverage is even more compelling to achieve the pledge to Leave No One Behind, for governments to be able to monitor the groups furthest behind in terms of development. Otherwise, the population groups disproportionately not registered will remain invisible in the measures of progress, when they typically are those in need of it most. Estimations of inequalities relying on periodic data like surveys, apart from their higher cost, also are also less likely to include the most marginalized. For example, Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS) and Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS), often used as a primary source of information in countries lacking strong administrative data, do not account for those living outside of households or otherwise excluded such as the homeless, slum dwellers, irregular migrants, nomadic or displaced populations, stateless persons, and people in temporary shelters or institutions.^{xi} These limits showcase the irreplaceability of quality CRVS data to assess progress in the 2030 agenda, allowing governments to go beyond a national average to investigate the groups left behind and explore what can be done to ensure true universal registration.

How can inequalities be assessed?

The support office of the Bali Process on People Smuggling, Trafficking in Persons and Related Transnational Crime (Bali Process)¹ has developed a Toolkit which offers a comprehensive guide to inequality assessments.² Since the Regional Action Framework on CRVS aims at assessing any kind of inequality and not only those of the toolkit's focus groups (refugees, stateless persons and asylum-seekers), it should be adapted to the national context depending on the populations at risk. But many of the steps described are insightful for assessments targeting any marginalized group. The toolkit is being piloted in Thailand in 2020.

The first step to assess inequalities is to identify those groups with lower registration rates and the magnitude of the gap with the rest of the population. To render an objective overview of the situation, countries need to analyze data of the best quality. Depending on the situation, several options might be available. Census data is one of the best data sources if it addresses the question of civil registration, as it is relatively comprehensive. National surveys or DHS/MICS can also provide insights on some of the gaps in universal registration. However, no matter which source is used, the most marginalized groups are often still excluded.

Further intelligence on the country's CRVS system can be found in the related legislation or policies. Researchers from academia and national or international organizations are also a great source of information, offering potential data reviews and discussions of the functioning of the system. As registration inequalities are rooted in many interwoven complex processes, it is important to fully understand the situation beyond what numbers can offer. This can be achieved by referring to studies on different mechanisms of civil registration in the country or elsewhere, or by conducting research on what appears to be blind spots. Additionally, qualitative studies can help overcome the limitations of the data used and get a better understanding of barriers to registration.

An inequality assessment makes sense only if linked to actions and targets to reduce the gaps between the identified groups and the rest of the population. In countries where the assessment reveals significant variability in civil registration completeness or coverage by geography or level of social and economic development, it may be necessary to establish special procedures for civil registration to ensure that progress is inclusive and universal. These may include incentives and measures to alleviate barriers to civil registration, such as gender disparities, distance, costs, legal restrictions and cultural factors, and may involve utilizing existing infrastructure or public services, including social workers and community health workers, for notifying civil registration authorities of vital events.

Since some of the groups of interest represent small proportions of the population, their situation may be obscured by a national average. To monitor the effectiveness of their implemented actions, members and associate members are therefore encouraged to set separate national targets for the population groups identified at special risk of exclusion, where appropriate, for civil registration coverage, provision of legal documentation and vital statistics. These targets should be supported by specific activities, ideally as part of a comprehensive multisectoral national CRVS strategy, to address the inequalities related to CRVS that these groups experience.

This low visibility of some groups at the national level is why the Regional Action Framework on CRVS goes beyond the measurement of civil registration completeness and includes inequality assessment as one of its steps. Implementation steps have been conceived as the essential tools for achieving quality and universal civil registration systems. Their pursuit should therefore be considered, even in countries with already functioning systems. It is especially important in the fight against inequalities, which can remain blind spots if not specifically

¹ For more information, visit <https://www.baliprocess.net/>

² You can find the toolkit at <https://www.baliprocess.net/UserFiles/baliprocess/File/Bali%20Process%20Civil%20Registration%20Assessment%20Toolkit%20FINAL.pdf>

and thoroughly examined. This step is also essential to the realization of the 2030 Agenda considering the numbers of SDG indicators whose calculation can benefit from a universal CRVS system.

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