

REALIZING UNIVERSAL BIRTH REGISTRATION

Birth registration is the first formal acknowledgment of a person's legal identity. It establishes the parent-child relationship under the law and provides critical protection of children against vulnerabilities such as family separation, child marriage and child labour. Birth registration supports access to services, legal rights and full participation in society. Despite considerable progress across Asia and the Pacific, gaps in birth registration coverage and completeness persist. Achieving universal and inclusive birth registration requires continued commitment and strategic action.

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development underscores the importance of legal identity for all. Target 16.9 specifically calls for legal identity for all, measured by universal birth registration. Indicator 17.19.2b tracks progress toward 100 per cent birth registration and 80 per cent death registration as markers of strong statistical systems.

The Regional Action Framework includes several targets related to birth registration for children under 1 year of age and under 5 years of age and for individuals throughout their lifetime, ensuring not only timely registration of newborns but also the registration of older children and all individuals.

Within the Regional Action Framework, target 1A focuses on registering births within one year of occurrence. Timely registration supports not only individual rights and access to services but also the production of accurate and timely vital statistics. Late registration undermines data reliability which in turn undermines the ability of Governments to design and implement effective policies and services that meet the needs of their populations.

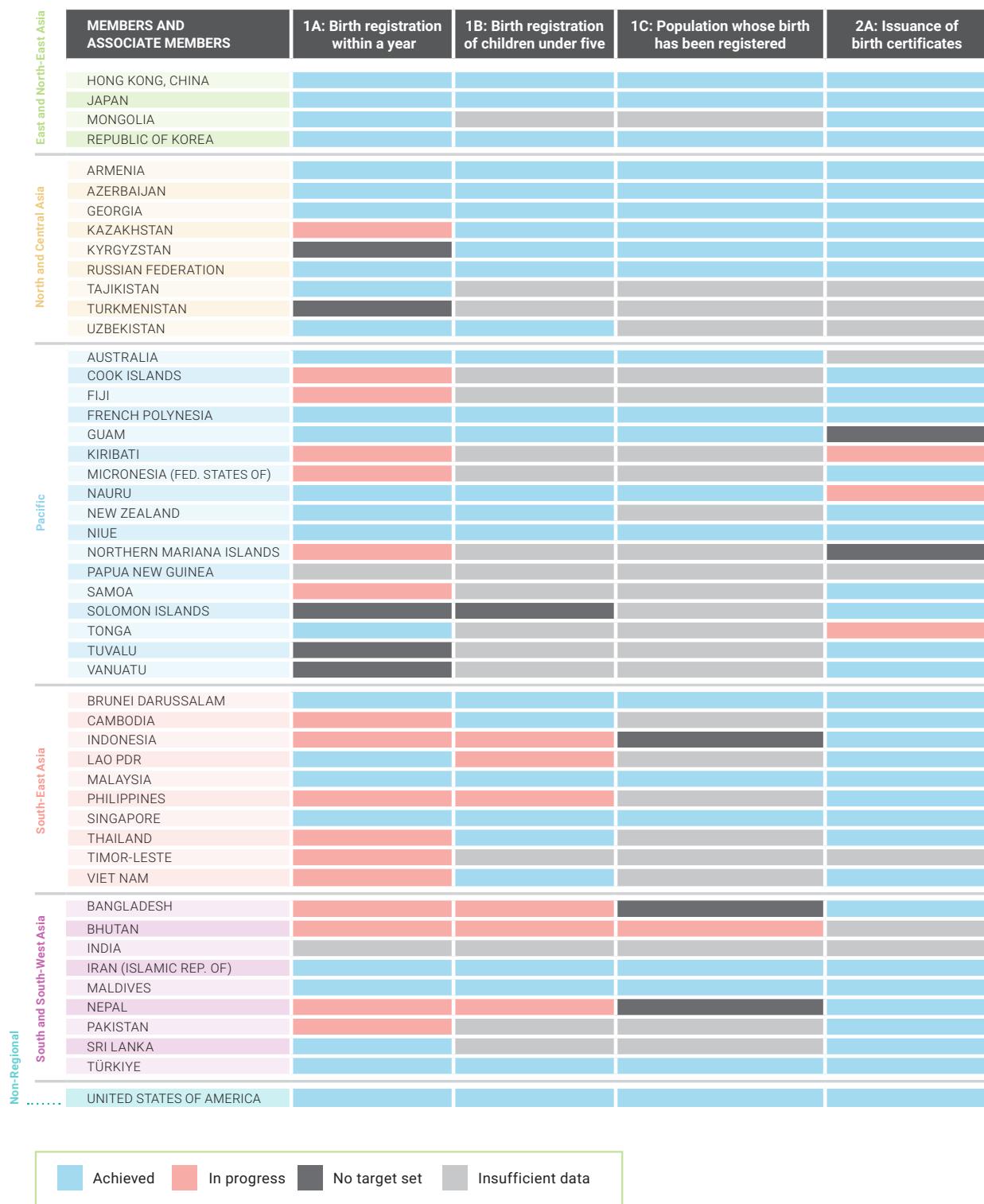
Target 1B focuses on the registration of births for children under 5 years of age supporting the protection of children's rights and their access to services such as education, healthcare and social protection.

Target 1C addresses the registration of all individuals within a country's territory or jurisdiction, emphasizing the importance of reaching people whose births were never registered. This target is particularly relevant for addressing historical backlogs and ensuring that the benefits of CRVS systems are inclusive and universally accessible.

Legal documentation is essential for exercising rights and accessing services. Proof of legal identity is defined as a credential, such as birth certificate, identity card or digital identity credential that is recognized as proof of legal identity under national law and in accordance with emerging international norms and principles. Universal and responsive civil registration provide documents and a permanent record for individuals to establish their legal identity, civil status and family relationships.



Figure II: Overview of achievement against birth registration targets



Note: Progress was assessed only for members and associate members that had submitted the 2025 review questionnaire. If data for 2022–2023 were not available, they are considered as having 'insufficient data'. Members and associate members were considered having 'achieved' their national target if the latest available data (2022–2023) was superior or equal to their target or was within 2 percentage points of 100 per cent if they had not set a target. Otherwise, it is considered 'in progress'. For most members and associate members, the latest data are from 2023.



Target 2A calls for the issuance of a birth certificate for every birth registered within one year of occurrence. A birth certificate is the official, legal proof, whether physical or digital, of a person's identity and is in most cases the starting point for an individual to obtain other documentation such as a national identity card, social security card, driving license and passport. Birth registration documentation is required not only to access public services but also for everyday activities, such as opening a bank account, signing a work contract, or subscribing to a mobile phone service. Even in locations with advanced digital identity systems, a birth certificate remains a foundational document.

Figure II shows that many members and associate members have met targets 1A and 2A, indicating growing numbers of infants registered within one year and receiving a birth certificate. This represents a critical step towards ensuring that every child's identity is legally recognized.

While registration should ideally occur at birth, it is often delayed until school enrolment, making registration of children under 5 years of age a key indicator, reflected in target 1B. Measuring target 1B requires different data sources to 1A and 2A. Since it is largely measured through surveys or, occasionally, population registers, fewer members and associate members have sufficient data to monitor progress against this target. By the end of 2024, only 33 members and associate members had enough data to report on target 1B, compared to 48 for target 1A and 42 for target 2A. Historically, many members and associate members in Asia and the Pacific have relied on household surveys such as Demographic Health Surveys (DHS) and Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS) to monitor birth registration completeness. These surveys include questions on both birth registration and birth certificate possession for children under 5 years of age. At the beginning of the CRVS Decade such survey data was limited and only 23 members and associate members had sufficient data to report on target 1B. The number rose to 33 by the end of 2024 as more members and associate members conducted such surveys allowing them to monitor birth registration completeness among children under 5 years of age.

Target 1C presents even greater data challenges. Estimating registration completeness for the entire population requires comprehensive population registers, large-scale household surveys or census data containing appropriate questions on birth registration. A few ESCAP members and associate members, such as the Philippines and Sri Lanka, have included such questions in recent population censuses to address this data gap.⁷

While birth registration rates are rising, millions of children remain unregistered each year.

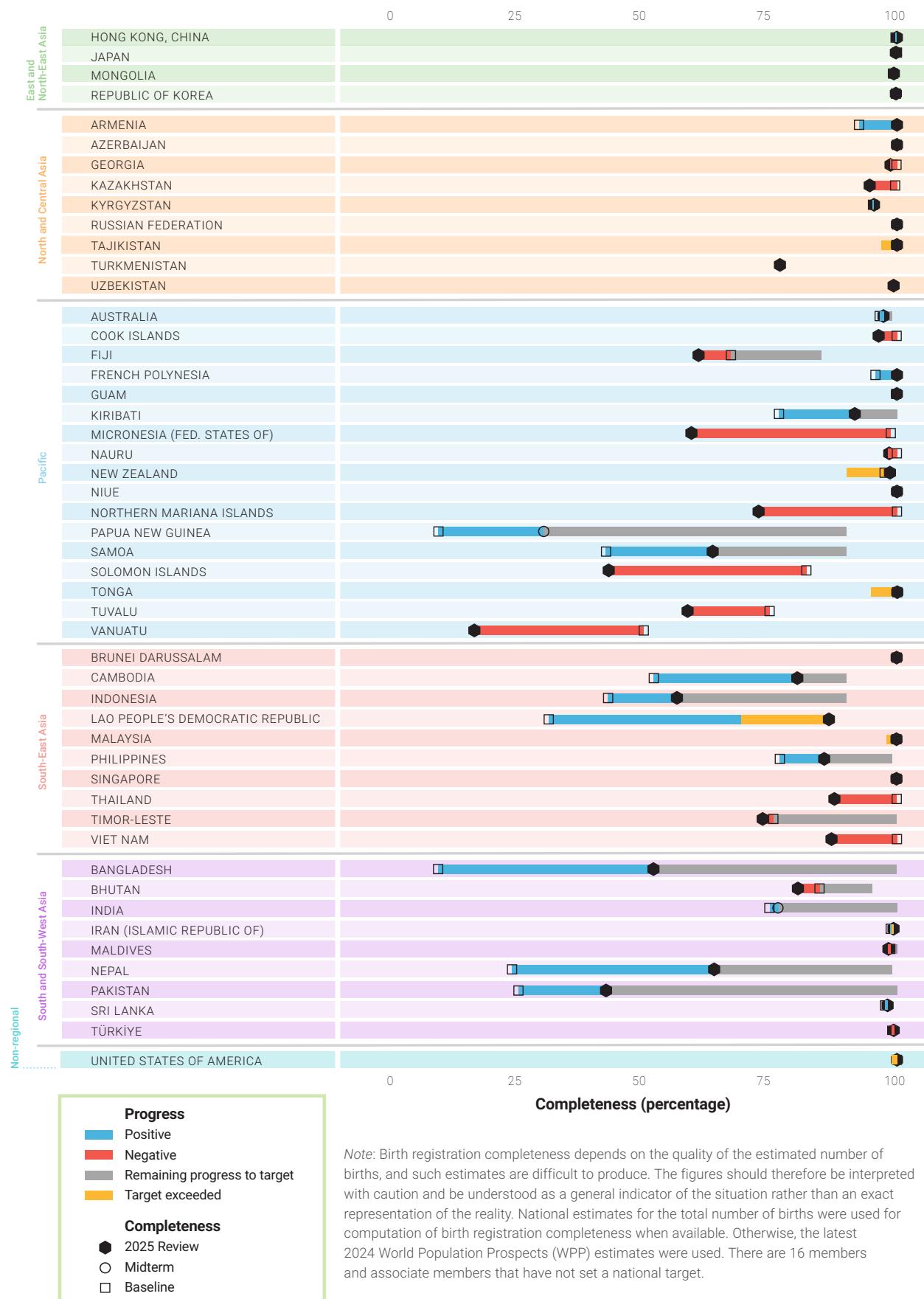
In alignment with Article 7 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, most members and associate members of ESCAP provide free birth registration within a legally defined period, usually two weeks to three months. During this period, fewer documents are typically required compared to late or delayed registration, which may involve additional fees and procedural hurdles. The 2025 review shows 14 members and associate members now register over 95 per cent of births within this period, up from 11 in 2015. When expanding the timeframe to one year, 26 members and associate members met their national targets for timely registration under target 1A (figure II). Birth registration rates tend to increase with age. For example, in Fiji, registration for children born in 2017 increased from 57 per cent by 1 year of age to 84 per cent by 5 years of age.⁸

7 A population register is an individualized data system, that is, a mechanism of continuous recording, and/or of coordinated linkage, of selected information pertaining to each member of the resident population of a country in such a way to provide the possibility of determining up-to-date information concerning the size and characteristics of that population at selected time intervals. See: <https://unstats.un.org/unsd/demographic/standmeth/principles/m19rev3en.pdf>.

8 Fiji Bureau of Statistics, Ministry of Health and Medical Services and Ministry of Justice (2023). [Assessing inequalities in registration of births and deaths in Fiji](#).



Figure III: Birth registration completeness – Progress towards target 1A





Overall, more births are now registered within one year of occurrence than at the beginning of the CRVS Decade (figure III). In East and North-East Asia the targets were achieved, and in South and South-West Asia the members and associate members saw significant improvements, with Bangladesh and Nepal increasing timely birth registration rates by over 40 percentage points by 2024.

The clear improvement in birth registration rates reflects substantial reforms and coordinated action since the launch of the CRVS Decade. Many Governments in the region undertook significant overhauls of their systems, including digitalization, strengthening ties with the health sector and significant efforts in advocacy and outreach. These initiatives were often supported by strong political will and the mobilization of resources to strengthen their CRVS systems. For example, the Philippines enacted its CRVS Law in 2015, declared its own national CRVS Decade and designated February as CRVS Month through executive orders. Similarly, Bangladesh used a comprehensive CRVS system assessment in 2013 to develop a multisectoral action plan and issued national guidelines for CRVS improvement in 2019.

Despite progress, universal birth registration has not been achieved. Estimates from the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) indicate that 14 million infants in Asia and the Pacific in 2024 were not registered within one year of birth.⁹ To ensure every child's birth is registered, continued progress will require sustained investments, institutional capacity-building and cross-sectoral coordination.

More birth certificates are being issued – some in electronic formats

As previously mentioned, a birth certificate is crucial to access services, such as healthcare and education, and to exercise rights. It serves as official proof of legal identity and is often a prerequisite for obtaining other documents like national identity (ID) cards, passports, or driver's licenses. Many countries only issue national identity cards or other credentials at the age of majority. Recognizing the foundational importance of birth registration and certification in establishing and ensuring legal identity, the United Nations Legal Identity Agenda (UNLIA) promotes a holistic approach that integrates CRVS and identity management (see box 2).

In line with this, Goal 2 of the Regional Action Framework calls for the issuance of legal documentation for all registered vital events. Specifically, target 2A focuses on the issuance of a birth certificate for each registered birth within the territory and jurisdiction. Most members and associate members of ESCAP have made considerable progress.

By 2024, 37 out of 50 had met national targets for target 2A, up from 18 in 2015. Certificates are often provided free and at the time of registration. Increasingly, digital systems are being used to issue certificates and link registration records to other services. There is also a shift towards fewer paper certificates and greater use of electronic certificates. For example, New Zealand issues digital birth certificates by default. Depending on national law, a birth certificate may also serve as proof of nationality or a prerequisite for obtaining it. Birth certificates in combination with proof of nationality of the parents often serve as a temporary proof of nationality.¹⁰

⁹ UNICEF (2024). [The Right Start in Life: Global levels and trends in birth registration](#).

¹⁰ Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) (2024). 'Ensuring birth registration for the prevention of statelessness.' Information note. Available at: <https://data.unhcr.org/fr/documents/download/109697>.

Birth registration rates have increased significantly during the CRVS Decade, not only for children under 5 years of age but also among the total population

Over the past decade, the region has made remarkable progress in birth registration for children under 5 years of age (target 1B). From 2012 to 2024, the number of unregistered children under 5 years of age declined from 135 million to 51 million, a 60 per cent reduction. Despite this major achievement, challenges remain to reach every child to ensure truly universal registration.

The South and South-West Asia subregion has the highest number of unregistered children under 5 years of age (43 million) but also experienced the greatest absolute reduction (7.2 million) in unregistered children. The South-East Asia and East and North-East Asia subregions reduced the number of unregistered children by 4.5 million and 1.5 million, respectively since 2019 (figure IV). The Pacific has the highest proportion of unregistered children (33 per cent), where geographical, administrative and financial barriers continue to pose significant challenges to birth registration efforts.

BOX 2

UNITED NATIONS LEGAL IDENTITY AGENDA

The United Nations Legal Identity Expert Group was established in September 2018 by the United Nations Deputy Secretary-General and was later transformed into a Task Force comprising representatives of 16 United Nations agencies. This group promotes a comprehensive approach to developing and implementing civil registration and vital statistics and identity management (CRVSID) systems.

The United Nations defines legal identity as the basic characteristics of an individual's identity, such as name, sex, place and date of birth, conferred through registration and the issuance of a certificate by an authorized civil registration authority following the occurrence of birth. In the absence of birth registration, legal identity may be conferred by a legally recognized identification authority; this system should be linked to the civil registration system to ensure a holistic approach to legal identity from birth to death. Legal identity is retired by the issuance of a death certificate by the civil registration authority upon registration of death.

To guide countries in aligning with the United Nations Legal Identity Agenda (UNLIA), the Task Force developed the United Nations Country Team Guidelines on Implementing UNLIA and the official working definition of legal identity in close collaboration with the World Bank. Over time, the Task Force has produced a series of normative guidance and policy papers contributing to the development of international standards in areas such as digital identity, the use and scale of biometrics, the content of identity credentials and, most critically, the confidentiality and privacy of individual information. Some key publications and documents include a guide to the creation of Free Movement Zones to promote migration and increased cross-border travel between

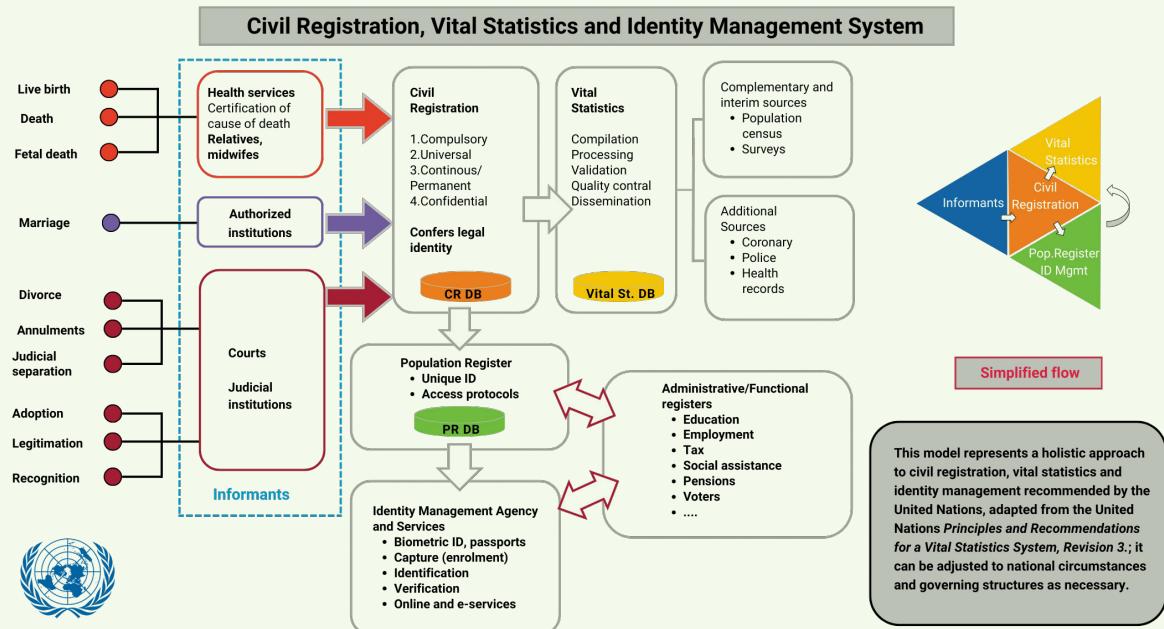
themselves, a Compendium of the United Nations Policy on Data Protection and Privacy, country assessment reports for 13 priority countries in Africa and a synthesis report identifying priority investment areas where UNLIA technical and financial support can accelerate national implementation.

The Task Force actively supports country-level implementation of CRVSID systems aligned with UNLIA while contributing to global and regional dialogues. These include the Ministerial Conference on Civil Registration and Vital Statistics in Africa and Asia and the Pacific, side events during the United Nations Statistical Commission, United Nations General Assembly and the Summit of the Future, and the Identity for All in Africa (ID4Africa) Annual General Meetings.

Several significant publications and tools were launched in 2024, including: i) the International Organization for Migration (IOM) Digital Identity Manual, Identity Management Manual and Legal Identity Maturity Assessment Methodology; ii) the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) Digital Gateway for forcibly displaced persons; iii) the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) CRVSID integration video showing the life-course approach, 'Reaching Children with a Holistic Approach: Enhancing Synergies Between Social Protection and Civil Registration Systems for an Inclusive and Equitable Society' and 'The Right Start in Life: Global levels and trends in birth registration, 2024 update'; and iv) the World Health Organization (WHO) and UNICEF online course on birth and death registration. The Task Force held seven webinars in 2024, promoting best practices in CRVSID across a range of technical and policy topics.

BOX 2 continued

UNITED NATIONS LEGAL IDENTITY AGENDA



Source: United Nations Legal Identity Agenda (2020).

By 2024, 26 members and associate members had achieved their national targets or universal registration for children under 5 years of age, up from 11 in 2019 (figure II). Over the same period, the number of members and associate members with universal registration for the entire population more than doubled. However, data gaps still hinder monitoring, particularly for target 1C as nearly half of the reporting members and associate members lack sufficient data in 2024.

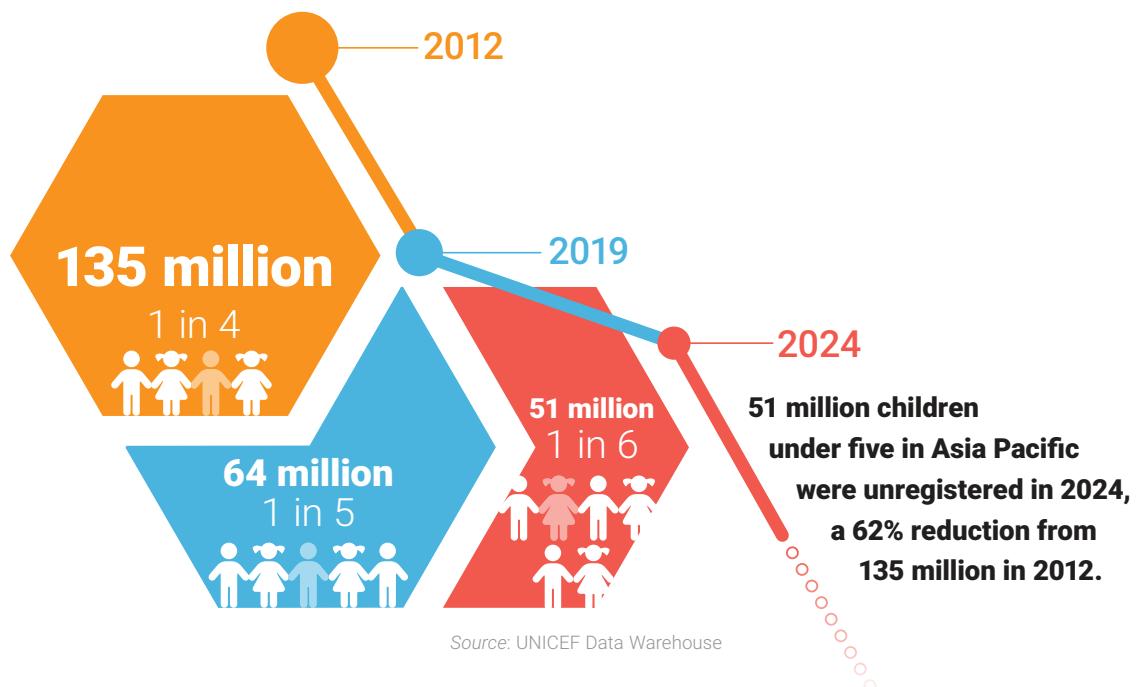
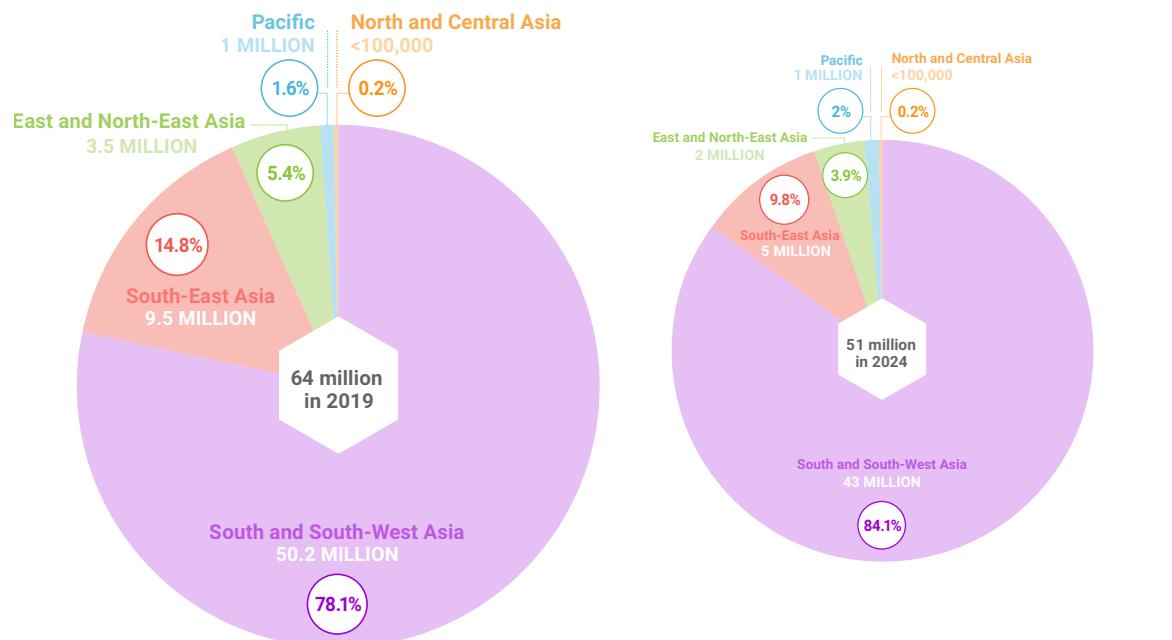


Figure IV: Number and percentage of unregistered children under 5 years of age in Asia and the Pacific from 2019 to 2024



Note: Non-regional members of ESCAP are not included. See Annex V for the list of ESCAP members, associate members and non-regional members.

What can be done to improve birth registration?

The Regional Action Framework outlines eight implementation steps to support the goal of universal registration, including establishing a national CRVS coordination mechanism and developing a multisectoral strategy. Both of these steps enhance coordination across government agencies and stakeholders, strengthening efforts to register every individual. Many members and associate members, such as Cambodia, Maldives and Samoa, established national coordination mechanisms early in the CRVS Decade. These mechanisms have supported improvements, including the development and revision of laws, regulations, national CRVS strategies and business processes, all of which have contributed to increased birth registration rates.

Conducting inequality assessments is another critical step. These assessments help to identify marginalized groups and improve system inclusivity. Even among members and associate members with high birth registration rates, an inequality assessment is valuable in verifying the completeness of the birth registration process and uncovering gaps in the CRVS system. For example, an assessment was conducted recently in Australia, identifying an estimated 12,600 unregistered children in their first year of life (4.1 per cent of babies), predominantly among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.¹¹

In addition to the implementation steps, the Framework outlines action areas (see box 1). These action areas serve as the basis for Governments and development partners to focus and organize CRVS improvement efforts. They also establish structured reporting for members and associate members to capture non-quantifiable achievements.

Digitalization is enhancing birth registration and the issuance of birth certificate processes across the region. In Iran, digital records are shared between the Ministry of Health and Medical Education and the National Organization for Civil Registration, enabling the timely issuance of birth certificates. By 2024, Iran successfully issued birth certificates for all births registered within one year of occurrence.¹² Similarly, Azerbaijan introduced electronic birth certificates in 2020 and linked its registration database to a centralized e-government system, allowing parents to seamlessly access social benefits, education and healthcare services for their child.¹³

BOX 3

DIGITALIZING BIRTH REGISTRATION AND CERTIFICATION:

LEVERAGING TECHNOLOGY TO IMPROVE CHILDREN'S FUTURE IN PAPUA NEW GUINEA

In 2023, Papua New Guinea had approximately 1.2 million children under 5 years of age. However, only 13.1 per cent—around 161,000 children—had received a birth certificate, limiting their ability to access essential services such as healthcare, social protection and, eventually, education. While school enrolment may begin after 5 years of age, lacking a birth certificate at an early age places children at risk of exclusion when the time comes. The country's low birth registration and certification rates are largely due to limited administrative capacity, logistical difficulties and challenges in reaching remote and rural populations.

To address these challenges, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) in partnership with the Government of Papua New Guinea, has leveraged technology to expand birth registration. Mobile registration toolkits are used to support registration in mobile civil registration units to register vital events of hard-to-reach population groups. Each toolkit can process more than 1,000 birth registrations

per month and with the 44 kits provided in 2024 by UNICEF and the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) of Australia in 2024, the Government of Papua New Guinea aims to increase birth registration to over 500,000 per year.

This initiative has also resulted in a tripling in the number of birth certificates issued from 26,000 certificates in 2023 to 78,000 in 2024. However, to match the increase in registrations, birth certification needs to be accelerated. Until recently, birth certification was conducted manually with the Registrar General having the sole authority to physically sign birth certificates. Recognizing this bottleneck, UNICEF plans to provide electronic equipment for digital signatures in 2025, enabling faster and more efficient issuance of birth certificates. By streamlining both the birth registration and certification processes, Papua New Guinea is working towards ensuring every child's right to a legal identity and improved access to essential services.

11 UNICEF Australia (2023). [Certify Hope – Rights from the start: Achieving universal birth registration in Australia](#).

12 Iran (Islamic Republic of). Countries/Regions. <https://getinthepicture.org/country/iran-islamic-rep>.

13 Azerbaijan. Countries/Regions. <https://getinthepicture.org/country/azerbaijan>.

Since then, Azerbaijan has issued digital birth certificates for all registered births. As members and associate members advance digitalization efforts in their CRVS systems, adopting a stepwise approach can be an effective strategy. In Papua New Guinea, only the Registrar General is authorized to a birth certificate, which creates a bottleneck. Due to a notable increase in birth registration driven by mobile registration, the country—supported by UNICEF—is transitioning to the use of digital signatures to accelerate the birth certification process (box 3).

Universal birth registration must cover the entire population including hard-to-reach populations and people in vulnerable situations. By 2024, 39 members and associated members (78 per cent) allowed non-citizens to register vital events, and 62 per cent had made registration processes accessible to persons with disabilities. For stateless individuals, birth registration can offer a pathway to end statelessness and may help with access to basic services, such as education, banking and employment.

Alongside efforts to increase birth registration and certification rates, it is also important to monitor how much progress is being made. Censuses can play a vital role together with CRVS data to assess birth registration completeness and identify inequalities (box 4). CRVS systems should also serve as the foundation for developing comprehensive population registers. In Asia and the Pacific, 22 members and associate members have set a national target of at least 95 per cent birth registration for their entire population. Türkiye has met this target by deriving birth registration data from their well-functioning population register, which is also the backbone for the provision of public and private services.¹⁴

BOX 4

STRENGTHENING THE SYNERGY BETWEEN CRVS AND CENSUS FOR MORE TIMELY AND INCLUSIVE POPULATION DATA

Across Asia and the Pacific, members and associate members are increasingly moving towards register-based censuses and expanding the use of administrative data sources for which a well-functioning CRVS system is essential. By continuously recording births, deaths and other vital events, CRVS forms the foundation for updating population registers and producing timely and accurate population estimates. However, to fully harness the potential of CRVS in this context, members and associate members must first address gaps in birth and death registration completeness. Census data play a crucial role in identifying areas where CRVS coverage is insufficient, including through inequality assessments. By leveraging census findings, governments can design and implement targeted interventions to improve CRVS completeness and coverage, ultimately enhancing the quality, reliability and inclusivity of population data for evidence-informed policymaking.

To support this shift, ESCAP developed the Self-Assessment Tool on the Readiness to Use Administrative Data for Census (SATRAC). This tool provides a structured framework for members and associate members to assess their institutional and technical capacity to use administrative data sources – such as CRVS – for population and housing censuses. By using SATRAC, national statistical offices and civil registration authorities can better align their strategies and efforts, ensuring that administrative data meaningfully contributes to the census and strengthens the production of demographic statistics.

As the shift towards register-based censuses accelerates, strengthening CRVS systems, integrating them within national statistical frameworks and, most importantly, linking civil registration microdata and statistical population registers will be essential. These efforts will help generate comprehensive, timely and policy-relevant population statistics, supporting the shared goal ‘to get every one in the picture’.

¹⁴ Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) (2022). *Emerging Trends in Census Approaches in Asia and the Pacific with country examples*. Available at: <https://repository.unescap.org/handle/20.500.12870/4343>.

Azerbaijan also maintains a population register, building on universal birth registration for infants and adults.¹⁵ For some members and associate members, censuses and surveys have been used to estimate birth registration rates. In 2015 and 2019, the Philippines and Vanuatu conducted censuses that included a question on birth registration for all household members. Findings revealed that 95 per cent of the population in the Philippines and 85 per cent in Vanuatu had their birth registered. However, while such methods provide valuable insights, a well-functioning population register can give more regular, accurate and timely data on birth registration and other vital events across the entire population.



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15 Azerbaijan country presentation (2023). Presented at the Regional Training Workshop on Transition to Register-based Approaches for Population and Housing Censuses, Ankara, Türkiye, 12-15 June. Available at: www.unescap.org/events/2023/regional-training-workshop-transition-register-based-approaches-population-and-housing#.