

Access to Birth Registration for Refugees and Asylum-Seekers in Ethiopia

A birth registration is the official recording of the birth of a child through a state's administrative process. It is a permanent and official record of a child's existence. Although birth registration is different from the process of acquiring nationality, it establishes a child's legal identity.

There are 1,066,842 refugees in Ethiopia as of 30 August 2024. Some 576,094 of them, or 54%, are children. Since the Vital Events Registration started in refugee camps/settlements in October 2017, only 69,131 birth registrations have been completed. While the exact number of children without a birth registration is under review, it is clear that many forcibly displaced children lack vital documentation.

This September 2024 protection brief analyzes the challenge of birth registration among refugees and other forcibly displaced populations in Ethiopia. It will lay out why birth registration is important in displacement situations, including in Ethiopia. The commendable actions by the Government of Ethiopia to promote birth and other vital events registration for refugees since 2016 will also be reviewed. The causes of the current birth registration challenges in different parts of the country are then analyzed. Finally, the brief sets out a series of recommendations for the way forward.

I. Why is birth registration important for refugee and asylum-seekers children in Ethiopia?

Birth registration is an important protection tool in Ethiopia. At a basic level, birth registration establishes a child's identity. Its importance, however, goes far beyond this, as a lack of birth registration can lead to serious barriers for refugee children including:

- **FUTURE NON-RECOGNITION AS A CITIZEN (statelessness):** Without a birth registration and documentation, children may have problems proving their links to a State, which puts them at risk of becoming stateless or being denied access to asylum.
- **DENIAL OF ACCESS TO SERVICES:** Without a birth registration, a child's access to education, health care and social security may be hampered. For example, a birth registration is sometimes a prerequisite for school enrolment in Ethiopia and for the taking of national exams. As an adult, it is often a prerequisite to be able to marry, to enter the labour market, get travel documents such as passports, access banking systems, and to register the birth of one's own children.
- **INCREASED RISK TO VIOLENCE AND ABUSE:** Children without a birth registration in Ethiopia are more vulnerable to protection risks such as trafficking, child labour, child marriage, illegal adoption, sexual exploitation, and recruitment into armed groups.



- **RISK OF BEING TREATED AS AN ADULT:** Children without a birth registration may be unjustly treated as adults during asylum or judicial proceedings.

- **INCREASED RISK OF FAMILY SEPARATION IN EMERGENCIES:**

Lack of a birth certificate decreases the possibility of successful tracing and family reunification for children separated from their families during flight or other emergencies.

- **OBSTACLES TO DURABLE SOLUTIONS:**

Family reunification can be difficult in the Ethiopian context without any documents to trace the child's relatives, and a lack of documentation can interfere with the child's ability to return to his/her country of origin.

- **INCREASED RISK OF DENIAL OF INTERNATIONAL PROTECTION AND REFOULEMENT:**

Birth registration and certificates can serve as a protection tool with the legal attributes it carries on by establishing the legal identity of an individual. A lack of documentation could also heighten the risks of refoulement. Children or even adults without any form of identity, particularly with regard to their nationality - such as birth certificates - have/may not be considered as aliens and as such not deserving international protection. In locations with security concerns, they are usually detained and may even face return to places they claim to have come from and where they could face serious harm hence amounting to refoulement.

II. Actions by the Government of Ethiopia to promote birth registration for refugee children.

At the 2016 Leaders' Summit on Refugees, Ethiopia made nine very significant pledges to improve the lives of refugees and integrate them more effectively in society. One of the key pledges concerned documentation, specifically to enhance the civil registration and vital statistics (CRVS) system to ensure that all births, deaths, marriages, and other vital events for refugees would be registered and documented. This initiative was important for both refugees and for the national authorities themselves, as it was also foreseen that it would improve the accuracy and reliability of population data, crucial for planning and delivering public services, and for informing development responses.

A related legal proclamation was subsequently passed. Ethiopia's Vital Events Registration and Nationality Identity Card Proclamation (Amendment Proc. No. 1049 /2017), entered into force in August 2017. The proclamation provides the legal foundations for refugee access to vital events registration. An implementing directive soon followed. The launch of vital events registration for refugees began in October 2017.

The revised Refugees Proclamation (Proc. No.1110/2019) awards refugees the same treatment as nationals regarding the registration of vital events and issuance of certificates.

The proclamation empowers the Refugees and Returnees Services (RRS) as the responsible Government body that has the primary responsibility for the security and management of all refugee camps and settlements in Ethiopia and in ensuring the protection and physical security of refugees, in collaboration with federal and regional governments as well as with UNHCR and other partners.

The progress in the issuance of birth and other vital events registration to refugees has been constant, but at times slow. In 2019, there were 8,080 vital events registered, with the vast majority being births (some 7,150). So far in 2024, 8,769 births have been registered.

Everyone has the right to be recognized as a person before the law, as enshrined in Article 6 of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights and Article 16 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. Several international human rights instruments, such as Article 7 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child and Article 24(2) of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights also recognize the right to a birth registration.

Sustainable Development Goal 16.9 ("legal identity for all, including birth registration, by 2030") is key to advance the 2030 Agenda commitment to leave no one behind, and equally relevant is SDG 17.19 -support to statistical capacity-building in developing countries, monitored by the indicator "proportion of countries that have achieved 100 per cent birth registration and 80 per cent death registration".

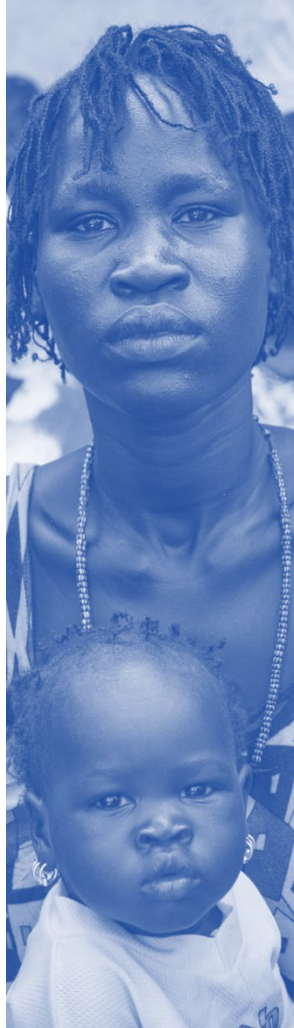
III. Causes of gaps in birth registration among refugee children in Ethiopia

The following challenges to refugee access to birth registration have been identified:

- **Lack of vital events registration capacity.** There are more than 1 million refugees in Ethiopia. To date, insufficient resources including human resources, lack of well-equipped vital registration offices and gaps in information technology-based registration system have been

provided to the RRS Vital Events Registration Unit to ensure comprehensive registration of vital events, including birth registration.

- **Backlog created due to COVID-19 movement restrictions.** Registration and issuance of vital events documentation halted at several refugee sites due to COVID-19 movement restrictions, leading to a backlog across the country (as summarized in the next chapter).
- **Refugee parents denied access to the birth registration process due to lack of pre-natal medical care and birth notification.** For different reasons, some refugee mothers do not seek pre-natal medical care and births often occur at home in the refugee settlement. The absence of proof of pre-natal medical attention has led to the rejection of some birth registration requests on the grounds that the parents do not have a proven link to the child. Testimonies from traditional birth attendants have not been accepted as alternate proof of birth.
- **Security Concerns.** A state of emergency has been declared in several regions in recent years, including Oromia, Tigray, and Amhara. As a result of this, issuance of vital event documents has been halted at times, along with the interruption of other services.
- **Children born outside of Ethiopia, after the refugee registration of the mother.** Some refugees have crossed back to their country of origin after having registered their refugee status for short periods. Pendular



movements to some countries are common, particularly during calmer periods. Some children have therefore been born in their country of origin and do not have a medical record in Ethiopia. These children have been unable to register - a situation particularly prevalent among refugees from South Sudan and Somalia, among others.

- **Lack of community engagement and awareness regarding birth registration:** There is no significant involvement of the community due to a lack of understanding about the advantages of birth registration, an issue often associated with cultural beliefs and low levels of literacy.

IV. Understanding the gaps in birth registration across different refugee-hosting areas in Ethiopia

Addis Ababa: The document verification exercise that was carried out in the beginning of 2024 reduced the number of children without a birth registration. Even so, the problem of gaps in birth registration persists. Based on the preliminary findings by Jesuit Refuge Service (JRS - UNHCR's child protection partner in the urban setting) and

UNHCR, there are about 126 children waiting for birth registration.

Afar: In Afar, specifically in Berhale, there are 2500 children who are not registered for birth and require immediate intervention. From 2020 there have not been any registration activities in the Afar region. Registration will restart in 2024.

Alemwach: the birth registration of refugee children relocated immediately after the conflict in Tigray did not take place mainly due to the security concerns related to the conflict in Tigray and the suspension of registration by the Government. As a result, about 1,000 children were unable to get registered. UNHCR took alternative measures to assist these children and register them using KOBO software to ensure that they could receive humanitarian assistance. As of 1 June 2024, about 700 children included in the KOBO list were transferred into UNHCR's registration system proGres and issued the required documents. The remaining children will be transferred in the same way, despite the challenges in internet connectivity in the region.

Assosa: In Tsore refugee camp, there are about 6300 children waiting for birth registration. For other refugee camps in Assosa, a few cases have been handled on a case-by-case basis through protection litigation desk with teams composed of RRS, UNHCR, and child protection partners.

Bokh: There is no functional vital events registration. As a result, about 382 children without a birth registration have been identified by UNHCR and partner OWS-Development Fund.

Borena and South-Omo settlements: For these locations, there is no dedicated presence of UNHCR and RRS staff. The number of refugee children registered in Borena and South-Omo stand at 1,754 and 2,290 respectively. There is no available data on their birth registration.

Gambella: In 2019, RRS collaborated with Immigration and Citizenship Services to launch a mass registration campaign and issue birth certificates. The campaign resolved certain difficulties, but not to the intended level, and many children's births are still not registered. Exceptionally, cases of minors with ongoing/active resettlement

cases have been processed case-by-case through collaborative litigation between RRS and UNHCR. Other incidents were examined together with community leaders, including unannounced home visits to verify family links. Regardless, the issue of infants born outside the camp or born in other parts of the country (Addis Ababa, Benishangul Gumuz, surrounding Gambella cities, etc.) remains unsolved. Approximately 11,000. These children are between 0 and 8 and have been unregistered for over 5 years.

Jijiga: Efforts to address the problem of the unregistered births of refugee children have taken place since 2020. Among the contributing factors are the government suspension of registration and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic which caused service interruption. Since the second quarter of 2024, UNHCR and RRS have reinstated the protection litigation desk to address this issue.

Melkadida: According to the data available through UNHCR's partner Save the Children, there were 3,414 unregistered child births as of December 2023. Through advocacy and engagement with the community, it was agreed to register children aged 0 to 5. In 2024, about 2,125 children's births were registered, while 1,289 children are waiting for registration.

Shire and Mekelle: Given the reduced RRS presence in the region, there is currently no birth registration taking place.

Sudan Situation (Metema, Kurmuk, Aftit and Ura): With the relocation of refugees ongoing in both locations (Aftit and Ura), there is currently no activity regarding vital events registration. This will be addressed as soon as the population is stabilized.

V. Proposed recommendations to the Government of Ethiopia, Donors, and Humanitarian Partners

1. By the end of 2024, **UNHCR will support the Government of Ethiopia's civil registration authorities to scale up birth registration and simplify administrative procedures** to ensure that children are registered and obtain birth certificates. Support with **IT infrastructure including laptops** will be key. The allocation of 20 laptops is foreseen.

2. **UNHCR to discuss with the Government of Ethiopia the possibility of alternative birth registration mechanisms.** This could include the establishment of **mobile birth registration modalities** to ensure accessibility working closely with the community incentive health workers and the recruitment of an additional task force for vital events registration. This would also positively contribute to obtaining birth records immediately after birth for parents who may have specific needs or other complications preventing them from obtaining birth registration.

3. Concerning planning and programming: **UNHCR and RRS should include birth registration in the Country Refugee Response Plan for 2025 and beyond.** With this approach, it will be possible to obtain better countrywide results.

4. Regarding the ongoing emergency responses, by the end of 2024 **UNHCR should identify resources and capacity** of vital events registration in the existing camps and newly established settlements of Aftit, Alemwach, and Ura to ensure permanency and continuity.

5. **Community Awareness: A task force will be formed to promote community awareness about the importance of birth registration.** Involve key community actors in behavioral change and public sensitization campaigns, including community structures, traditional, religious, and youth leaders.

In line with UNHCR's increased effort to ensure Accountability to Affected Populations (AAP), information on birth registration procedures will be provided to communities, including procedures for late registration, using Information, Education and Communication (IEC) materials translated into the various languages used by the community and continuous discussions with community structures.

6. **Existing Protection Working Groups at different levels should regularly discuss issues of birth registration with the involvement of health actors.** UNHCR and partners will also ensure that birth registration is integrated into other sectoral programs including health, education, food security, and nutrition. This will seamlessly help to advocate for policies/programs to ensure that

children are not denied access to basic services including education or health services due to a lack of birth registration.

- 7. Support the Government of Ethiopia's commitment** to the Sustainable Development Goals 2030 achievements and its progress on Target 16.9 foreseeing the *'provision of legal identity for all including free birth registrations.'* **Engage with the Government to ensure that refugees and other**

forcibly displaced persons are being included in Government target calculations.

- 8. Donors' intervention and support** through funding and engagement with the Government. **UNHCR to enhance advocacy efforts to donors** to garner support for the Government of Ethiopia's efforts to address gaps in birth registration. The support and engagement from the donor community will be vital to close these gaps.



For more information:

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