

DIRECTORATE OF INFORMATION & COMMUNICATION

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COVID-19 threatens to reverse progress in birth registrations: strategies for counter-actions.

17th August 2020: In Africa, nearly one in two children are deprived from a legal existence. Countries such as Algeria and Tunisia top the list of countries that have impressively reached the targeted 100 per cent of birth registration. The trend of increasing registration of children at birth, also reflects in West and Central Africa, where over the past three years, the regional average of children under-5 registered, increased from 45 per cent to 53 per cent, equaling up to 8.6 million more children registered. These statistics reveal that the continent has in recent years made considerable progress in improving birth registration. However, that improvement only accounts for 52 per cent of children under-5, registered in Africa, leaving millions of other children deprived of their basic right to a legal identity. In Eastern and Southern Africa, the average percentage of under-5 children registered is currently 40 per cent. Unless progress is accelerated, the total number of unregistered children in Africa will continue to increase and will exceed 110 million by 2030 (63 per cent).

With the prevention and containment measures against the COVID-19 pandemic such as lockdowns and restrictions, birth registration centers and service points have reduced availability and accessibility of services. The new realities threaten to reverse the accumulated gains and decelerate the evident progress to be on track with the aspirations of Agenda 2063 and the global Sustainable Development Goals. However, while these challenges are acknowledged, Africa has opportunities to promote and accelerate the trajectory of birth registration, by implementing the commitments made to reposition civil registration and vital statistics as a critical agenda, by integrating birth registration in health facilities, by decentralizing and moving towards its full digitalization.

These are the messages at the center of the joint African Union and UNICEF "No name campaign". The campaign, launched on the 17th June 2020, seeks to rally for the speedy implementation of commitments by the African Union member states, towards universal registration of children at birth and the urgency to address the indignity of invisibility

Within this framework, the technical meeting of African Union (AU) Member States Senior Officials responsible for Birth Registration convening on the theme "Towards Universal Birth Registration in Africa: challenges and opportunities during COVID-19", restated that lack of a legal identity for many Africans continues to be a developmental challenge for Africa's socio-economic transformation, and that the registration of children at birth is one of the key elements to accelerate social justice for any person

from birth all through their lifecycle. The meeting which gathered over 200 participants made emphasis on the need to prioritize and classify civil registration as an essential service, similarly putting in place cross-cutting strategies that ensure business continuity during emergencies, including pandemics such as COVID-19, and other disruptive public health emergencies and disasters. The meeting held in collaboration with UNICEF, brought together Registrar Generals of AU Member States, representatives from the Regional Economic Communities, civil registration experts, civil society organizations, the private sector, and development partners.

Addressing the meeting, African Union Commissioner for Economic Affairs, Prof. Victor Harison stated that Member States have the obligation to ensure the legal recognition of individuals in their territory, without the exception of emergencies such as the current COVID-19 pandemic, the Ebola crisis, displacements caused by natural disasters and conflicts that often leave many without proof of a legal identity which may eventually lead to statelessness and other associated risks. He added, "there are challenges of birth registration on the continent that have been worsened by the current pandemic. However, there are immediate and long-term opportunities that we could exploit in the midst of this crisis. One such opportunity is to have civil registration offices prepare contingency plans to meet post-pandemic demand and backlog for birth registration. Late registration fees and penalties should be waived for a given period of time and enhance those measures with facilities such as mobile registration centres, expanding staffing, and creating awareness of availability of service. Let us also ensure that the workforce as well as the citizenry, are well protected in areas where these services are still open during this pandemic."

"As the COVID-19 pandemic deeply challenges the progress made in the last decade on birth registration, we are proud to be joining hands with the African Union through the "No Name Campaign" to ensure that every child is registered at birth and can have a legal identity by 2030, stated Marie-Pierre Poirier, Executive Director for UNICEF, West and Central Africa. We must go beyond business as usual, integrating birth registration to health and immunization facilities, and engage innovative and digital solutions for the future to ensure no child is left behind. With the urgent scaling up of these interventions, Africa can emerge from the pandemic as a place where transformative strategies set the continent clearly on track for universal birth registration in line with the collective ambitions expressed in the Sustainable Development Goals".

While making emphasis on the importance of vital statistics in the production of timely, accurate and disaggregated data for administrative and statistical use at the national, regional, continental and global levels, Brenda Kabemba Banda, from Zambia, the Chair of the Conference of Ministers in charge of CRVS, observed that low rates of birth registrations and lack of legal identity on the continent have exposed a large number of children to vulnerabilities such as exploitation in the labour market, and risk being subjected to extremely poor working conditions, trafficking, sexual exploitation, lack of access to justice, among other dangers. "I think what is evident given the current nature of the COVID-19 pandemic, is the urgent need to accurately target interventions that allow for uninterrupted birth registration processes. This is also

a good opportunity to address the gaps that remain in the digitization of civil registration systems to improve access to core government services. In 2016, African member States declared 2017-2026 to be “Decade for repositioning CRVS in Africa’s continental, regional and national development agenda”, this calls for a major paradigm shift that accommodates holistic and integrated civil registration and vital statistics systems”, she stated.

Following the sharing of countries’ experiences, participants made a host of scaling-up recommendations strategically focused on a fully-functional and complete civil registration and vital statistics systems that provide real-time data, particularly on birth registration, which is crucial during and beyond the pandemic. It will be followed by the development of a strategic plan, based on best practices and lessons learnt from this first meeting.

For more information, visit- <https://au.int/en/newsevents/20200617/no-name-campaign>

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