

The Right to Be Counted

By Rima Salah and Jim Emerson

BANGKOK, Thailand, 14 March 2006 - Suborna was seven when traffickers snatched her from her home in Bangladesh. When her father eventually found her, local officials refused to let him bring Suborna home. In another Bangladeshi village, Saheb Ali was turned away from his local primary school. In India, a young girl called Dharma was forced by her father to sell homemade liquor on the streets, her wish for an education cast aside.

These children had one thing in common: none of them were registered at birth and therefore, none of them had a birth certificate – the 'membership card' for society that should open the door to a whole range of other rights including education and health care, participation and protection.

Unfortunately, they are far from alone. Asia and the Pacific are home to staggering numbers of unregistered children. More than 29 million children in the region are not registered by their fifth birthday. South Asia accounts for the vast majority of these cases, with 70 per cent of all children there not registered.

These numbers must be reversed. The right to birth registration – along with the right to an identity and a nationality – are guaranteed under the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child. Governments, therefore, have a duty to fulfil these rights for *all* children. Unregistered children lack the most basic protection against abuse and exploitation and become a more attractive commodity to a child trafficker, illegal adoption rings and others who seek to take advantage of their non-status.

This week, as civil registrars from Asia and the Pacific gather in Bangkok, we call upon governments to renew their commitment to achieve universal birth registration. We urge governments to surmount the challenges that hinder birth registration by taking bold, innovative actions. One such step would be a regional network for civil registrars – an initiative we hope will emerge from the 4th Asia and the Pacific Regional Conference on Universal Birth Registration.

For the harm does not end in childhood. As they grow up, unregistered children are driven further towards the edges of society. Without birth certificates, they cannot apply for a passport, a driver's license or a marriage licence. They cannot open a bank account or inherit property. Nor can they seek formal employment or exercise their right to vote.

Then there are the national repercussions. The registration of each child creates capacity – the capacity for a child to enter education at the right age and the capacity to receive essential health care during those vital early years. And by registering the births of Asia's children, we enable governments and its partners

to plan future services more effectively. Without this data, governments often fail to deliver services to the least developed parts of a country, deepening the social and economic isolation of the poor and marginalized.

Why are there so many unregistered children in Asia and the Pacific? Foremost is a problem of perception: birth registration is often not seen as a fundamental right that lays the groundwork for so many other basic human rights. Instead, it is viewed as a mere formality or a minor issue compared to more immediate and visible problems such as poverty and hunger.

Another reason is economic. Many governments fail to properly fund birth registration systems. Individuals also face economic barriers. Birth registration and the first copy of a birth certificate ought to be free, but many countries levy fees, including late registration fines.

In Asia and the Pacific, gender discrimination is also often to blame for low registration rates.

And yet, with a bit of creativity and determination, even the poorest countries can make great strides towards universal birth registration. In Cambodia, where civil records were completely destroyed by the Khmer Rouge, about 70 per cent of the entire population has been registered within the first 15 months of a nationwide, mobile registration campaign. Afghanistan – another country devastated by decades of war – combined registration efforts with immunization drives, resulting in 1.8 million children being documented in 2004.

The stories of Suborna, Saheb Ali and Dharma do end happily. Suborna's father obtained a birth certificate, and brought his daughter home. Saheb Ali and Dharma were registered too and are now going to school. But much, much more needs to be done to ensure happy endings for the millions of unregistered children in Asia and the Pacific today.

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