

# Why the births of millions of African children are not registered

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In large parts of Africa, only half of all children are registered at birth. As a result, these unregistered children cannot, or only with difficulty, make claim to essential human rights later in life, be it healthcare, education or financial support. A new study by Anne Lieke Ebbers and Jeroen Smits of Radboud University identifies the factors that contribute to children failing to be registered and suggests how this far-reaching problem could be addressed. The study will be published today in *PLOS ONE*.

Registration of birth is considered by the United Nations to be a human right. Because unregistered people do not exist in government systems, they cannot claim essential rights such as education, healthcare and state protection. Yet in many countries, this is still too often the case: according to UNICEF, unless significant steps are taken, there will be 100 million unregistered children worldwide by 2030.

## Barriers to registration

"Aid organisations are trying to increase birth registrations by addressing issues such as poverty, education and women's rights. However, our research reveals that the failure to register children also comes down to factors that should be viewed in a broader context," Ebbers explains. "For example, there are large differences between children born in the city and in rural areas, while the registration system a country uses also plays a major role."

Sometimes there is a chain of factors that complicates the registration process. "For example, in some countries, the registration centres are mainly located in cities and hardly at all in [rural areas](#)," explains Ebbers. "Combine that with an often poor infrastructure, possibly limited freedom of movement for women, and the fact that in some countries you have to pay to register your child, and the number of obstacles becomes considerable. UNICEF has therefore made the registration of all children a priority. Investing in more easily accessible registration systems can prevent many problems for children and adults later."

## **The role of context**

The study compared data from the [Global Data Lab](#) of over 350,000 children in 40 countries in the Sub-Saharan region. Including such a large number of children and countries made it possible to conduct a detailed study into the role of the context in which households live, which has not been done before. This revealed a number of important relationships. "For example, it turns out that in addition to domestic factors, sub-national and national factors are also important. Among others, the study revealed that centralised registration systems and registration fees prevent people from registering their children," says Ebbers.

"In addition, the provision of care during pregnancy and birth also has a great influence. Health workers can point out the importance of registration to expectant and new parents and verify that the child has actually been registered during routine check-ups. However, this requires an effective healthcare system for mother and child, which unfortunately is often not the case in the more remote areas of these countries."

According to Smits, the study reveals that the situation is more complex and nuanced than is often thought, and that therefore solutions should be considered in a broader context. "We see that context factors explain

about 40% of the differences in registration. However, the current approaches focus mainly on domestic factors, such as poverty reduction and education. These are also important, but they are not producing the desired results. If we want to get all [children](#) registered at birth, we need to look at the whole context."

**More information:** Anne Lieke Ebbers et al, Household and context-level determinants of birth registration in Sub-Saharan Africa, *PLOS ONE* (2022). [DOI: 10.1371/journal.pone.0265882](https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0265882)

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