

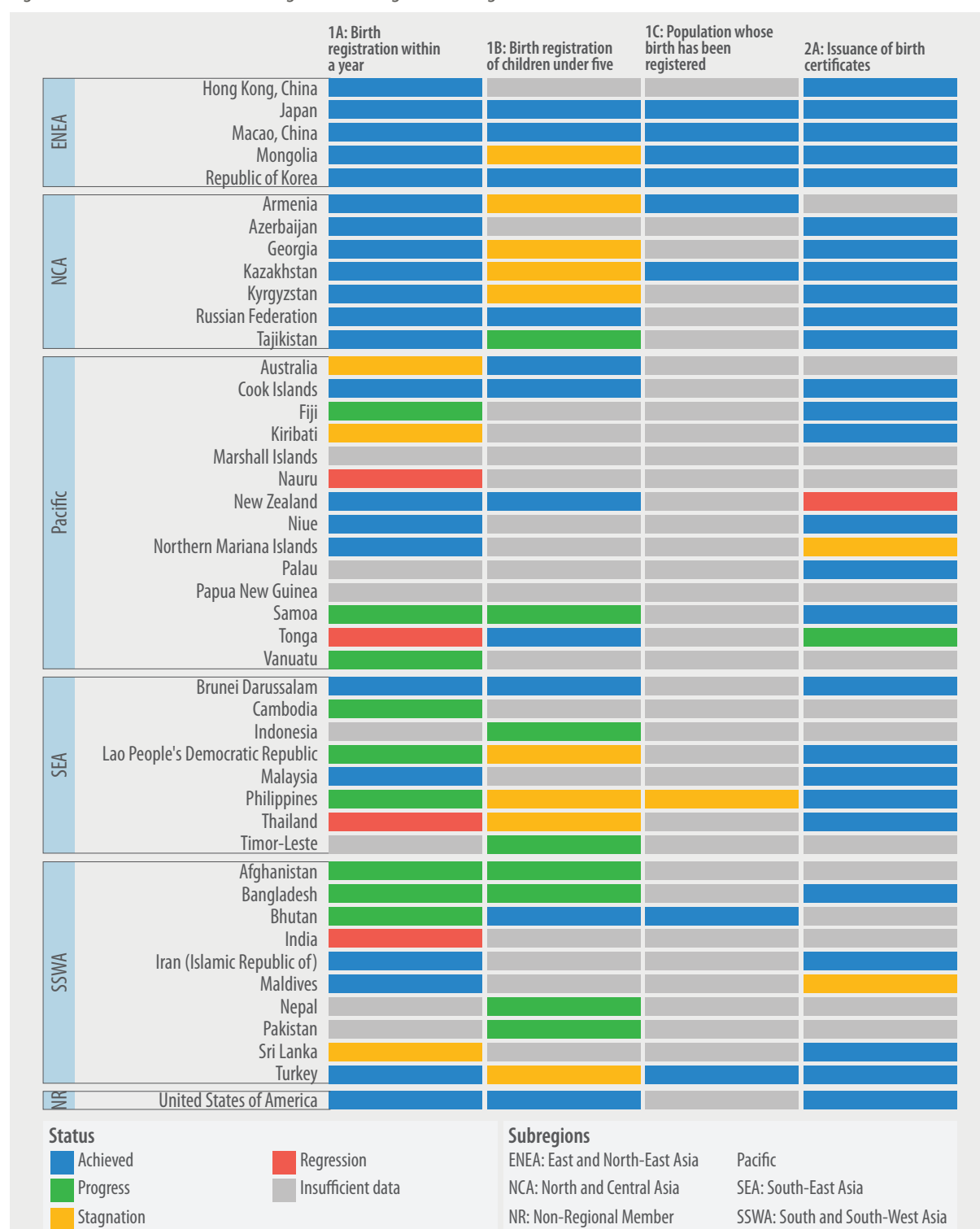


Achieving universal birth registration

Birth registration is closely linked to a person's legal identity. It provides an official and permanent recognition of an individual. Beyond the recognition of an individual, birth registration also establishes the connection of a child to her or his family through the recording of the parents' names. Later in life, the proof of legal identity provided by the birth registration and the official birth certificate allows individuals to access services and exercise their rights. For example, the recording of a child's date of birth as part of birth registration can later help prevent child marriage.

Birth registration is an integral part of the 2030 Agenda. Goal 16 on peace, justice and strong institutions includes target 16.9 on the provision of a legal identity for all, including birth registration. This reflects the importance of civil registration for legal identity and, ultimately, the promotion of peaceful and inclusive societies providing access to justice for all and building effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels. Goal 17 on partnership for the goals includes indicator 17.19.2 on the proportion of countries that achieve 100 per cent birth registration by 2030. It highlights the importance of registration and its use for statistics both for monitoring sustainable development and as an indicator of statistical capacity. By improving birth registration countries are thus also contributing to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Figure III: Overview of achievement against birth registration targets



Note: Progress was assessed only for countries that had submitted at least two data points. For most countries, the baseline data is from 2014 and the midterm from 2018. If the midterm value is superior or within 2 percentage points of the target set for 2024, the target is considered achieved. If not, if the midterm value has increased by more than 2 percentage points compared to the baseline, it is considered progress. If it has decreased by more than 2 percentage points compared to the baseline value, it is considered regression. If it remained within 2 percentage points above or below the baseline value, it is considered stagnation.

For target 1B, the sources are the UNICEF database, MICS surveys and DHS surveys, or midterm reports if none of the previous sources are available. Since most of the data came from surveys and not civil registration data, a different methodology was used: available data for the 2010–2019 period was collected and divided between baseline (2010–2014) and midterm (2015–2019). Progress was only assessed for countries having at least one data point for each of these two periods, and within each period only the latest data point was kept if there was more than one. Countries were considered having achieved their target if the latest available data was superior or equal to their target or was at 100 per cent if they had not set a target, even if only one data point was available.

The Regional Action Framework contains four targets on different facets of birth registration. Target 1A on birth registration within one year stresses the need to register births soon after their occurrence to ensure access to services and facilitate the exercise of rights. Registration soon after birth also reduces the risk of misreporting and increases the likelihood of the registration of the death of a child, which might not have been recorded otherwise. Timely registration is a precursor to timely vital statistics on births and infant mortality. Nevertheless, the registration of a birth alone does not constitute proof of civil registration. It should be accompanied by the issuance of a birth certificate, but unfortunately this is not always the case. The Regional Action Framework therefore includes target 2A on the provision of birth certificates after registration. Although it is important to register a birth soon after its occurrence, various factors such as the lack of parental awareness, difficulties in accessing registration points or overly complex requirements or procedures can prevent the registration of a child in a timely manner. Target 1B on birth registration of children under five years old reflects the importance of alleviating this issue by processing late registration relatively early in the life of a child. Finally, since birth registration and birth certificates are critical all throughout the life course, the Regional Action Framework includes target 1C on the registration rate of the entire population, reflecting the accumulated efforts to register births and the potential backlog of individuals who need to obtain legal documentation. Figure III shows many countries have already achieved or are

Goal 16 on peace, justice and strong institutions includes target 16.9 on the provision of a legal identity for all, including birth registration.

progressing toward achieving these targets. Nonetheless, for target 1B on children under five and target 1C on the entire population whose birth has been registered, data availability is not always sufficient to assess progress. These targets can also be used to answer important questions about the status of birth registration in Asia and the Pacific.

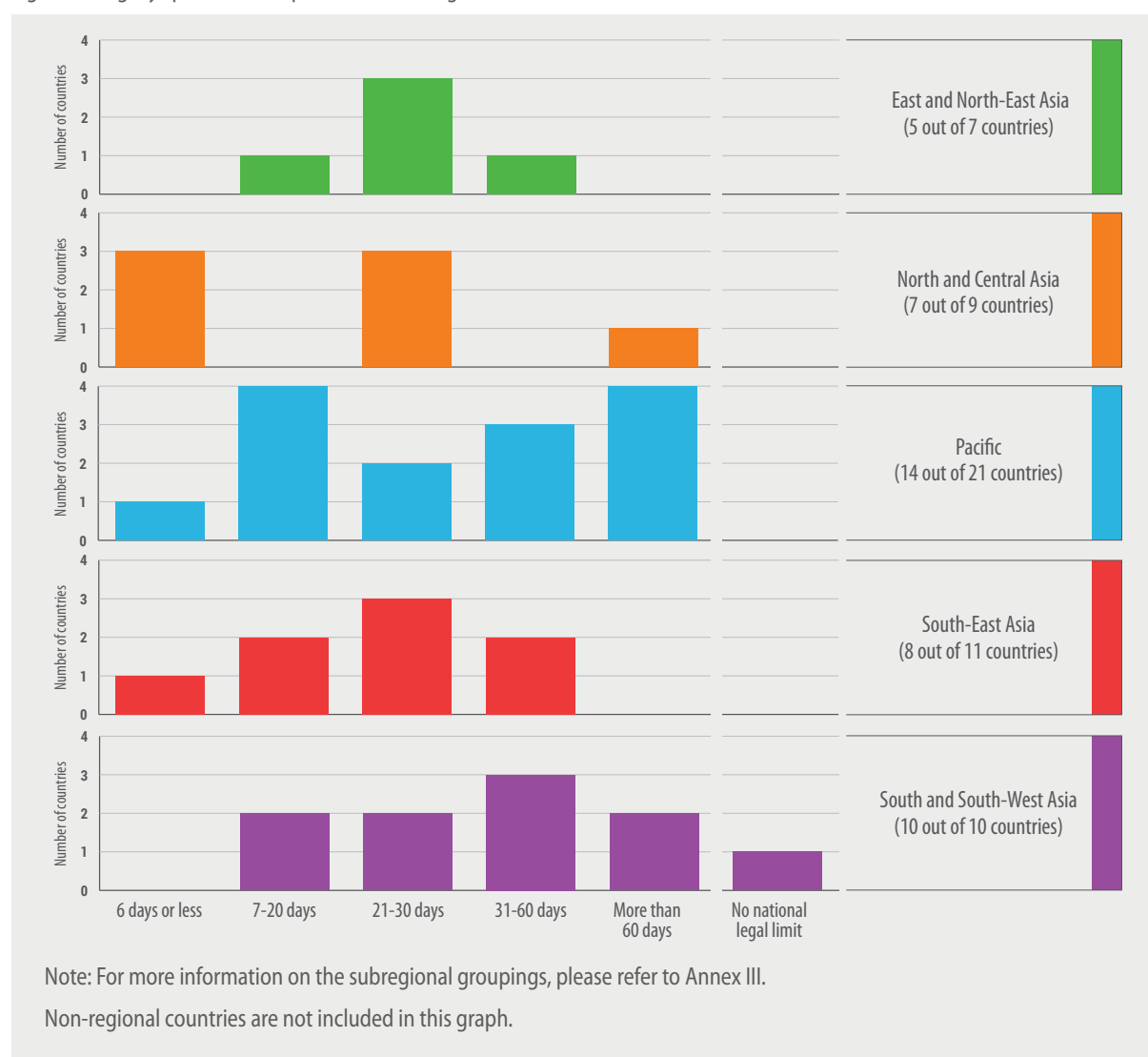
Are births registered within a year?

As explained above, it is critical for births to be registered soon after their occurrence. Article 7 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child emphasized the need to register children immediately after birth. Forty-two countries in the region reported having a legally specified period during which registration is free to encourage timely registration of births. For most, this period is between two weeks and three months from the date of birth. After this period, many countries ask for additional documents or a late registration fee, which may discourage the registration of births. One country in the region requires a fee to register births during the legally specified time period while one other country does not have any legislation about it. The legally specified period for birth registration is similar across Asia and the Pacific. The only exception is the North and Central Asia subregion where at least three countries have a free registration period of six days or less.

Unfortunately, a legally specified time period during which registration is free is not sufficient to ensure universal birth registration. The situation at the beginning of the Decade varied greatly from one subregion to the other. While half of the countries in the region, mostly located in East and North-East Asia and North and Central Asia, registered more than 95 per cent of their births within a year, many other countries lagged behind. Nevertheless, these countries set ambitious targets for 2024, and they must make fast progress to achieve them.

Since the inception of the Decade, countries have implemented several activities, programmes or reforms to improve their

Figure IV: Legally specified time period for birth registration

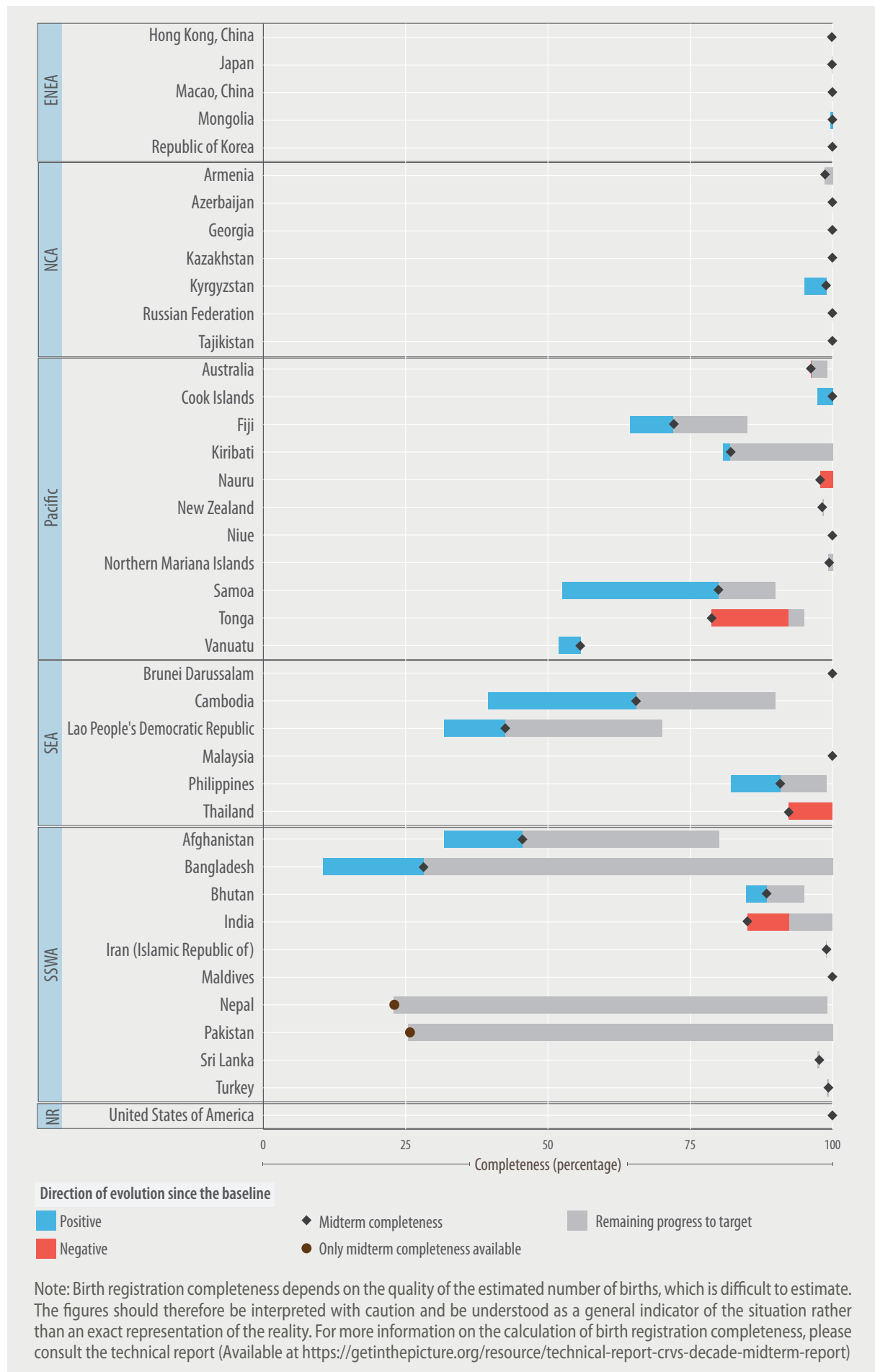


CRVS systems, including birth registration. These efforts were particularly notable in countries that had lower birth registration completeness at the beginning of the Decade. For example, Kiribati opened civil registration desks in hospitals, Afghanistan revised its registration law, and Bangladesh is implementing an online Birth and Death Registration Information System. Coupled with the establishment of multi-sectoral national coordination mechanisms and a much better understanding of the gaps remaining, acquired by making a detailed assessment of national CRVS systems, this has resulted in significant progress towards the targets set by countries.

Indeed, the region has made great progress on birth registration completeness, i.e., the percentage of births which are registered

within one year of occurrence, between the baseline (2014 for most countries) and midterm (2018 for most countries) (see Figure V). This progress is mostly visible in countries which had low birth registration completeness at the beginning of the Decade, and while there remain large differences in the region, the gap is closing. Countries such as Afghanistan and Cambodia registered few of their births in 2014, and they have managed to drastically increase birth registration completeness. Should countries continue progressing at the same pace during the second half of the Decade, the picture of birth registration completeness will be much more similar across subregions of Asia and the Pacific. Nevertheless, many countries must accelerate their progress to achieve the target on birth registration completeness by the end of the Decade.

Figure V: Birth registration completeness: Progress towards target 1A



**Box
2**
Birth registration in the face of natural disasters: Vanuatu and the tropical cyclone Pam

Since 2008 the civil registration completeness of Vanuatu has increased, but the civil registration system was put to the test in 2015 when the country was hit hard by tropical cyclone Pam. Although the death toll was limited, over half of the country's 270,000 population were affected, and about a third of affected people were displaced.

The Civil Registration and Vital Statistics Department, in collaboration with other national stakeholders as well as the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) responded to the crisis by increasing capacity for registration and launching awareness campaigns and mobile registration operations. The cost of travel was a major obstacle for many families, so registration points were opened in remote islands and "catch up days" were organized in areas that lacked access to government services. As a result more than 250,000 children and adults were issued a birth certificate, including around 80,000 for the first time.* A mini census with complete enumeration conducted in 2016 showed that 85 per cent of the population had a birth certificate.

The Department of Civil Registry also signed memorandums of understanding with the ministries of health and education to extend the registration role to midwives and teachers. Further partnerships are still being developed, for example, to link national identification to voter registration. Finally, and critically with regards to natural disasters, the Government of Vanuatu developed a central civil registration database with support from UNICEF and the Government of Australia. The locally developed system is better adapted to the specific needs of the country, and in post-disaster registration campaigns, the database ensure accuracy and avoiding double registrations. As Vanuatu is ranked by the United Nations University's Institute for Environment and Human Security as the world's most at-risk country for natural hazards,** efforts to increase the resilience of the CRVS system are even more critical.

Notes: * Pacific Civil Registrars Network (2017), *Report of the Disaster Preparation and Response Workshop*, Available at <https://getinthepicture.org/sites/default/files/resources/Final%20report%20PCRN%20conference%20on%20disasters%20and%20CRVS%20Suva%2022122017.pdf>.

**<https://i.unu.edu/media/ehs.unu.edu/news/4070/11895.pdf>.

If a birth is registered, is a birth certificate then issued?

Ideally the registration of a birth should be accompanied by the provision of a birth certificate for all individuals to claim identity and civil status and ensure related rights. It is critical to provide these documents for legal and administrative purposes. Legal documentation should be accessible at no fee or a low fee and delivered soon after the registration of a vital event. Legal documentation, in particular legal identity, is strongly linked with a broad range of rights and activities, and efficient CRVS systems

can help everyone to claim their rights. For this reason, the United Nations recently launched an agenda on legal identity that emphasizes its link with civil registration (see Box 4).

A birth certificate gives an individual access to a range of rights and services. For example, 35 countries in Asia and the Pacific reported using the birth certificate as a primary source document in issuing national passports, while 36 countries require a birth certificate for enrolling in primary school. Moreover, 23 countries said a birth certificate is required for receiving childbirth allowance.

These examples show the importance of a birth certificate for individuals throughout their lifetime. Although requiring birth certificates for the provision of services has a positive effect on registration completeness, it is important to emphasize that access to education and the right to health are human rights, which should not be restricted due to a lack of documentation.

Most countries reported issuing birth certificates for all registered births. Nevertheless, in countries such as New Zealand and Tonga, birth certificates were not automatically issued free of charge after registration, explaining the lower percentage of registered births for which a certificate was issued. In New Zealand

parents increasingly do not need a paper certificate as data are shared across the Government to allow access to services such as parental payments. In Tonga birth certificates are needed for a child to enter school, and parents often wait until that moment to order a birth certificate.

How many children under five have not had their birth registered?

Various factors, such as lack of parental awareness, difficulties in accessing registration points or overly complex requirements or procedures, can prevent the registration of a child soon after birth. The impact of those factors emerges with higher frequency in already vulnerable groups, such as ethnic or language minorities. It is vital to

Box 3

Kyrgyzstan and the fight to eliminate statelessness in Central Asia

The issue of statelessness in Central Asia mainly originated from the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the formation of new States. Indeed, what was internal migration under the old regime, left people stranded across borders with outdated Soviet passports or proof of their place of birth. Women, who often migrated when marrying, were disproportionately affected when new borders were created, and their children inherited this precarious status. To this day, countries in the region are trying to address this issue.

Since 2014, the Government of Kyrgyzstan has worked hand-in-hand with the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to eliminate all known cases of statelessness in the country. This ambitious project was started as part of the global #IBelong campaign launched by UNHCR in 2014 to end statelessness by 2024. Continuing efforts made since its independence, Kyrgyzstan embraced this campaign and followed the recommendations from the Global Action Plan to End Statelessness.

Kyrgyzstan's dedication paid off in 2019, when it was declared the first country in the world to eliminate statelessness. This success story was achieved through the identification of more than 13,700 stateless people, including more than 2,000 children in a period of five years. Depending on the situation of these people, their statelessness was resolved through either birth registration or the confirmation or acquisition of nationality and was ensured by the delivery of national identity documents such as birth certificates and passports.

This important milestone also highlights the role civil society can play in achieving universal registration. Indeed, Azizbek Ashurov, a lawyer, has been one of the key actors in eliminating known cases of statelessness in the country. Through his organization, Ferghana Valley Lawyers Without Borders, he offered legal support to stateless people since 2003. Working with the Government, he later organized mobile campaigns in remote parts of the country to find and help marginalized groups. In recognition of his efforts, UNHCR awarded him the 2019 Nansen Refugee Award.

alleviate this issue relatively early in the life of a child to ensure the rights of the child are protected and the child has access to services, such as school.

Although birth registration in Asia and the Pacific is improving, there remain an estimated 64 million children under five without birth registration, representing 18 per cent of children under five in Asia and the Pacific (Figure VI). Most of these children are living in South and South-West Asia. In terms of percentages, the Pacific subregion is the most impacted, with 30 per cent of children under five not registered. In South-East Asia, 17 per cent of children under five (9.5 million) are not registered.⁷

Eight countries in the region have achieved full registration of all children under five (see Annex II, Table 1). Nevertheless, most countries have legislation mandating births to be registered within a few weeks or months.

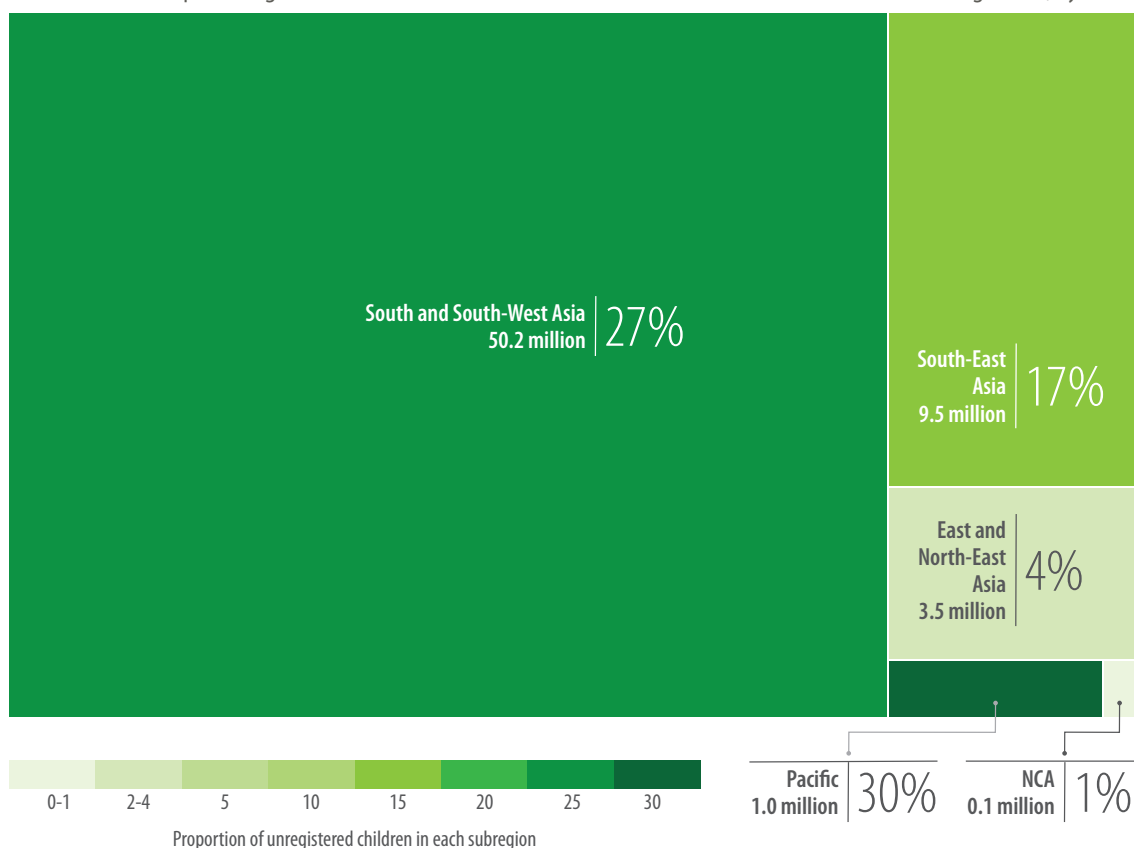
⁷ UNICEF (2019). *Birth Registration for Every Child by 2030: Are we on track?*, Available at <https://data.unicef.org/resources/birth-registration-for-every-child-by-2030/>.



The number of **children under five** in Asia and the Pacific whose **birth was never registered** decreased from **135 million in 2012 to 64 million in 2019**.



Figure VI: Number and percentage of children under five in Asia and the Pacific whose birth has never been registered, by subregion



Note: The figure is based on an estimated 356.4 million children under five, and 64.4 million of them unregistered (18%). Non-regional countries are not included in this graph.

With increasing birth registration rates in the region, the number and percentage of children under five whose birth has not been registered should decrease in the coming years. It will be crucial to ensure that those who did not benefit from improvements in birth registration as young children are registered later in their life.

What is the percentage of the total population whose birth was never registered?

Since a birth certificate is needed throughout the life of an individual, it is important to monitor the registration rate of the entire population, which reflects the accumulated efforts to register births and the potential backlog of individuals who need to obtain legal documentation. As part of the Regional Action Framework, countries have set ambitious targets for 2024. Currently, 15 countries are aiming to have their entire population registered by 2024, and 15 more have targets ranging from 60 per cent to 99.5 per cent.

A well-functioning CRVS system is not sufficient to measure the registration rate of the entire population since migration must

also be considered. Therefore, calculating the registration rate for the entire population is possible only for countries that have a population register, including information on birth registration, or that conducted a census or survey with a question on birth registration not only for children, but for all members of the household. Estimating the number of people and percentage of the total population whose birth has never been registered is extremely challenging. The Philippines has a census question on birth registration for all household members. According to their 2015 census, 95 per cent of their population had its birth registered. Following cyclone Pam, Vanuatu had a question on birth registration in its 2016 mini census with complete enumeration. It showed that 85 per cent of the population had its birth registered. Nepal asked this question as part of a survey, giving an estimated 62 per cent of the population that had its birth registered. Nine other countries with population registers or identity management systems⁸ linked to their CRVS systems were able to submit figures for this target in response to the midterm questionnaire. With the exception of the above-mentioned countries and Papua New Guinea at 15 per cent, all respondents to the midterm questionnaire reported that more than 99 per cent of their population had its birth registered (see Annex II, Table 1).

As 18 per cent of children under five in the region never had their birth registered, it is likely the percentage for the total population is even higher due to lower birth registration rates in the past. Making progress and achieving universal registration of the entire population also requires a different kind of effort than birth registrations during the first year of life and for children under five. Countries must not only modify the current

⁸ While there is no internationally agreed definition of identity management, the term most commonly refers to the issuance of a proof or legal tender of identity to each individual and the maintenance of systems for managing information and documents associated with such identity. *Handbook on Civil Registration and Vital Statistics systems: Management, Operation and Maintenance, Revision 1*, United Nations, New York, 2018, para. 80, available at <https://unstats.un.org/unsd/demographic-social/Standards-and-Methods/files/Handbooks/crvs/crvs-mgt-E.pdf>.



system but actively organize campaigns to make sure that everyone has the opportunity to register irrespective of their age.

What can the region do to improve birth registration?

Progress in birth registration completeness is far from linear and depends largely on the underlying improvements made to CRVS systems. Due to the different levels of development of CRVS systems in the region and the resulting heterogeneity of birth registration completeness, different approaches will be required in each country.

Many countries reported already being close to universal birth registration at the beginning of the Decade and displayed no major changes since then. However, due to the intrinsic difficulty in measuring how many people were not counted, namely unregistered births, it is challenging to assess whether a country is indeed registering all births soon after their occurrence. Remaining gaps may still exist, especially in hard-to-reach or marginalized population groups. To ensure genuine universal registration, countries may want to conduct a more detailed analysis of birth registration with a focus on hard-to-reach and marginalized populations. The implementation of the Regional Action Framework requires members and associate members to complete a series of eight implementation steps. One is to assess inequalities related to CRVS experienced by subgroups of the population, including among hard-to-reach and marginalized populations, which only a few countries have done thus far (see Chapter 4, **Regional Action Framework as a catalyst to improve CRVS systems**). Countries with high birth registration completeness should make this kind of assessment a priority for the second half of the Decade to ensure the CRVS system leaves no one behind.

Although the situation has markedly improved since the beginning of the Decade, many countries are still far from reaching their targets for 2024, let alone universal birth registration. Indeed, at least 13 countries in the region register fewer than 90 per cent

of births. Long-term improvements to their CRVS systems will require a coordinated improvement approach involving all relevant stakeholders. Fortunately, all these countries now have a CRVS coordination mechanism and have developed or are developing a comprehensive CRVS strategy based on a detailed assessment of the situation. Areas of improvements will depend on the country but may include a revision of the legal framework, simplification of registration procedures to have a more active system reaching out to the families rather than the other way around, implementation of an information and communications technology platform for CRVS and advocacy campaigns. A stronger involvement of the health sector in birth registration could also help increase the percentage of timely births registrations. Indeed, medical professionals are uniquely positioned to notify civil registrars of recent births. The implementation of any of these elements alone will not be sufficient for countries to reach their objectives by the end of the Decade.

Finally, tackling the issue of the birth registration backlog will be a critical issue for many countries going forward. As countries implement identity management systems linked to civil registration it is important to make sure the lack of birth certificate does not become a barrier to enter these systems. Papua New Guinea, which had low birth registration rates in the past, decided to offer late registrations while entering people into their identity management system. In Vanuatu, individuals who register for a new identification card will be supported to have their birth registered first, if needed. Those efforts support building the stock for the identity management system and vital statistics, and those efforts assume that all births will be registered in the future. Otherwise, the identity management systems in these countries will be incomplete again in the not-too-distant future. Identity management systems can build on civil registration, and this is another important reason for investing in and strengthening civil registration.

**Box
4**
United Nations Legal Identity Agenda

The right to be recognized as a person before the law is enshrined in Article 6 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international rights instruments. For this reason, SDG target 16.9 calls for legal identity for all, including birth registration, by 2030. In addition, recent technological progress has also facilitated the implementation of identity management systems in countries.

Around the world, countries needed guidance on the implementation of identity management systems. To ensure a homogeneous, harmonized and coordinated approach of all United Nations agencies and programmes and the World Bank Group, the United Nations Legal Identity Expert Group was formed in September 2018. It was initiated by the United Nations Deputy Secretary-General and comprises 17 United Nations agencies.

The common approach has a strong emphasis on ensuring a holistic installation and development of civil registration, vital statistics and identity management systems. The United Nations operational definition of legal identity is therefore founded on civil registration from birth to death, with a human rights approach. It is defined as follows:

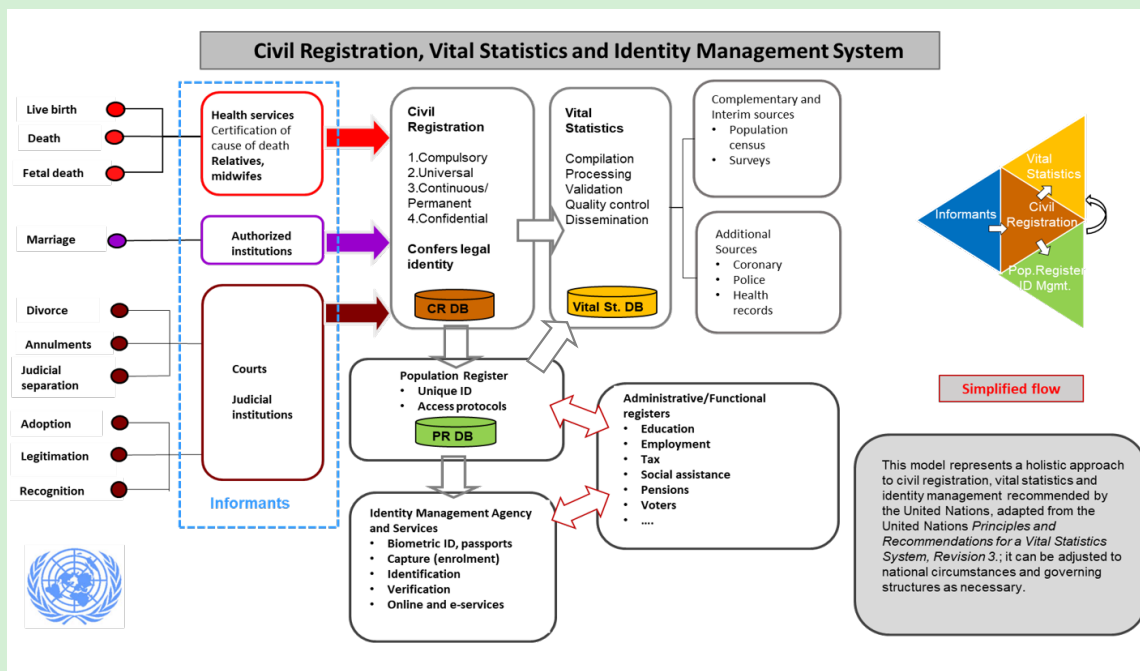
Legal identity is the basic characteristics of an individual's identity, e.g., name, sex, place, and date of birth conferred through registration and the issuance of a certificate by an authorized civil registration authority following the occurrence of birth. In the absence of birth registration, legal 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.*

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.* In the case of refugees, Member States are primarily responsible for issuing proof of legal identity. The issuance of proof of legal identity to refugees may also be administered by an internationally recognized and mandated authority.

The holistic approach to civil registration, vital statistics and identity management promoted by the United



(Box 4 continued)



Nations Legal Identity Agenda provides member States with a clear framework to implement as a systematic and perpetual mechanism for ensuring legal identity for all. Legal identity founded on civil registration leverages the strength and infrastructure of an existing system. It guarantees the concept of legal identity starts from births, ensuring children are covered, unlike stand-alone identity management systems onboarding individuals later in life. Secondly, it provides a clear method to 'retire' legal identity, facilitating the closing of governmental services, such as the provision of pensions after death and the maintenance of up-to-date population registers. In return, by using civil registration rather than competing with it, the implementation of identity management systems will strengthen the role of civil registration and thus ensure the continuous availability of a wealth of demographic and health information for vital statistics.

Note: *United Nations, Statistical Commission, *Overview of the United Nations Legal Identity Agenda*, Available at: <https://unstats.un.org/unsd/statcom/51st-session/documents/BG-Item3k-Overview-E.pdf>.

Box 5

Linking civil registration and national identification for greater citizen convenience and system capacity: the examples of Bhutan and Mongolia

Guided by the philosophy of Gross National Happiness, the Royal Government of Bhutan takes multiple aspects into account to improve the well-being and living standards of its people. In this regard, high interest is given to civil registration as it is recognized as the first step in ensuring the provision of citizens' rights. As part of such efforts, a transition was started at the beginning of the twenty-first century to enhance the civil registration process from a paper-based system to a database called the Bhutan Civil Registration System. Administered by the Department of Civil Registration and Census under the Ministry of Home and Cultural Affairs, the system generates a citizenship identity number in parallel to the registration of a child's birth. To make the registration process more accessible, the Royal Government established registration facilities through community centres at the Gewog level (block level). As soon as the birth registration is completed, the system sends a text message to the applicant with the citizenship identity number. This web-based civil

(Box 5 continued)

registration system not only increases the coverage and completeness rate of registration, but it also offers benefits for data integration. In particular, it allowed for the development of the national population register, with updates in real time, which makes Bhutan the only country in the South Asia to achieve the full integration of the civil registration and identification systems.


In Mongolia, the will to increase accessibility of state services, including through digitization, has led to similar achievements. In 2018, it adopted the “One citizen, One registration” programme* with three overarching goals: to further integrate the system of civil registration to provide prompt delivery of public services, to fully digitize the original sources and to ensure data security.

Indeed, while Mongolia was already registering most of its vital events, the lack of collaboration between the primary stakeholders led to discrepancies and data quality problems. Through the revision of the civil registration law as well as the signing of a memorandum of understanding, these institutions were able to connect their different databases by key features, such as identification number, to form a national comprehensive database. This means that the registration of a child’s birth in a civil registration office enables the child to later obtain an identification number and an identification card, while the relevant information is securely transmitted to the Ministry of Health and the National Statistical Office. Most local registration offices are now connected to the Internet, allowing for automatic transmission to the database, and the programme is still ongoing to connect the remaining offices.**

Notes: *National Statistics Office of Mongolia (2019) *Integration of CRVS and ID systems*, Available at <https://getinthepicture.org/system/files/Integrating%20CRVS%26ID%20-%20Mongolia.pdf>.

**<http://eng.burtgel.gov.mn/post/53333>.





A birth certificate is important for individuals throughout their lifetime. Access to education and the right to health are human rights, which should not be restricted due to a lack of documentation.