

A name, an official identity, and a nationality recognized by everyone: most of us take these things for granted. Yet, for nearly a quarter-billion children around the world, including tens of millions in Sub-Saharan Africa, such basic rights are unattainable luxuries.

According to UNICEF, the births of some 230 million children under the age of five – about one-third of the world's total – have [never been registered](#). Asia is home to 59% of these unregistered children and Sub-Saharan Africa a further 37%. All of them grow up “invisible,” even to their own country.

The problem is particularly acute in certain African countries: only 3% of children in Somalia, 4% in Liberia, and 7% in Ethiopia have official papers, for example. Registration levels also vary widely within countries, both in Africa and elsewhere. Children born in rural areas, which are often far removed from administrative centers, are less likely to be registered than those living in cities. Income is another factor, with children born into the poorest 20% of households being far more prone to slip through bureaucratic cracks. Children of ethnic-minority or refugee families are even less likely to appear in a civil registry.

We know the main reasons for non-registration. Many parents, owing either to lack of education or ignorance of official procedures, settle instead for rituals, ceremonies, or even birth records issued by maternity hospitals. Political crises, wars, and internal displacements aggravate the problem: parents fleeing to safety with their children typically are not preoccupied with registering them properly.

The consequences, however, can be severe. Unregistered children are born, live, and die in anonymity. With their physical and legal existence unnoticed by national authorities, they are often condemned to lives spent on the margins of society.

Children who have no birth certificate cannot prove their age, parentage, or identity, or get official papers such as a passport. They find it extremely hard to gain access to basic services such as health care, education, and social assistance. Unregistered children also are frequently among the first to suffer discrimination and mistreatment. Because their age cannot be proven, they often become victims of child labor or trafficking and, for girls, forced marriage.

As African governments seek to increase registration rates among their populations, they should keep two fundamental principles in mind. First, although there is no one-size-fits-all solution to the wide disparities in registration between and within

different countries, successful approaches in one place could inspire governments elsewhere. For example, some countries, including Côte d'Ivoire, have established "[mobile court hearings](#)" that travel around the country and allow unregistered people to receive a birth certificate.

In addition, developing effective and sustainable initiatives requires the full commitment of African governments, policymakers, and non-governmental organizations, as well as the continued engagement and assistance of international agencies. For this reason, I met last October with UNICEF's regional director for West and Central Africa, Marie-Pierre Poirier, whose commitment and work I greatly admire. We discussed the status of children's rights in the region, including registration of births, issuance of birth certificates for all children, and the fight against child labor - all of which are inextricably linked.

Civil-society organizations and NGOs have a crucial role to play in reducing the enormous numbers of "invisible" African children. The [Children of Africa Foundation](#), of which I am president, was set up 20 years ago to care for disadvantaged and vulnerable children and currently works in 12 African countries. Its projects in Côte d'Ivoire include the [Children's Hut](#) in Abidjan, health-care initiatives such as ophthalmological caravans and the Mother-Child Hospital of Bingerville, and educational schemes such as a Bibliobus and school supply kits.

Additionally, I have launched a major project together with Côte d'Ivoire's ministers of interior and justice that allows any child enrolling in sixth grade to obtain a certificate of studies, thereby ensuring that they can receive a birth certificate. Our hope is that other countries on the continent will follow suit.

Let's be clear: 230 million unregistered children around the world is a global crisis in urgent need of solutions. Every single case is an individual tragedy that leaves a child at serious risk of discrimination or worse, and leads to emotional damage that can last a lifetime. Only by upholding for all children their most basic right - an identity - can we ensure that no child is left behind.

***Dominique Nouvian Ouattara is First Lady of Côte d'Ivoire.***

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