

# Refugees are more vulnerable without civil registration and ID. How can we help?



Photo: Natalia Cieslik / World Bank

More people than ever are fleeing their homes from conflict and disaster. **Around 68 million people** across the globe have been forcibly displaced, at a rate of one person every two seconds. Over one-third these individuals have crossed international borders in search of safety.

Refugees face incredible hardship. They endure dangerous journeys with many falling victim to physical harm, exploitation, and abuse. Even if they reach a

host country, they can spend long periods living in uncertainty and poor conditions.

Civil registration and identity documentation (ID) can lower the barriers and risks that refugees face. Birth registration provides proof of a child's name, place of birth and identity of parents. This enables the child to claim proof of nationality and thus access their rights. Proof of age, identity and nationality facilitates freedom of movement, access to essential services, and social protection. ID was the most urgent need of over half of refugees surveyed in Niger and Togo, who valued it above food, healthcare, transport, and shelter.

Unfortunately, refugees often find themselves without civil registration and identity documents.

## Why refugees lack proof of identity

There are many reasons why refugees may not have civil registration or identity documents. For example, they may have been:

- Lost on a difficult journey, such as an overcrowded boat on rough seas
- Stolen, as refugees are more vulnerable to crime
- Destroyed by conflict or disaster
- Confiscated during times of conflict or displacement
- Carried by a relative who got separated from them

Refugees rarely have access to registration services during migration, meaning they can't replace lost documents or record new births.

Lack of documentation can even be a cause of forced displacement, rather than a consequence. Marginalized populations often struggle to access civil registration services and have no way to prove their nationality as a result. In Sub-Saharan Africa, more than 750,000 people have been denied a nationality primarily because their births were never registered.

## What happens when refugees don't have civil registration or identity documents?

**They lose freedom of movement.** Without proof of identity, migrants can't travel through official checkpoints at international borders. This means they must turn to other, more dangerous channels such as smuggling.

**They may be refused asylum.** Migrants can apply for refugee status to gain protection and rights in their host country. Their application will be delayed if they can't present proof of identity, and their nationality may have to be determined through other less reliable means, often leading to unfair rejection of applications. This can lead to genuine refugees being deported or made stateless.

**Families are separated.** Refugees struggle to prove their relationships without civil registration documentation. They may be separated as a result, or struggle to find family members they've lost.

**Children face an uncertain future.** Mothers who give birth during migration or in a host country may be unable to register their child or prove their parentage and nationality.

**They become more vulnerable.** Refugees without ID usually have access only to [the most basic services](#), such as some emergency responses. They're often unable to find work, exercise their rights, and seek social protection. This puts already vulnerable individuals at a higher risk of poverty, exploitation, and abuse.

**It's harder to go home.** Without proof of identity and nationality, refugees may be unable to return home or reclaim their property and rights.

## Functional registration

United Nations (UN) member states and the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) are required to give refugees some form of ID. UNHCR may assist by planning or carrying out registration, either jointly with the Government or on its behalf, or may also conduct registration independently in accordance with its mandate. This is usually done via 'functional' registration, which is the process of recording, updating, and verifying information on displaced individuals in an

emergency context. The UNHCR can also provide certificates to refugees in non-member states, but these documents technically have **no legal force**.

Functional registration is essential for providing humanitarian assistance, protecting refugees' rights, and helping governments manage rapid migration. But issues arise when functional registration activities do not coordinate with existing civil registration systems. This can make it harder for countries to rebuild after conflict and disaster, or to manage refugee populations effectively over the long term.

## Working towards inclusive, joined-up registration

The world is seeing the highest levels of displacement on record. This means it's more important than ever to build efficient, inclusive systems that register refugees so they can be protected and provided for.

In November 2018, the Centre of Excellence for Civil Registration and Vital Statistics (CRVS) Systems co-hosted **a workshop with UNICEF and UNHCR**, on civil registration and identity management in humanitarian settings. The event brought together technical experts and governments to develop guidelines for civil registration and identity management in emergencies.

Together, we identified several priorities that included:

- Invest in more civil registration and identify staff
- Improve IT systems with more and better equipment
- Enable better exchange of data between civil and functional registration systems
- Prepare emergency plans aligned with government emergency responses
- Opt for inclusive registration systems that integrate host and refugee populations
- Improve coordination and exchange of knowledge between partners

We also identified the following opportunities:

- Organize country consultations in priority countries for in-depth information on the status of civil registration and identity management in emergencies

- Develop and disseminate guidelines and recommendations for civil registration and identity management in humanitarian contexts
- Conduct a global study on exchanging information between functional and foundational registration

For more information about the workshop's outcomes, stay tuned for the formal report.