

"Now, I Belong"

Granting official identity in Cameroon to leave no one behind.



(Photo: UNDP Cameroon)

Who are you?

This is a common question when stepping into a healthcare facility, and in the majority of cases there is an answer. You prove who you are by showing your ID or simply saying your name. Can you even imagine not having one? Think about it for a moment. Without an official name, a legal identity, you don't officially exist. In modern times, **legal identity** has been established through registration of major life events such as birth, marriage, death - a process called **civil registration**. However, it is lacking in almost half of the world's countries, leaving people behind and resulting in an acute crisis of statelessness.

Across all cultures, humans seek one thing: a sense of belonging. Beyond answering the age-old question 'Who am I', identity evokes a strong sense of belonging and plays an important role in empowering individuals to exercise their rights and responsibilities fairly, access public services and the private economy. Having a legal identity protects people before the law and avoids violence and exploitation from criminal enterprises. **Being able to**

prove who you claim to be is not only a practical necessity for the human experience, but it is also relevant in the digital society we live in. We are social creatures living in a digital era.

People who cannot prove who they are face multifaceted challenges. When a country lacks records of people's birth and civil status, it excludes them from health coverage, schooling, social protection programs, and humanitarian response in emergencies and conflicts. Around 45% of people without legal identity are from Sub-Saharan Africa. In Cameroon, a country that is facing humanitarian crises, violence hazards, civil registration is more important than ever.



(Photo: UNDP Cameroon)

In July 2020 , UNDP Cameroon , in collaboration with the National Civil Status Registration Office (BUNEC) , implemented the project 'Legal Identity for All'. This Japan-funded initiative aims to strengthen the capacity of civil registration and identity management systems to avoid leaving people behind regarding identity issues. In line with SDG 16.9, closing the global identity gap by 2030 is a priority and an aim of the UN Legal Identity Agenda. The project focused on the second most populated region: the Far North, an area currently affected by conflict where poverty rates run high.

The project initiated a series of **awareness raising** campaigns, an important first step in building a culture of civil registration. This clearly laid out the incentives associated with registering life events.



(Photo: UNDP Cameroon)

Action was also taken in order to **strengthen the digital infrastructure**, the human capacity of civil registration centers and providing better equipment for a competent network of vital statistics. Two workshops were held in order to train civil registration officers on digitalization. Registrars were provided with the skills to succeed in their roles. Even though only 8 out of 40 municipalities from the Far North received better equipment, this is a sure sign of progress. It is a signal of how important it is to continue **advocating** as it leads to more efficient services and to an improved public perception of the civil registration process.

In order to reach the most remote areas of the region, and the commitment of **Leaving No One Behind**, mobile registration teams were established with motorbikes in those very remote areas to collect data on vital events (i.e. birth, marriage, death certificates), expanding the coverage of civil registration services to these hard-to-reach areas. As a result, 15,500 new vital events were registered in the database, and 700 secondary-school-age children obtained birth certificates, allowing them to sit for official examinations, contributing to decreasing dropouts. Finally, they belonged.



(Photo: UNDP Cameroon)

Having a unique identity is key for citizens and the government itself. National ID programmes contribute to tackling the global problem of statelessness. Nevertheless, without local and global coordination, there is no possible sustainable service. In order to advance the interoperability between civil registration and ID systems, a regional committee was established, and national meetings were organized. The link in between these systems is critical to ensure a holistic approach to legal identity from birth to death.

Despite dealing with the pandemic and various other challenges, especially those in remote areas in the Far North region, it is certain that an advocacy continuum to provide Legal Identity for All is the way to achieve and contribute for SDG 16.9. *Granting legal identity is about inclusion, and inclusion is a **fundamental human right**.*

This blog was authored by Paula Paz, an online United Nations Volunteer, who enhanced the communication efforts of the UNLIA Task Force, incorporating valuable insights from the UNDP Cameroon Office. Also, another online UNV, Timothy Tarkelly, provided editing services.