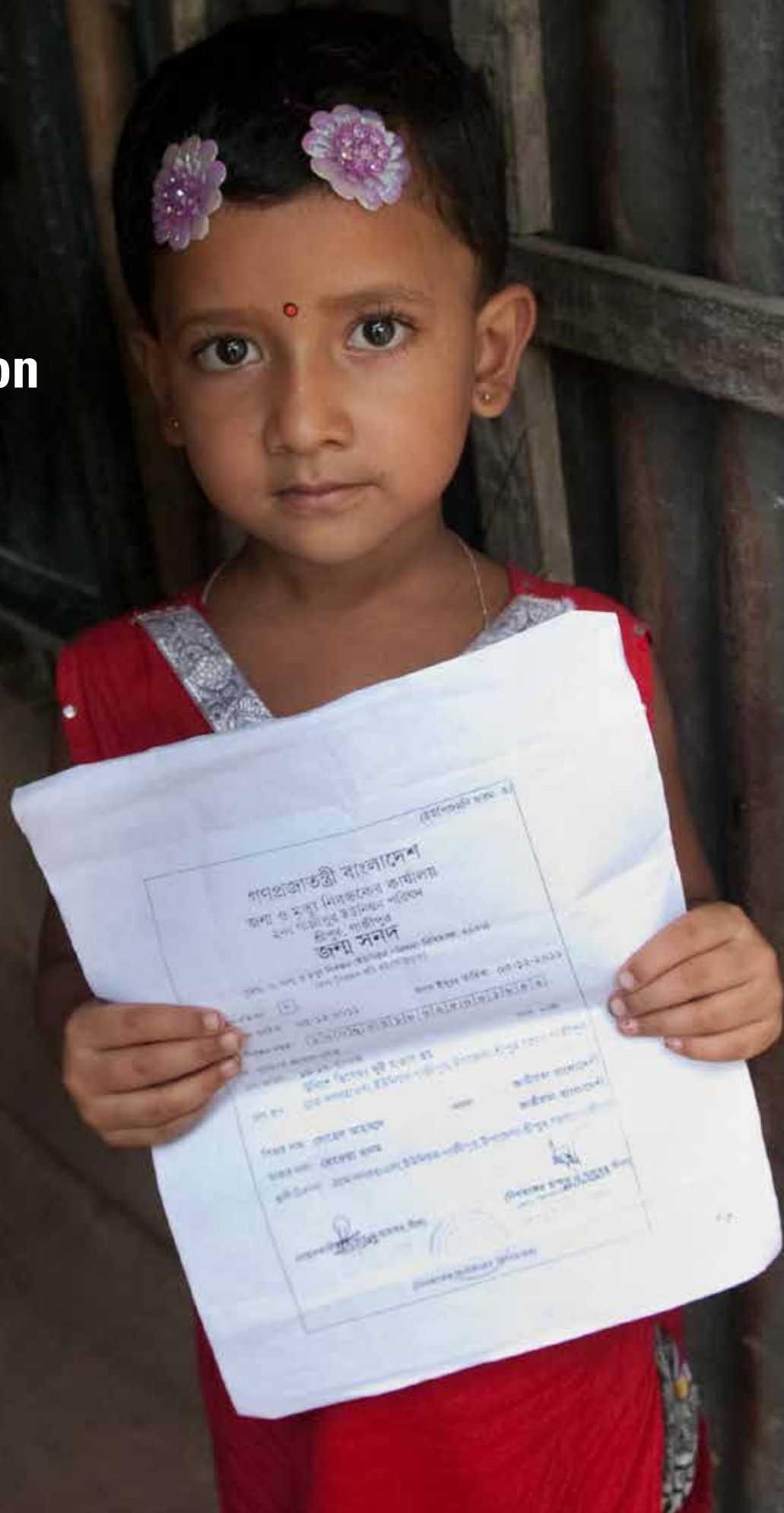


A Snapshot of Civil Registration in South Asia



BIRTH REGISTRATION

BIRTH REGISTRATION AS A PASSPORT TO PROTECTION

A name and nationality is every child's right, as enshrined in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and other international treaties. Birth registration is the continuous, permanent and universal recording of the occurrence and characteristics of births in the national civil registry, in accordance with the country's legal requirements. It is the first step in securing children's recognition before the law, safeguarding their rights and ensuring that any violation of those rights does not go unnoticed. Ensuring that every child is registered is also an essential part of a functioning system of vital statistics, which is crucial for sound economic and social planning.

The births of **around 1 in 3** children under age 5 in South Asia have never been recorded. Almost half (42 per cent) of all unregistered children in the region live in India. Possession of a birth certificate is even less common – just under half of the region's children under age 5 do not have a birth certificate.

Of all infants (under age 1) living in South Asia, slightly **more than 1 in 3** have not had their births registered, and just over half do not possess a birth certificate.

Significant progress, however, has been achieved: The region's birth registration level has more than **doubled since 2000**, largely driven by rising levels in India, the region's most populous country.

If the rate of progress observed in recent years continues, the region could achieve **universal birth registration by 2030** – target 16.9 of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Registration should take place as soon as possible after birth. Timely registration ensures protection from birth and minimizes the risk of misreporting details or failing to report the event altogether. The need for timely birth registration is stipulated in article 7 of the CRC.

In most of the countries in South Asia, the legal time frame to register births is longer than one month

South Asian countries according to the legal time frame for birth registration

COUNTRY	LEGAL OBLIGATION TO REGISTER BIRTHS WITHIN...
Afghanistan	3 months
Bangladesh	45 days
Bhutan	1 year
India	21 days The Registration of Births and Deaths Act No. 18, 1969, allows for delayed registration.
Maldives	7 days
Nepal	35 days
Pakistan	Provinces have different time frames for birth registration; per their respective by-laws, the period in Punjab is within 60 days and, in Sindh, within 30 days.
Sri Lanka	3 months

BARRIERS TO BIRTH REGISTRATION

Lack of birth registration can be the result of many barriers, including distance or access to the nearest registration facility, lack of knowledge on how to register a child's birth, and fees for registering a birth or obtaining a birth certificate, which can be prohibitively expensive for some families. Traditional customs and practices might not encourage or emphasize formal birth registration processes. Moreover, institutional procedures and processes sometimes treat children from certain ethnic or religious groups differently or impose restrictions – whether formally by law or informally in practice – on a mother's ability to register her child without the father's involvement.



Even in countries where birth registration is free by law, there are often fees, such as judicial costs, or opportunity costs, including those related to travel, that are difficult to measure. These added costs can directly affect registration levels.

With the exception of Afghanistan, every country in the region has fees associated with birth registration, which, in most cases, reflect fines for late registration

South Asian countries according to whether there are fees to register births, including for late registration

COUNTRY	BIRTH REGISTRATION IS...	
Afghanistan	Free	
Bangladesh	Free	Fees are charged for late registration.
Bhutan	Free, except for application fee	The only applicable fee is a service charge if the application is submitted at a community centre.
India	Free	Fees are charged for late registration and vary by state.
Maldives	Not free	Additional fees apply for late registration.
Nepal	Free	Fees are charged for late registration.
Pakistan	Free, with the exception of Baluchistan province	All provinces charge fees for late registration except Punjab province.
Sri Lanka	Free	Fees are charged for late registration.

Note: The table does not reflect the fact that some countries do not impose fees for registering births, but do require fees to obtain a birth certificate.

MARRIAGE

REGISTRATION

Marriage before the age of 18 is a fundamental violation of human rights. In India, there is no legal obligation to register a marriage and in Bangladesh, there is no obligation to register a marriage within the Hindu and

Buddhist faiths. In Sri Lanka, a marriage can only be registered once both parties are 18 years of age. This lack of a formal record means that there is no safeguard for boys and girls who marry before the age of 18.



The prevalence of child marriage among boys in South Asia is below 5 per cent. While this is a relatively low level, it still translates into over 50 million men who married in childhood.

The level of child marriage among boys in the region has dropped to one third what it was 25 years ago, with some acceleration of progress within the last 10 years.



Child marriage among girls remains a substantial problem in a number of countries in South Asia, including Bangladesh, where nearly 6 in 10 young women were married in childhood, placing it among

the top five countries in the world for this harmful practice. Bangladesh is followed by Nepal (40 per cent) and Afghanistan (35 per cent), both well above the global average of 21 per cent.



In South Asia, a girl's risk of marrying in childhood has declined by more than a third, from nearly 50 per cent a decade ago to 30 per cent today, largely driven by advances in reducing the prevalence of child marriage in India. Marriage before age 15 has also become less common, dropping from 17 per cent to 8 per cent over the last decade.



The decline in child marriage observed over the past decade in South Asia, while strong in relation to progress seen in other parts of the world, is not proceeding fast enough to reach the SDG target of eliminating child marriage by 2030. Progress would need to be about five times faster to meet the SDG target.

BOYS

GIRLS

Exceptions	Minimum legal age for marriage		Minimum legal age for marriage	Exceptions
	18	Afghanistan	16	Age 15 with parental consent
No minimum with parental consent/court approval	21	Bangladesh	18	No minimum with parental consent/court approval
	18	Bhutan	16	
	21	India	18	
Below age 18 once puberty is reached and with court approval	18	Maldives	18	Below age 18 once puberty is reached and with court approval
	20	Nepal	20	
	18	Pakistan	18	Age 16 in Punjab province
No minimum for Muslim marriages	18	Sri Lanka	18	No minimum for Muslim marriages

CHALLENGES IN ACCURATELY RECORDING DEATHS AMONG CHILDREN

The substantial challenges to registering children's deaths include a lack of understanding as to why this is important and a lack of incentives.

People in remote geographical areas may not have access to local civil registration offices. While well-functioning civil registration systems are the preferred source for child mortality indicators, only about 76 countries worldwide are considered to have good-quality death registration data from vital registration systems.¹ In South Asia, coverage is insufficient in terms of having an accurate count of the number of deaths, and there is a lack of accuracy or completeness regarding the content of information recorded. No countries in South Asia are considered to have high-quality vital registration data.

Key quality issues include misreporting of age at death, under-reporting, and omission or misclassification (sometimes as stillbirths) of deaths. Completeness of registration of child deaths often varies by age at death, and deaths among younger children tend to go unreported more often than deaths occurring at later ages. As is the case with birth registration,

timely registration of deaths is key to ensuring that the event and surrounding details are accurately recorded. Among South Asian countries, the length of time legally required to register a death varies considerably – from just 21 days in India to no legal time frame in Bhutan and Maldives. Documenting the causes of death among children and producing reliable estimates of the number of deaths by cause remains difficult. Such statistics may not be systematically collected by national criminal justice, health or vital registration systems, and determining the cause of death, particularly when victims are very young, can be challenging – even in countries with advanced and well-functioning systems. In addition, the medically certified cause of death may be inaccurate due to insufficient training in the classification of child deaths.

To ensure quality and comparability across countries, it is crucial that standard international definitions, such as the International Classification of Diseases, and international definitions of fetal death and live births are used. The utilization of these definitions is an essential part of enabling the systematic recording, coding and analysis of mortality data, including the cause of death.

¹ United Nations Children's Fund, *Is Every Child Counted? Status of data for children in the SDGs*, UNICEF, New York, March 2017, open PDF from <data.unicef.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/SDGs-publication-SPREADS-WEB-1.pdf>; and World Health Organization, *MCEE-WHO methods and data sources for child causes of death 2000-2016*, Global Health Estimates Technical Paper WHO/HMM/IER/GHE/2018.1, WHO, Geneva, February 2018, open PDF from <www.who.int/healthinfo/global_burden_disease/childcod_methods_2000_2016.pdf?ua=1>.





ADVANCING CIVIL REGISTRATION IN SOUTH ASIA

Two plans endorsed by all South Asia governments promote birth registration and a legal identity for all: the Asia-Pacific Regional Action Plan to improve civil registration and the Regional Action Plan to End Child Marriage. Both plans aim to strengthen civil registration and certification, which offer important legal protections for individuals; they also serve as the primary frameworks for UNICEF's work on this issue.

At the country level, UNICEF has supported most governments in the region to assess their civil registration systems and develop related action plans. When a country has many federal states, such as India, this work is carried out at the subnational level. Strong institutions are required to make such systems effective and sustainable; towards this end, UNICEF works to build the capacity of national staff. At the same time, UNICEF supports legislative reforms and innovations on the ground.

In Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Pakistan, for example, low birth registration levels led to the development of information and communications platforms to facilitate the registration of births. Such technology allows for the timely flow of information through various levels of government. In Afghanistan, computerized systems have been set up in health centres so that births can be immediately recorded. Birth registration is also being linked to other social services. In Nepal, birth registration is recommended to access a child grant; from 2009 to 2013, the registration of children under 5 increased from

40 per cent to 90 per cent in the five Karnali districts where the child grant was administered.² In Pakistan, birth registration is encouraged during school enrolment and in Bangladesh, children are required to have their births registered in order to enroll in school.

Improvements in civil registration can also help end the practice of child marriage. Beyond verifying the age of the future bride and groom, marriage registration ensures that individuals have the necessary legal documents to access social services. Such services can help create an environment that curbs this harmful practice. Registration also generates the data needed to direct further policy interventions. At the community level, in Pakistan, the marriage registrar is often responsible for birth notifications, which streamlines the registration process. And in Nepal, information about birth and marriage registration are integrated into parent-and-child life skills programmes.

Throughout the region, systems for citizen identification are being developed in tandem with efforts to strengthen civil registration systems. Both systems provide institutional anchoring for the verification and authentication of identities, and ultimately the ability of citizens to secure basic human rights. Civil registration is the necessary foundation for any civil identification system. Institutional support can promote this connection, ensuring the protection of individuals and facilitating the provision of services.

² United Nations Children's Fund, Asian Development Bank and the Government of Nepal, *A Cross-Section Study on the Relations Between Child Nutrition and Social Protection Measures in Karnali Zone: Linking infant and young child feeding and child cash grant*, UNICEF, ADB and Government of Nepal, Kathmandu, 2014.

Data sources: Estimates of birth registration and child marriage are from UNICEF global databases, 2018, based on Demographic and Health Surveys and Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys. Information on civil registration systems in South Asian countries was compiled from June to October 2018 using existing legal frameworks and in consultation with experts on civil registration and vital statistics, officials within relevant national institutions, and UNICEF country offices.

Suggested citation: United Nations Children's Fund, *A Snapshot of Civil Registration in South Asia*, UNICEF, New York, 2018.

UNICEF
Data and Analytics Section
Division of Data, Research and Policy
3 United Nations Plaza
New York, NY 10017, USA
Tel: +1 (212) 326-7000
E-mail: data@unicef.org
Website: data.unicef.org