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Leaving No One Behind
Improving Statistics on Statelessness
UN Statistical Commission Side Event

JOINTLY ORGANIZED BY THE EXPERT GROUP ON REFUGEE, IDP AND
STATELESSNESS STATISTICS (EGRISS), UNHCR and UNFPA

25TH FEBRUARY 2021 | EVENT REPORT

EGRISS EXPERT GROUP ON REFUGEE, IDP AND STATELESSNESS STATISTICS

Background

On 25 February 2021 the Expert Group on Refugee, IDP and Statelessness Statistics (EGRISS), together with UNHCR and UNFPA convened a side event on the margins of the UN Statistical Commission to raise awareness of the need to improve statelessness statistics at country, regional and global levels. The event brought together a diverse range of participants from governments, including national statistical offices; humanitarian and development actors, including from the UN and the World Bank; and civil society actors. The event presented information about statelessness and growing political momentum to address it linked to the #IBelong Campaign and the Global Action Plan to End Statelessness 2014-2024. It highlighted the data gap and important recent work to develop a new set of International Recommendations on Statelessness Statistics (IROSS)[1] that will help improve statelessness data. It encouraged peer-to-peer learning in the area and support for the adoption of the IROSS by the UN Statistical Commission in 2023. Nearly one hundred participants from different sectors and regions joined the event.

Overall, the event aimed to inform the statistical community about the current scarcity and weaknesses of official statistics in this area and other data needed to report on the size and characteristics of stateless populations.[2] It highlighted the importance of developing statistical standards and ensuring the harmonization of statistics to accurately reflect the problem of statelessness.

A young stateless Rohingya girl from Myanmar is collecting water at the communal water taps in Cox's Bazaar, Bangladesh
© UNHCR/Hyo Mee Duerinck

The event was an opportunity to raise awareness of the ongoing process to develop new International Recommendations on Statelessness Statistics (IROSS) under the auspices of EGRISS and to foster feedback on these and support for their adoption in 2023.

This short report highlights the main takeaways from, and lessons learned at the event. It also sets out the next steps concerning the development of the International Recommendations on Statelessness Statistics (IROSS).

Speakers

Ms. Melanie Khanna

Melanie J. Khanna is the Chief of the Statelessness Section in the Division of International Protection at the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in Geneva. She frequently lectures and writes on statelessness and is the co-editor, with Laura van Wass, of the 2017 volume, "Solving Statelessness."

Mr. Jean Damascene Rusanganwa

Jean Damascene Rusanganwa is the Director of Citizen Services at the Directorate General of Immigration and Emigration (DGIE) of Rwanda. He has been working for the DGIE since 1994. Besides his responsibilities, he also manages the National Taskforce on Statelessness. He was a member and Deputy Chairperson of the National Refugee Eligibility Committee (2009-2015) and member of the DGIE Innovation Committee (2004-2010). Mr. Rusanganwa also headed the DGIE staff Disciplinary Committee (2004-2014) and the team drafting the Border Procedure Manual (2007).

Mr. Jonathan Marskell

Jonathan Marskell is a Senior Digital ID Specialist with the World Bank Group's Identification for Development (ID4D) initiative, based in Singapore. He is responsible for supporting digital ID and civil registration financing and technical assistance projects in East Asia and the Pacific, South Asia, and East Africa, as well as contributing to ID4D's global thought leadership, convening and advocacy, including on issues related to forced displacement.

Mr. Tom Moultrie

Tom Moultrie is professor of demography and director of the Centre for Actuarial Research (CARe) at the University of Cape Town, South Africa. Among his long-standing research interests are the fertility dynamics of Africa; the political sociology of official statistics; and improving and refining the suite of indirect methods of demographic estimation. He has frequently acted as a consultant in the analysis of census data for national governments and international agencies.

Mr. Romesh Silva

Romesh Silva is Senior Technical Specialist in health and social inequalities at the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) headquarters in New York. He is the global technical lead for UNFPA's work on population data and estimation in humanitarian contexts and also its program on the strengthening of civil registration and vital statistics (CRVS) systems. He has led numerous research projects on the demography of armed conflict and forced displacement through his work for the United Nations, nongovernmental organizations, and official truth commissions.

Ms. Natalia Krynsky Baal

Natalia Krynsky Baal is a Senior Strategy and Policy Officer at the World Bank-UNHCR Joint Data Center. She has been working for the last ten years to strengthen available data and analysis in forced displacement situations. Previously, she worked with the Joint IDP Profiling Service (JIPS), where she was responsible for strategy, oversight, and fundraising. She also led the development of International Recommendations on IDP Statistics (IRIS).

Ms. Aina Helen Saetre

Aina Helen Saetre has been with UNHCR for the past 4 years. She works in the Statistics and Demographics Section and is the coordinator of the Expert Group on Refugee and Internally Displaced Persons Statistics (EGRIS). Before joining UNHCR Aina worked for UNAIDS' regional support team in Bangkok, Thailand. Prior to that she was working in UNAIDS at global level. In this position she was managing UNAIDS' Global Fund to fight AIDS, TB and tuberculosis portfolio.

Definition, causes and consequences of statelessness

What is statelessness?

As defined in Article 1 of the 1954 Convention Relating to the Status of Stateless Persons, a "stateless person" is *"a person who is not considered as a national by any State under the operation of its law"*.[3]

People who are stateless are distinct from refugees and internally displaced people. Most stateless people are not displaced and reside where they were born and have lived their whole lives. Some of them may however be refugees and IDPs as well as being stateless. This is the case, for example, for the Rohingya stateless refugee population in Bangladesh.

Stateless people are also distinct from undocumented people or irregular migrants. Lack of identity papers or lack of legal stay in a country does not make a person stateless per se, although such people may be stateless or at risk of statelessness.

What are the main causes of statelessness?

• Nationality laws that are not consistent with international standards;

• State succession or transfer of territory;

• Weak birth registration systems and administrative barriers to birth registration;

• Protracted refugee situations, especially when multi-generational.

What are the consequences of statelessness?

Lack of socioeconomic rights: Potential exclusion from education, legal employment, public healthcare (including access to COVID-19 vaccines), and other critical services.

Lack of civil and political rights: Exclusion from voting and political participation, lack of freedom of movement, lack of legal recourse, and risk of detention.

Increased vulnerability, especially for women and children, to sexual and other forms of exploitation and abuse, physical and psychological hardship, and poverty.

Alienated and marginalized communities when groups of people are stateless for extended periods. Under such circumstances, statelessness can be a cause of instability, conflict and displacement.

Ending statelessness by 2024

The Global Action Plan to End Statelessness: 2014–2024, developed in consultation with States, civil society and international organisations, sets out a guiding framework made up of 10 Actions that need to be taken to end statelessness within 10 years. The Global Action Plan sets the following overarching objectives:

• Resolve existing major situations of statelessness;

• Prevent new cases of statelessness from emerging; and

• Better identify and protect stateless populations.

Socioeconomic impacts of statelessness - Kenya

A 2019 joint UNHCR-World Bank study compared the socioeconomic conditions of the stateless minority Shona community with those of Kenyan citizens. The study found that members of the stateless Shona are more likely to be poor and have limited access to education and employment opportunities. It also showed that the lack of proof of citizenship and other documents hinder members of the Shona community from securing formal employment and leaves them with few options other than engagement in the informal sector. At the end of 2020, the Government of Kenya granted citizenship to all eligible members of the Shona community.[4]

Why we should collect official statistics on statelessness

Data gaps

UNHCR Global Trends (2019)[5] reported a global number of 4.2 million stateless persons, including those of undetermined nationality. The true extent of statelessness is estimated to be much higher, as fewer than half of all countries in the world submit any data and some of the most populous countries in the world with large suspected stateless populations do not report on statelessness at all.

People who do not have proof of their legal identity may be at risk of statelessness. The number of people in the world who are unable to provide official proof of their nationality is estimated to be around 1 billion people[6] globally, and 47% of those are children without a birth certificate.[7] This suggests that many more people are at risk of statelessness than those currently identified as stateless globally.

Weaknesses in the current data likely mean the international community is unable to accurately report and estimate the numbers of people who are either stateless or of undetermined nationality.

A 2019 study on statelessness in Côte d'Ivoire jointly undertaken by, among others, the Ivorian Government, UNHCR, UNICEF and UNFPA increased the Ivorian Government's numbers of stateless persons on its territory from 692,000 in 2018 to 955,400 in 2019, an increase of almost 40%. This increase reflects improved methodology used in the study

A significant difference between confirmed and estimated global numbers

4.2M KNOWN STATELESS

10M ESTIMATED STATELESS

1 BILLION ESTIMATED NOT TO HAVE IDENTIFICATION

compared to that used in previous years, rather than an actual increase in the number of stateless persons.

Improvements in methodology worldwide could be expected to result in a significant increase in the number of people known to be affected by statelessness globally.

Bosnia and Herzegovina. A Roma woman and her child who was at risk of statelessness showing birth and citizenship certificates
© UNHCR/Midhat Poturovic

Data driving concrete change

Several of the actions outlined in the Global Action Plan to End Statelessness have a direct relevance to official statistics. Action 10 is to Improve quantitative and qualitative data on stateless populations, which has the goal of making quantitative data on stateless populations publicly available for 150 States, with an interim goal of having quantitative data for 100 States by 2017.

Rwanda

Plan of eradication of statelessness

Rwanda recently made several concrete commitments relevant to eradicating statelessness, in line with the Global Action Plan to End Statelessness. As part of its efforts, a National Statelessness Taskforce has been established and a National Action Plan 2020-2024 has been developed, which will serve as a roadmap for the eradication of statelessness in Rwanda by 2024.

A crucial element of the National Plan is the identification of stateless persons and those with undertermined nationality. In order to tackle this issue, the government is working closely with the National Institute of Statistics of Rwanda to include the question of statelessness in the next national population and housing census of 2022. The government has already planned capacity building activities in order to sensitize those collecting data and the general population about statelessness, as lack of an accurate understanding about statelessness may arise as a challenge in the process of data collection.

The objective is to grant or confirm nationality for all stateless persons and their descendants living in Rwanda and continue to facilitate access to civil registration and vital statistics systems to prevent new cases of statelessness from arising, especially among the refugee population.

Kyrgyzstan

First country to end statelessness

In 2009, UNHCR and its implementing partners conducted pilot surveys to identify the prevalence and causes of statelessness in Kyrgyzstan. Findings of the surveys resulted in the creation of an inter-ministerial process to address statelessness, and the adoption of a National Action Plan to Prevent and Reduce Statelessness.

In July 2019, Kyrgyzstan became the first country to end statelessness on its territory by identifying and confirming the nationality of nearly 14,000 stateless people.

Kenya. Registration of stateless
Shona community
© UNHCR/Georgina Goodwin

Including stateless persons in identification systems

Leaving no one behind

Birth registration is the first acknowledgement of a child's existence and legal identity, and a birth certificate is part of the proof required to obtain nationality. Its possession helps to avoid the risk of statelessness. A birth certificate may also be required to access social service systems, including health, education and justice. One in four children under age 5 in the world are not registered today, and even when they are, they may not have proof of registration. An estimated 237 million children under age 5 worldwide are currently without a birth certificate.[8]

In many countries, individuals face technical and administrative obstacles, which prevent universal birth registration and may contribute to perpetuating

statelessness. The SDG dedicated target (16.9) under Goal 16: provide legal identity for all, including birth registration, by 2030,[9] commits States and others to address this.

Legal identification for all is central to the objective of leaving no one behind, as it can improve individuals' quality of life and create improved social and economic opportunities. Legal ID systems may also lead to greater inclusion in social protection, financial and health systems especially for the most vulnerable groups.

In addition, better statistics on statelessness play an integral role in improving the lives of stateless persons and ending statelessness itself. Household surveys and censuses are important data sources for official statistics, however, stateless persons are often not included. Data on stateless persons are incomplete and deficient, but there is a clear responsibility for National Statistics Systems to guide end-users about their quality and completeness of population data as stated in the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics.[10]

Building inclusive and safe identification systems

Despite the significant advantages of improved Civil Registration and Vital Statistics (CRVS) and ID systems, the drive towards legal identification may also present risks to those who could be made vulnerable by being identified as stateless. Registration may bring to light many more cases of undetermined nationality, and without protection and a remedy to their lack of of citizenship, individuals may be reluctant to register themselves or their children. In order to mitigate possible risks

for stateless populations and encourage their identification, it is necessary to guarantee that:

• CRVS and ID systems are inclusive and ensure universal access for individuals without discrimination;

• Authorities ensure public confidence in the data collection systems and clarity towards the use of data;

• Human rights and data protection standards are at the forefront in the management of administrative data;

• Survey and census data are only used for statistical purposes;

• National Statistical Offices are capacitated and motivated according to the highest standards of data privacy and protection;

• International organizations, civil society and other actors support in the monitoring of the use of data and the application of data protection principles.

COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic has greatly impacted the production of demographic and other statistics across the globe, disrupting national civil registration systems and housing and population censuses in many countries. The reduction in birth registrations across the developing world exposes vulnerable groups to increased risks of statelessness. On the other hand, the lack of data on stateless populations hinders the development of adequate health responses and provision of health services to these vulnerable groups, which may leave them out of vaccination plans.

Kenya. Stateless Shona get
Kenya birth certificates.
© UNHCR/Georgina Goodwin

The road ahead: Improving statistics on statelessness

Current initiatives to improve data on statelessness

As presented previously, there are many technical, administrative and political challenges that may arise during the process of collection of official statistics on statelessness. However, despite the challenges, it is important to remember the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics, which emphasize the role of statistical systems to public and useful information. Improved data can serve as a key catalyst in the achievement of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development as well as the Global Action Plan to End Statelessness. It may serve as a source of information to monitor progress and ensure that authorities are accountable towards their commitments.

In recognition of these challenges, two complementary initiatives, funded by the World Bank-UNHCR Joint Data Center (JDC), are being pursued to improve data on statelessness: the Inter-agency Group on Statelessness Estimates (IGSE) and the group of experts on statelessness statistics. The work of the latter has now been folded under the auspices of EGRISS.

The IGSE, established in January 2019, brings together around thirty experts from academia, civil society and international and regional organizations and is co-led by UNHCR and UNFPA. The aim for the IGSE is to become a platform for technical collaboration and knowledge sharing on statelessness estimation. The urgent need to improve the global, regional and national estimates of stateless persons runs in parallel to the development of the International Recommendations on Statelessness Statistics (IROSS) which will lead to improved official statistics on statelessness in the medium- and long-term.

International Recommendations on Statelessness Statistics (IROSS)

The work to develop recommendations on statelessness statistics started in 2019 with the establishment of a group of experts on statelessness statistics. Since then, the work has made great progress, being modeled on the work and methodology of the Expert Group on Refugee, IDP and Statelessness Statistics (EGRISS) that was established by a decision of the 47th session of the UN Statistical Commission and has so far produced the International Recommendations on Refugee Statistics (IRRS, 2018), the International Recommendations on IDP Statistics (IRIS, 2020) and the accompanying Compilers' Manual, 2020. In 2020 the work of the on statelessness statistics was included under the umbrella of EGRISS. The Report on Statelessness Statistics is included in the agenda of the 53rd session of the UNSC in 2022, and Member States are invited to provide feedback and guidance for the further development of the IROSS.

Recommendations from the UNSC can be expected to significantly improve data collection at the national level over time.

This will in turn improve the quality of data as well as the number of countries reporting official statistics on statelessness.

To improve statelessness data the draft IROSS addresses the need for harmonized data, definitions and methods at international, regional and national levels. The IROSS presents a statistical framework for collecting data about stateless people and those of undetermined nationality; proposals for improving the quantity and quality of data on these groups; and, recommendations for its analysis and for the coordination of official statelessness statistics.

The IROSS will be further developed over the coming months. Individuals and organisations are invited to participate in the development of the recommendations through a peer review and global consulation process. The latter will be managed by the UN Statistical Division and EGRISS secretariat. Further examples of good practice are being sought and contributions are welcome.

Endnotes

1 Under the EGRISS umbrella, a subgroup on statelessness statistics is currently working on the development of common standards and definitions to improve the quality and relevance of statistics on stateless populations. In December 2019, the expert group gathered in Bangkok to discuss the development of International Recommendations on Statelessness Statistics (IROSS). Representatives from 16 countries, including experts from national statistical offices and line ministries, as well as UNHCR, UNFPA and UN regional commissions participated in this meeting. The group developed an ambitious work plan to deliver the recommendations on statelessness statistics within two years. The ultimate objective is to submit the international recommendations to the United Nations Statistical Commission for its adoption in March 2023.

2 In 2014 the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) launched the #IBelong Campaign to End Statelessness by 2024. At that time a target was set to increase the number of States with quantitative estimates of the size of their stateless populations from 75 to 100 by the year 2017, but UNHCR is currently only able to report statelessness data for 79 countries and estimated data for a further 22.

3 UNHCR. (1954). Convention Related to the Status of Stateless Persons. https://www.unhcr.org/protection/statelessness/3bbb25729/convention-relating-status-stateless-persons.html

4 UNHCR. (2021). New evidence about the socioeconomic impacts of statelessness emerges from a study of the Shona community in Kenya. https://www.unhcr.org/blogs/socioeconomic-impacts-of-statelessness-shona-community-in-kenya/

5 https://www.unhcr.org/globaltrends2019/

6 According to the World Bank Group's 2018 ID4D Global Dataset, an estimated one billion people around the globe face challenges in proving who they are. They struggle to access basic services. https://id4d.worldbank.org/global-dataset

7 https://plan-international.org/early-child-hood/birth-registration

8 https://data.unicef.org/resources/birth-registration-for-every-child-by-2030/

9 The adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by the United Nations General Assembly in September 2015 placed birth registration firmly on the international development agenda. It included a dedicated target (16.9) under Goal 16: provide legal identity for all, including birth registration, by 2030. Complementing this is target 17.9, which calls for support in building the statistical capacity needed for strong national civil registration systems. Such systems produce vital statistics, including those on birth registration, which are foundational for achieving sustained human and economic development.

10 https://unstats.un.org/unsd/dnss/gp/fundprinciples.aspx

We are looking forward to staying in touch with participants of the event and sharing more information with those interested in contributing to the development of the International Recommendations on Statelessness Statistics (IROSS).

For more information, please contact the secretariat of the Expert Group on Refugee, IDP and Statelessness Statistics (EGRISS): egrisstats@unhcr.org

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