



CLOSING THE REGISTRATION GAP:

A Commonwealth Action Agenda on Birth Registration and Child Protection

THE COMMONWEALTH DIMENSION AT A GLANCE

1 in 3 children under the age of one and **1 in 5** children under the age of five in the Commonwealth are unregistered.¹

3 of 5 countries identified by UNICEF as contributing to half of all unregistered births globally are Commonwealth countries.²

7 of the top 14 highest-rate countries for child labour globally are Commonwealth member states.³

5 Commonwealth member states are classified as 'high-burden' countries in the global effort to end child marriage.⁴

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Birth registration - the legal recording of a child's existence - is the foundational instrument of child protection. Without it, children do not have a legal identity and are 'condemned to anonymity'.⁵ Invisible to the state, they are excluded from safety nets and unable to access healthcare, education, social services, or justice.⁶ As a result, unregistered children can be acutely vulnerable to child marriage, child sexual exploitation and abuse (CSEA), forced labour, trafficking, and statelessness.⁷ Without official proof of age, laws designed to protect children cannot be enforced.

This is a Commonwealth problem. Approximately 1 in 3 children under the age of one and 1 in 5 of children under the age of five in the Commonwealth are unregistered.⁸ 3 of the 5 countries contributing to half of all unregistered births globally are Commonwealth members (India, Pakistan and Nigeria).⁹ Commonwealth nations also account for 7 of the top 14 countries with the highest rates of child labour,¹⁰ and 5 Commonwealth member states are classified as 'high burden' countries in the global effort to end child marriage.¹¹

The 2022 Kigali Declaration on Child Care and Protection Reform, adopted unanimously by all 56 member states, provides the mandate for coordinated Commonwealth action.¹² The evidence is clear that transformation is achievable: South Asian Commonwealth nations have seen birth registration rates rise from 39% to 76% in two decades,¹³ and case studies from Africa, the Pacific, and the Caribbean demonstrate that dramatic improvements are possible within a single decade. Critically, the most successful reforms go beyond administrative

modernisation. They rewrite the law to deputise frontline health workers to register births at the point of delivery; elevate the birth certificate to foundational legal identity document; and ensure that digital registration systems are underpinned by legislation that protects rather than exposes vulnerable families. These are legal reforms, and they are prerequisites for the infrastructure and awareness measures that follow. Successful models are broadly transferable across the Commonwealth's shared legal and administrative systems - and this brief sets out how.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO COMMONWEALTH MEMBER STATES

- ➔ **Repeal gender-discriminatory laws and reform nationality provisions:** remove all barriers preventing mothers from independently registering births; ensure equal rights to confer nationality; and repeal restrictive joint-registration laws that disadvantage unmarried fathers and their children.
- ➔ **Legally mandate point-of-birth registration:** enact legislation deputising midwives, health workers, and community officials to register births at the point of delivery. Statutory delegation of this authority - not digital investment alone - is the single most transferable legal lesson from successful Commonwealth reform.
- ➔ **Elevate birth certificates as foundational identity documents:** legislate the birth certificate as the primary document for accessing education, healthcare, social protection, and national identification systems; and prohibit the denial of essential services to children on grounds of non-registration.
- ➔ **Eliminate financial barriers:** remove direct fees for registration and first certificate issuance; repeal late registration penalties that disproportionately penalise those least able to access the system.
- ➔ **Decouple civil registration from immigration enforcement and establish rights-based digital safeguards:** formally separate civil registration from immigration enforcement through legislation or binding administrative guidance, ensuring undocumented and refugee parents can register births safely; and require that all civil registration digitalisation is underpinned by law guaranteeing data privacy and explicitly prohibiting the repurposing of registration data for immigration or enforcement purposes.
- ➔ **Invest in decentralised, digitally integrated systems:** expand registration into rural and marginalised communities; integrate civil registration formally with health, education, and social protection services through binding multi-sectoral agreements.
- ➔ **Implement demand-side incentives and sustained public education:** link registration to social grants and school enrolment; establish national birth registration days; and invest in frontline worker training at community level.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO COMMONWEALTH INSTITUTIONS

- ➔ **Pursue targeted legal reform advocacy:** through the Commonwealth Lawyers Association and the Commonwealth Children Interest Group (ComCIG), challenge discriminatory registration and nationality laws and support member states in developing rights-compliant frameworks.
- ➔ **Establish a Birth Registration Knowledge Exchange:** systematically document and share legal templates, legislative reform models, and lessons from the modernisation of inherited colonial civil registration systems.
- ➔ **Develop a Model Commonwealth Civil Registration Standard and integrate monitoring metrics:** drawing on proven Commonwealth reform frameworks, produce an adaptable model standard; and establish clear targets and disaggregated accountability mechanisms under the Kigali Declaration.

THE PROBLEM: SCALE AND URGENCY

Birth registration forms the entire basis of a person's legal identity. The Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) recognises it as a fundamental human right and describes it as the 'precondition for the protection of other human rights'.¹² In other words, birth registration is a right to have rights;¹³ those not recognised by law cannot rely on it for their protection.

The most widely cited estimate - that 23% children under the age of five do not have their births registered¹⁴ - significantly understates the extent of the problem: by the age of five, unregistered children have already spent years exposed to serious harm.¹⁵ It is therefore even more concerning that an estimated 29% of children under the age of one are unregistered worldwide.¹⁶

The problem of unregistered births is similarly widespread across the Commonwealth. According to available data, one-third (33%) of children under the age of one and one-fifth (20%) of children under the age of five are unregistered in the Commonwealth.¹⁷ Three of the five countries UNICEF identifies as contributing to half of all unregistered births globally - India, Pakistan, and Nigeria - are Commonwealth members.¹⁸

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The Kigali Declaration on Child Care and Protection Reform (2022), adopted unanimously by all 56 member states,¹⁹ represents the clearest mandate yet for coordinated Commonwealth action. It recognises the particular vulnerability of marginalised children and centres the elimination of child labour, trafficking, and sexual exploitation as key objectives. Rigorous implementation of effective birth registration systems is an absolute prerequisite for meeting these commitments.

To fulfil the goals set out in the Declaration and achieve Sustainable Development Goal 16 - universal registration and legal identity for all by 2030 - Commonwealth member states must modernise their birth registration systems and urgently address the root causes of low registration rates.

WHY IT MATTERS: THE HARM CASCADE OF UNREGISTERED BIRTHS

Without the foundational legal record of a child's existence, young people are condemned to a pervasive anonymity that impedes normal civil life and strips them of fundamental protections.²⁰ This invisibility creates a legal void, exposing vulnerable children to a nexus of severe, compounding risks of harm.²¹ Each harm feeds the next.

Child Sexual Exploitation, Abuse and Early Marriage

Without documented proof of age, age-of-consent laws are easily bypassed, leaving children highly vulnerable to child sexual exploitation and abuse (CSEA) and early marriage. By definition, an unregistered child has no legal identity or proof of them being under-age, meaning that if abused, their trauma may not be legally recognised as child abuse, enabling perpetrators to exploit this anomaly to evade prosecution.

These issues are already widespread across the Commonwealth and are exacerbated by low birth registration rates. Estimates show that one in eight children are sexually abused worldwide before reaching the age of 18, amounting to a total of 12.7% of the world's children.²² Globally, one in five girls are married before the age of 18 and one third of those under 15.²³ The Commonwealth bears a particularly heavy

burden, as 58.5% of all child marriages take place in Commonwealth countries, despite these countries only having 32% of the global child population.²⁴ Approximately 8.8 million girls under the age of 18 in the Commonwealth are married each year - equal to 24,000 girls every day, or 17 girls every minute.²⁵

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Early marriage serves as a gateway to a litany of further abuses,²⁶ as well as institutionalising the physical, psychological, and sexual abuse inherent to the power imbalance of such relationships.²⁷ When it includes aspects of forced marriage, it is considered a form of modern slavery.²⁸ Children who are forced into marriage are at an increased risk of limited social engagement, economic empowerment, and discontinued education,²⁹ and face high rates of health complications from early pregnancies.³⁰ This has the potential to result in a perpetual cycle where mothers who experienced early marriage due to lack of birth registration go on to not register their own children.

In addition to their vulnerability to abuse and early marriage, unregistered children also face heightened risk of sex trafficking: the legal void preventing proof of age enables traffickers to move and exploit children across borders with far less accountability,³¹ while early marriage itself can serve as a pathway into trafficking.³²

Child Labour and Hazardous Exploitation

Children who are unregistered and therefore cannot prove their age face heightened risks of child labour and trafficking for labour exploitation.³³ This occurs through similar means as the CSEA and early marriage discussed above — age related labour laws can be easily evaded, traffickers can move children more easily, children face difficulties seeking justice for lack of legal recognition as a victim. However, a further contributing factor is that when children are denied access to education and remain invisible to the state institutions responsible for their protection, they may perceive work as their only option.³⁴ Commonwealth nations occupy seven of the top 14 highest rates of child labour globally,³⁵ highlighting it as an issue in pertinent need of attention to protect children within the Commonwealth.

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The negative impacts of child labour are clear and well-documented. Children face a variety of risks at work, including long working hours, injury risks from machinery or tools that are too big for them to handle, workplace violence, and low or withheld wages.³⁶ Children are often pushed into the most unsafe environments, such as working underground, underwater, at heights, or in extreme temperatures.³⁷ Approximately 70% of child labourers worldwide work in agriculture, where they may be regularly exposed to harmful pesticides and other dangerous chemicals.³⁸ The ILO estimates that around 22,000 children die at work annually,³⁹ with survivors suffering severe, lifelong physical and mental health issues, including malnutrition, cancer, and chronic pain.⁴⁰

Statelessness and Hostile Immigration Environments

Lack of birth registration and documents can create an increased risk of a child becoming stateless.⁴¹ A stateless child has no legally recognised nationality and is therefore not afforded the legal protections of state citizenship. Stateless children face profound barriers to education, healthcare, housing, and justice, and are at elevated risk of trafficking, sexual exploitation, child labour, modern slavery, and forced recruitment into armed forces.⁴² Research consistently documents severe mental health impacts from the associated social exclusion and discrimination.⁴³ Without birth registration or proof of parentage, regaining or establishing nationality later in life is nearly impossible.⁴⁴ Consequently, more children are now born into statelessness globally than regain a nationality each year,⁴⁵ and this crisis is set to grow alongside the exacerbating factors of climate-driven displacement and migration.⁴⁶

Crucially, statelessness risk is not confined to low- or middle-income settings. The United Kingdom illustrates how high-income states with ostensibly universal registration systems can harbour structural vulnerabilities. While the UK reports a near 100% birth registration rate,⁴⁷ undocumented and refugee mothers are heavily disincentivised from registering their children's births because the 'compliant environment' immigration policy incentivises data sharing between public bodies – such as hospitals and birth registrars – and the Home Office.⁴⁸ Driven by fear of deportation and unaffordable maternity charges, marginalised mothers avoid interacting with state services, leaving their children undocumented, unseen and at acute risk of statelessness.⁴⁹

Beyond the threat of statelessness, a lack of documented identity forces children into dangerous protection vacuums when interacting with immigration systems. When children arrive in a host country without documentation, domestic authorities frequently rely on arbitrary mechanisms to determine age. In the UK, for example, Home Office policy permits an initial age assessment based purely on visual appearance and demeanour; if an official deems an individual to look significantly over 18, they are processed as an adult.⁵⁰ This systemic flaw can lead to misclassification, and to children immediately losing the vital safeguarding protections and services to which they are legally entitled.⁵¹ Between 2022 and 2023, charity Care4Calais reported that at least 1,300 refugee children were wrongly placed in adult accommodation and detention facilities.⁵² Many of these misclassified children face immediate street homelessness, go missing, or fall victim of severe safeguarding failures. The psychological toll is severe, with age-disputed children suffering higher levels of isolation, hopelessness, psychological distress and suicidal ideation.⁵³

The UK case underscores how domestic immigration policies and systems can actively reinforce, rather than prevent, the very vulnerabilities they are designed to mitigate, and why formally decoupling civil registration from immigration enforcement is a necessary reform across all member states.

BARRIERS TO REGISTRATION AND LEGAL IDENTITY

The failure to register children is rarely due to a lack of parental care; rather, it is the result of compounding, systemic obstacles. The impact of these obstacles is most significant for women, those in poverty, and those in rural or marginalised communities. Identified barriers are mutually reinforcing. For example, gender discrimination limits women's ability to engage with systems that are already physically inaccessible and poorly understood.

Gender, Discriminatory and Restrictive Laws

Being a woman remains the most substantial factor in the inability to register a birth. The UN Human Rights Working Group on discrimination against women in law and practice has described its cumulative effect as a 'vicious cycle of exclusion':⁵⁴ discriminatory laws and structural inequalities prevent women from registering births, while lack of registration in turn harms women and girls most severely.

In some Commonwealth member states, explicitly gender-discriminatory laws remain on the statute book: in Fiji, mothers cannot register a birth except in extreme circumstances such as the death of the father;⁵⁵ in Malaysia, mothers are deterred from registering children born out of wedlock due to fear of discrimination or societal stigmatisation;⁵⁶ and in five other Commonwealth countries, mothers do not have equal rights to confer nationality to their children.⁵⁷

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Even where the law is not explicitly discriminatory, prejudicial attitudes and structural obstacles impact women's access to formally register their children's births.⁵⁸ In many countries, practical and cultural barriers limit female autonomy, meaning many women in rural communities are not permitted to travel unaccompanied to urban registration centres if a full day's travel is required.⁵⁹

Restrictive "Joint Request" laws also create significant administrative hurdles for unmarried fathers. These laws typically prohibit the state from recording a father's name on a birth certificate unless both parents attend the registry in person and sign the register together. Failure to navigate these hurdles can lead to children being issued "single-parent" birth certificates, which has consequences for their legal identity, nationality,⁶⁰ and inheritance as in many Commonwealth nations citizenship is derived through descent (*jus sanguinis*), requiring a child's biological link to a citizen parent. Such restrictive laws that impact unmarried fathers are in place in several Commonwealth countries with colonial legacies, including Trinidad and Tobago,⁶¹ Jamaica,⁶² and Uganda.⁶³ More recently, some Commonwealth countries have recognised these laws as discriminatory and there have been landmark judicial rulings. In South Africa (2021) and Malawi (2021), Constitutional Courts struck down provisions in their respective Births and Deaths Registration Acts that prevented unmarried fathers from independently registering their children.⁶⁴

Cost and Colonial-Era Infrastructure

The direct and indirect costs of registration are the most significant practical barrier for low-income families.⁶⁵ Direct costs include registration fees and penalties for late registration. Indirect costs, which are often even greater, include travel to a registration centre, accommodation where multiple visits are required, and lost working days and income during this time.

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Many of these costs are embedded in colonial-era civil registration systems that were not designed for the populations they now serve.⁶⁶ Colonial systems placed registration offices in administrative centres, meaning costs fall heaviest on rural, low-income communities - precisely those most in need of access. The UN Legal Identity Agenda Task Force points to these complex, colonial-era bureaucracies as largely responsible for the slow global progress in registration.⁶⁷ Consequently, less than 10% of countries classified as low-income have achieved complete birth registration.⁶⁸

The impact of cost removal is striking: in Vanuatu, after the government removed cost barriers through 'catch-up days' and integrated registration into hospital discharges and school enrolments, registration rates for children under one surged from 35% to 57% in a single year (2013-2014).⁶⁹ By 2018, overall registration had climbed from a low of 26% to 86%,⁷⁰ proving that decentralised, no-cost access can rapidly eliminate 'invisibility' even in geographically challenging contexts.

Punitive late fees can act as a deterrent rather than an incentive, specifically punishing families who already struggle with access.⁷¹ In the Turks & Caicos Islands, for example, there is a strict legal requirement to register a birth before 42 days and the 'Late Registration of Birth Penalty' is \$200 USD.⁷²

Awareness and Education

Globally, over 50% of caregivers of unregistered children report a lack of understanding of the registration process.⁷³ This lack of awareness creates damaging misconceptions, such as the incorrect belief that reporting a birth to a local community chief constitutes formal legal registration.⁷⁴

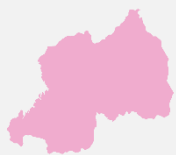
Because there is a strong correlation between maternal education level and registration rates, awareness campaigns must explicitly target and empower women and girls. Women are uniquely positioned to drive this change, constituting 67% of the global formal health workforce responsible for institutional registration,⁷⁵ as well as the vast majority of informal community health and social care workers.

WHAT WORKS: EVIDENCE FROM AROUND THE COMMONWEALTH

The shared common law legal and administrative frameworks of most of the 56 Commonwealth member states present a unique opportunity: successful registration campaigns can serve as replicable models across nations with similar structural challenges. Member states with civil law traditions and non-British colonial heritages have also successfully reformed highly codified administrative frameworks to boost registration.

Recent initiatives show that dramatic improvements are achievable and provide a clear evidence base. The most effective interventions – as the case studies below demonstrate – address identified multiple barriers to registration simultaneously. The following case studies demonstrate how Commonwealth nations are successfully putting these combined strategies into practice.

SPOTLIGHT: RWANDA | THE “ZERO-TRIP” DIGITAL IDENTITY MODEL



Rwanda’s reform journey is seen as something of a ‘gold standard’ for nations seeking to integrate Civil Registration, Vital Statistics, and Identity (CRVSID).⁷⁶ To tackle existing barriers to birth registration, the government launched a two-pronged strategy: legal decentralisation and digital innovation. By legalising registration at hospital level with the Birth and Deaths Act (2020), Rwanda removed the need for parents to travel to distant district offices. This legal shift was powered by IremboGov, a digital service portal.⁷⁷ The system is built on a “citizen-centric” model: point of service entry of data into the system (at the health facility); database interoperability whereby data from the Ministry of Local Government, Ministry of Health and the National Identification Agency are integrated; and zero-trip delivery so that parents can download their child’s digital birth certificate directly to integration, Rwanda’s registration completeness rose from 90.3% in 2024 to nearly 93% in 2025, and the proportion of births registered within 30 days remained 99.1%.⁷⁸

Key lessons for the Commonwealth include decentralising authority, not just tech. Success was only possible because health workers and village-level secretaries were legally deputised to sign off registrations. Rwanda adopted the “lifecycle” approach and linked birth registration to the national ID system at the moment of birth, ensuring that a child is immediately “visible” for all future state services. The transition to “zero-trip, zero-paper” services through IremboGov removed bureaucratic friction. Rwanda has shown that digital transformation is most effective when the law is rewritten to empower frontline workers already present at the child’s birth.



SPOTLIGHT: BANGLADESH | SCALING UNIVERSAL REGISTRATION THROUGH DIGITAL INTEGRATION



Historically constrained by manual, paper-based processes and low public awareness, Bangladesh transformed its civil registration landscape to combat widespread child ‘invisibility’.⁷⁹ Introduced in 2004, the Birth and Death Registration Act radically decentralised the registration mandate to local government bodies and eliminated fees for early registration.⁸⁰ To tackle the logistical hurdles of reaching a massive rural population, the government introduced the Birth Registration Information System (BRIS) and integrated registration directly into the nationwide Expanded Programme on Immunisation (EPI).⁸¹ By allowing frontline health assistants and family welfare assistants to report births during routine vaccination and health visits, Bangladesh successfully merged public demand with immediate accessibility. Within a decade of enacting these reforms, the government achieved a historic milestone of over 100 million birth registrations on its online portal.⁸² Furthermore, localised pilot projects, such as the ‘Kaliganj model’ which equipped frontline community workers with tablet computers to digitally notify vital events, demonstrated the capacity to increase local registration rates significantly.⁸³

Bangladesh’s trajectory shows that member states with massive, geographically dispersed populations can achieve rapid, systemic coverage by bridging the gap between local community health services and modernised digital infrastructure.

SPOTLIGHT: PAPUA NEW GUINEA | TECH-LED INCLUSION TO OVERCOME GEOGRAPHIC DIFFICULTIES



Papua New Guinea (PNG) faces some of the world's most extreme geographic barriers to civil registration, with a largely rural population scattered across rugged mountainous terrain and remote islands. In 2018, PNG’s birth registration rate was a critical 13%⁸⁴ – the lowest in the Asia-Pacific region.⁸⁵ To address this “invisibility crisis”, the government launched a transformative modernisation of the Civil and Identity Registry (PNGCIR) and set an ambitious target, committing to ensuring 50% of children have their births registered by 2025.⁸⁶ Through implementation of the Civil and Identity Registration Act (2024), a unique ID number is now assigned at birth and explicitly states that citizens should not be denied essential services (health, education) due to a lack of documentation.

The core of this approach is the deployment of portable biometric registration kits. These lightweight, rugged devices are designed to operate in extreme temperatures and direct sunlight, allowing mobile teams to trek into underserved communities to capture real-time data, including personal details and fingerprints.⁸⁷ The initiative is on track to capture 500,000 new civil and identity registrations per year via mobile stations.⁸⁸ This system is integrated with the National Health Information System, ensuring that births are recorded at the point of hospital discharge. By March 2024, the programme had already issued over 2.4 million birth certificates,⁸⁹ proving that even in the most geographically challenging Commonwealth contexts, digital innovation and mobile outreach can rapidly dismantle the barriers to legal identity.

SPOTLIGHT: JAMAICA | CAPTURING LEGAL IDENTITY VIA BEDSIDE REGISTRATION



In Jamaica, birth certificates are essential gateway documents required to secure national IDs, access public healthcare, and enrol in education. To help achieve near-universal birth coverage, Jamaica's Registrar General's Department (RGD) revolutionised its civil registry by introducing the Childbirth Bedside Registration Initiative, seen as a regional best practice in the Caribbean and replicated in Grenada and St Lucia.⁹⁰ This embeds registration agents directly within hospitals/birthing centres and, by capturing data electronically through tablets, has drastically improved the quality of national vital statistics. It also acts as a foundational child protection tool, giving the state a verifiable legal mechanism to enforce age-related protection laws.

Crucially, this system is designed to leverage the "hospital window" to capture children immediately at birth, mitigating the risk of late or non-registration. Additionally, given that the brief period immediately following childbirth is when unmarried fathers are statistically most likely to be present, the facility allows unmarried parents to effortlessly co-sign the registration documents together. This satisfies the legal requirement for joint consent before the mother is discharged and acts as a legal and administrative countermeasure to missing paternal data. To remove any secondary financial friction, the state also waives the fee for the child's very first physical birth certificate. This combination of law and service delivery has driven national birth registration coverage past 90%, with paternal particulars captured at birth surging from under 30% prior to the initiative to over 80%.⁹¹

SPOTLIGHT: GHANA | COMBINING ACCESS WITH NATIONWIDE AWARENESS⁹²



Recognising that infrastructure is futile without public demand, Ghana adopted a multi-pronged strategy to address its three core barriers: prohibitive direct fees, physical inaccessibility, and widespread lack of public awareness.⁹³ The government abolished fees for early registration and established a highly publicised annual 'Birth Registration Day',⁹⁴ often extended to a month-long celebration in September, to raise awareness about the importance of early registration for children under 12 months, and focusing on educating parents in rural areas on the benefits associated with having a birth certificate. Crucially, rather than waiting for parents to find registries, Ghana integrated civil registration directly into its biannual Child Health Promotion Weeks and routine weighing and immunisation programmes.⁹⁵ By deploying mobile registration units and community volunteers to work alongside health workers, the government brought the registry directly to rural doorsteps.

Alongside legislative reforms, this focus on accessibility through mobile registration and public education produced remarkable results: national registration rates for children under one more than doubled, rising from 44% in 2003⁹⁶ to an impressive 93% by 2022.⁹⁷ Perhaps most significantly for policy makers, this integrated approach successfully closed the historical registration gap between rural and urban populations, ensuring equitable legal protection for the most vulnerable children.⁹⁸ Despite improvements, challenges remain, particularly with parents in remote areas where some still prioritise traditional naming ceremonies over legal registration and there is a 28% rate of unregistered children.⁹⁹ Nevertheless, Ghana demonstrates that well-designed demand-side interventions can reach the most marginalised communities when paired with accessible services.

SPOTLIGHT: SOUTH AFRICA | CONSTITUTIONAL RIGHTS AND INCENTIVISING REGISTRATION THROUGH SOCIAL PROTECTION



Under apartheid, South Africa's civil registration system was legally segregated and designed to exclude the majority of the population.¹⁰⁰ The post-apartheid government instituted sweeping legal reforms, explicitly enshrining a child's right to a name and nationality in Section 28 of the 1996 Constitution and unifying the registry under a single, non-discriminatory legal framework.¹⁰¹ The Births and Deaths Registration Amendment Act (2010) legally mandated that all births must be registered within 30 days, providing statutory pressure for the Department of Home Affairs (DHA) to increase access to registration. Infrastructure was massively expanded by establishing DHA offices directly within hundreds of public hospitals and health facilities and deploying civil registration officials directly into public maternity wards.

While removing cost barriers is essential, UNICEF recommends that governments proactively drive demand by incentivising registration. As well as making late registration legally difficult, South Africa incentivised birth registration by linking it to its most powerful poverty-alleviation tool: the Child Support Grant (CSG).¹⁰² By requiring a birth certificate to access this vital monthly cash transfer, the government fundamentally tipped the cost-benefit analysis for low-income parents, turning registration from an administrative burden into a direct financial benefit.¹⁰³ To capture the resulting surge in demand, the Department of Home Affairs (DHA) paired this financial incentive with infrastructure expansion. By allowing parents to register their newborn's birth so conveniently - and often apply for the CSG simultaneously - before even being discharged from the hospital, the nation removed both travel costs and bureaucratic friction. South Africa's birth registration rate soared from roughly 24% in 1991 to 95% in 2016, maintaining near-universal levels today.¹⁰⁴

SPOTLIGHT: INDIA | SCALING INTEROPERABILITY AND FOUNDATIONAL IDENTITY¹⁰⁵



Managing civil registration for the world's most populous nation requires digital coordination at an unprecedented scale. To achieve universal coverage, India recently overhauled both its legislative and technological frameworks.¹⁰⁶ In 2023, the government enacted the Registration of Births and Deaths (Amendment) Act, a landmark legal reform that officially elevates the birth certificate into the sole foundational document required for citizens to access education, voting rights, and the national ID system (Aadhaar).¹⁰⁷

To support this legal mandate, the Office of the Registrar General of India rolled out a modernised, centralised Civil Registration System (CRS) portal capable of functioning both online and offline.¹⁰⁸ By mapping a countrywide database of medical facilities and directly linking the CRS to digital "labour room" registers, India is automating the notification of births at the exact point of delivery.¹⁰⁹ Furthermore, to combat historical gender disparities in registration, state governments have introduced targeted demand-side incentives, conditioning specific cash transfers and social grants upon the registration of female children.¹¹⁰ India's approach demonstrates how massive populations can be captured by aggressively linking civil registration to national digital ID systems, maternal health tracking, and gender-equitable social protection.

SPOTLIGHT: VANUATU | OVERCOMING GEOGRAPHIC INVISIBILITY



As an archipelago of over 80 islands, Vanuatu historically faced extreme geographical and financial barriers to civil registration, like many other island nations. The high cost of travel to urban centres left rural populations largely undocumented, with the national birth registration rate sitting at a critical low of 26% in 2007.¹¹¹ By 2018, this figure reached 86% for children under 18, showing that rapid, systemic change is possible.¹¹²

The government adopted a radical "multi-sectoral" approach. The Department of Civil Registry established formal agreements with the Ministries of Health and Education,¹¹³ allowing midwives to legally register births before hospital discharge and enabling teachers to capture unregistered children during initial school enrolment.¹¹⁴ With support from Australia and UNICEF, Vanuatu developed a locally adapted central database. In June 2025, they launched a new digital system (RV5) to further streamline access to birth, ID, and marriage records across all provinces.

Coupled with the removal of financial barriers and the deployment of mobile outreach campaigns and "catch-up days" to reach remote and disaster-affected communities, the impact was immediate. Registration rates for children under one surged from 35% to 57% in a single year (2013-2014).¹¹⁵ After Cyclone Pam in 2015, the government re-issued lost certificates for free to ensure children did not lose their legal identity during the recovery. Vanuatu's success proves that even in the most geographically challenging Commonwealth contexts, decentralising access and integrating registration into everyday public services can rapidly dismantle the barriers to legal identity.

SPOTLIGHT: AUSTRALIA | INDIGENOUS-LED OUTREACH TO ADDRESS SYSTEMIC EXCLUSION



While Australia maintains a near-universal birth registration system, civil registry frameworks even in high-income states can inadvertently reinforce the very vulnerabilities they aim to prevent. Unregistered births remain a critical issue for pockets of marginalised First Nations populations;¹¹⁶ empirical studies reveal that 15-18% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in certain regional areas have historically gone unregistered at birth, compared to less than 2% of non-Indigenous children.¹¹⁷ This under-registration is driven by a complex combination of bureaucracy, geographical isolation, and historical trauma; specifically, a deep-seated distrust of state authorities rooted in historical policies of forced child removal.¹¹⁸

With roughly 12,600 births still going unregistered annually,¹¹⁹ targeted and culturally safe interventions are essential to break this compounding lifecycle of exclusion. The indigenous-led Pathfinders National Aboriginal Birth Certificate Program provides a powerful blueprint for overcoming barriers such as cost, complexity of process, lack of language literacy, and remoteness.¹²⁰ By utilising culturally safe mobile outreach clinics, fully covering certificate fees, and assisting families in navigating rigid proof-of-identity "catch-22" loops for individuals lacking baseline documentation, the programme embeds civil registration directly within trusted community frameworks and has unlocked legal identities for thousands, demonstrating how grassroots models can successfully dismantle systemic exclusion.

As these diverse case studies demonstrate, there is no single "silver bullet" for achieving universal birth registration. However, a clear and replicable Commonwealth blueprint emerges: success requires moving civil registration out of traditional, isolated silos. Whether overcoming the vast archipelagos of Vanuatu, the massive population scale of India, or the post-conflict realities of South Africa and Rwanda, the most effective member states have transformed registration from a passive administrative burden into a proactive, multi-sectoral public service.

By dismantling exclusionary legal frameworks, embedding registration directly into frontline health and social protection systems, and deploying context-appropriate technology - from basic USSD (Unstructured Supplementary Service Data) phones to advanced interoperable databases - governments can rapidly close the registration gap. Ultimately, these examples prove that a child's legal invisibility is not an inevitability of geography or poverty; it is a solvable policy challenge that yields to coordinated political will.

The Commonwealth Opportunity

The Commonwealth is well-placed to accelerate progress on birth registration. Its 56 member states share a voluntary commitment to common goals and benefit from comparable legal and administrative systems, most sharing a common law colonial heritage. This means that both the reforms required and the models that work are broadly transferable across national contexts.

Successful reform programmes do not need to be reinvented in each member state. The Commonwealth framework enables proven models, such as those demonstrated in Rwanda, Jamaica and South Africa, to be replicated, adapted and implemented across member states facing similar structural challenges. Unsuccessful initiatives equally provide shared learning, ensuring no experience is wasted and the Commonwealth's collective expertise continues to develop.

The Kigali Declaration reaffirms the Commonwealth's position at the leading edge of global commitment to ending child exploitation and abuse. Making that commitment real - translating the language of declarations into implemented or reformed law and funded infrastructure - requires birth registration to be treated not as a background administrative function but as the vital child protection instrument it is.

Pursuing universal registration within the Commonwealth would position it as the world's foremost source of knowledge and coordinated action in the fight to protect the most vulnerable children from the worst forms of exploitation. This is both a moral imperative and a historic opportunity.



CHARTING THE WAY FORWARD: POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Birth registration is a passport to lifelong protection. Every child deserves to be seen, counted and protected.

To meet the commitments of the Kigali Declaration and protect the tens of millions of children currently at risk, Commonwealth member states must urgently modernise their civil registration systems. The following reforms are drawn from the evidence base set out in this brief.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO COMMONWEALTH MEMBER STATES

LEGAL REFORM

- ➔ **Repeal gender-discriminatory laws and reform discriminatory nationality provisions:** Reform all legislation and policies that prevent mothers from independently registering their child's birth, including provisions restricting registration for children born out of wedlock or conditioning registration on the presence of a father; Ensure mothers have equal rights to confer nationality on their children; Repeal or reform restrictive 'joint request' laws that prevent unmarried fathers from independently registering their children, drawing on the judicial precedents in South Africa and Malawi.
- ➔ **Legally mandate and enable point-of-birth registration:** Enact legislation authorising civil registration at the point of hospital delivery and legally deputising midwives, health workers, and community-level officials to register births and issue certificates without parents needing to attend a separate registration office. Statutory delegation of this authority – not digital access alone – is the critical legal enabler of near-universal registration, as evidenced by Rwanda, Jamaica, South Africa and Vanuatu.
- ➔ **Elevate the birth certificate as the primary foundational identity document:** Legislate the birth certificate as the document required to access public services including education, healthcare, social protection, and national identification systems, creating a structural and lifecycle incentive for registration from birth.
- ➔ **Prohibit the denial of essential services on the grounds of non-registration:** Enact provisions explicitly stating that children shall not be denied access to health or education due to absence of a birth certificate, preventing non-registration from compounding into a lifecycle of exclusion.
- ➔ **Eliminate financial barriers:** Introduce universal no-cost birth registration, removing all direct fees for registration and issuance of certificates; Repeal late registration penalties that disproportionately penalise the families least able to access registration in the first instance.
- ➔ **Decouple registration from immigration enforcement:** Formally separate civil registration from immigration enforcement, ensuring that undocumented and refugee parents can safely complete birth registration without fear of reports to authorities.
- ➔ **Establish a rights-based legislative framework for digital civil registration:** Ensure civil registration digitalisation is underpinned by legislation that guarantees data privacy, established interoperability between health, education, and social protection systems, provides for offline-capable access in remote communities, and includes robust data protection safeguards.

INFRASTRUCTURE AND ACCESS

- **Leverage the point-of-birth window:** embed civil registration agents or legally deputised health workers directly within hospitals and birthing centres to capture registrations before discharge, eliminating the secondary journey that is the primary practical cause of late and non-registration.
- **Invest in decentralised and digitally integrated registration infrastructure:** expand registration points into rural and marginalised communities and deploy mobile technology and portable biometric registration kits integrated with digital civil registration databases. Ensure that statutory authority to register accompanies physical infrastructure; decentralisation of technology without legal delegation is insufficient.
- **Establish formal multi-sectoral integration:** create binding agreements between civil registry authorities and the Ministries of Health, Education, and Social Protection, ensuring births reported through vaccination programmes, school enrolment, and social grant applications are automatically linked to formal registration processes.

INCENTIVISATION

- **Implement proactive incentives:** where practicable, link birth registration to tangible benefits, such as the receipt of social support grants or school enrolment, to drive public demand. Consider targeted incentives for the registration of female children in contexts where gender registration gaps persist.

EDUCATION & AWARENESS

- **Launch sustained public education campaigns** emphasising the vital protective benefits of birth registration, with particular focus on women, rural communities, and lower-income households.
- **Establish designated national birth registration days** and integrate registration awareness into regular health promotion programmes, including vaccination and child health weeks.
- **Invest in training for frontline workers**, including community health workers, midwives, teachers, and social care professionals, ensuring accurate information about registration processes and parents' legal rights is available at community level.
- **Develop and disseminate accessible public communications materials** tailored to diverse Commonwealth contexts, including multilingual resources and community-based formats.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO COMMONWEALTH INSTITUTIONS

LEVERAGE COMMONWEALTH COORDINATION AND LEGAL REFORM ADVOCACY

- Strengthen Commonwealth-wide advocacy and awareness raising on birth registration and child exploitation through existing collaborative platforms, networks, and commitments, including the Kigali Declaration.
- Continue legal reform advocacy in partnership with the Commonwealth Lawyers Association and other members of the Commonwealth Children Interest Group (ComCIG) to challenge discriminatory registration laws and reform registration systems.

- ➔ Utilise initiatives like CommonProtect to coordinate advocacy and awareness raising about the links between lack of birth registration, child exploitation, and the obligations set out in the Kigali Declaration.
- ➔ Pursue targeted legal reform advocacy in partnership with the Commonwealth Lawyers Association and other members of the Commonwealth Children Interest Group (ComCIG) to challenge discriminatory registration laws - including gender-discriminatory provisions, unequal nationality laws, and colonial-era administrative frameworks - and to support member states in developing rights-compliant replacements.

ESTABLISH A COMMONWEALTH BIRTH REGISTRATION KNOWLEDGE EXCHANGE

- ➔ Systematically document, evaluate, and share legal templates, legislative reform models, judicial precedents, and lessons from the successful modernisation of inherited colonial civil registration systems across member states, ensuring that proven reform models can be adapted and replicated without being reinvented in each national context.

DEVELOP AND PROMOTE A MODEL COMMONWEALTH CIVIL REGISTRATION STANDARD

- ➔ Drawing on successfully implemented reform frameworks across Commonwealth countries, develop a model civil registration standard, adaptable to the Commonwealth's diverse legal traditions and cultural contexts, that addresses legal delegation of registration authority, digital infrastructure, data protection, multi-sectoral integration, and the elimination of financial and physical barriers to access.

INTEGRATE BIRTH REGISTRATION METRICS INTO COMMONWEALTH CHILD PROTECTION MONITORING FRAMEWORKS

- ➔ Establish clear targets and accountability mechanisms under the Kigali Declaration, incorporating disaggregated data on registration rates by gender, geography, and population group - including indigenous and refugee populations - to identify persistent gaps and measure the impact of reform programmes over time.

APPENDIX 1

PERCENTAGE OF CHILDREN REGISTERED IN COMMONWEALTH COUNTRIES

Source: UNICEF (2025). [*Percentage of children under age 5 whose births are registered and percentage of children under age 1 whose births are registered.*](#)

Commonwealth Country	Children under 1 registered	Children under 5 registered	Country	Children under 1 registered	Children under 5 registered
Antigua and Barbuda	-	-	Mauritius	-	-
Australia	-	100	Mozambique	25	31
Bahamas	-	-	Namibia	65	78
Bangladesh	27	42	Nauru	99	99
Barbados	94	99	New Zealand	-	100
Belize	90	96	Nigeria	31	40
Botswana	-	100	Pakistan	35	42
Brunei Darussalam	-	100	Papua New Guinea	13	13
Cameroon	56	62	Rwanda	78	86
Canada	-	100	Saint Kitts and Nevis	-	-
Cyprus	-	100	Saint Lucia	78	92
Dominica	-	-	Saint Vincent and the Grenadines	-	-
Eswatini	57	66	Samoa	41	67
Fiji	71	87	Seychelles	-	-
Gabon	94	96	Sierra Leone	93	90
Gambia	41	59	Singapore	-	100
Ghana	61	75	Solomon Islands	-	88
Grenada	-	-	South Africa	-	89
Guyana	97	98	Sri Lanka	96	99
India	87	89	Togo	79	83
Jamaica	97	99	Tonga	93	98
Kenya	74	76	Trinidad and Tobago	81	96
Kiribati	85	92	Tuvalu	81	87
Lesotho	73	80	Uganda	26	32
Malawi	72	67	United Kingdom	-	100
Malaysia	-	98	United Republic of Tanzania	57	68
Maldives	96	99	Vanuatu	67	77
Malta	-	100	Zambia	13	14
Total children under 1 registered in countries with available data (36 total)			67.28%		
Total children under 5 registered in countries with available data (48 total)			80.13%		



Written by Alfred Hansen, Helen Jones and Elizabeth Speller

July 2026

Suggested citation:

It's a Penalty (2026). 'Closing the Registration Gap – A Commonwealth Action Agenda on Birth Registration and Child Protection'. Available at: <https://itsapenalty.org/advocacy/birth-registration-and-child-protection-in-the-commonwealth/>

About CommonProtect and It's a Penalty

CommonProtect is an initiative launched by [It's a Penalty](https://itsapenalty.org/) that collaborates with multiple members of the Commonwealth Children Interest Group, including the Commonwealth Lawyers Association. The project works to ensure that the Commonwealth's commitments to child protection are translated from policy rhetoric into implementation at every level of society, from awareness campaigns for the general public to specialist training for government officials, private corporations, and legal practitioners.

It's a Penalty is a UK-based charity working internationally to end modern slavery, human trafficking, and child sexual exploitation, operating campaigns and advocacy across major sporting and cultural events globally. CommonProtect's work on birth registration reflects the conviction that addressing the common root causes of exploitation — including legal invisibility — is essential to achieving lasting, systemic change.

For further information, to support Commonwealth advocacy on birth registration, or to discuss partnership opportunities, please contact It's a Penalty at hello@itsapenalty.org.

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