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To cite this article: Leslie Butt & Jessica Ball (2017) Birth registration in Southeast Asia: a child's foundation right?, Asian Population Studies, 13:3, 223-225, DOI: [10.1080/17441730.2016.1239431](https://doi.org/10.1080/17441730.2016.1239431)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17441730.2016.1239431>



Published online: 20 Oct 2016.



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COMMENTARY



Birth registration in Southeast Asia: a child's foundation right?

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ARTICLE HISTORY Received 28 June 2016; Accepted 11 August 2016

Birth registration is understood as a child's 'foundation right' (UNICEF, 2015, p. 3). Ideally, birth registration provides a legal identity linked to country of origin and rights to state services including education, protection, health care and special programmes for vulnerable populations, aiming to leave no one behind. Universal birth registration by the year 2030 has been adopted as a target within United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal 16 (United Nations and the Rule of Law, 2015). Across Southeast Asia, however, birth registration is entangled with national ideologies and local moralities, and the idealised link between birth registration and entitlements cannot be assumed. Moreover, patterns of birth registration indicate inequitable access to the registration process itself. As shown in Table 1, there are uneven rates of birth registration within the region, ranging from a high of 99.4 per cent in Thailand to a low of 55.2 per cent in Timor-Leste. While UNICEF (2015) gives an average rate of 79 per cent across Southeast Asia, estimates vary depending upon reporting agency and methods. In addition, Malaysia, Singapore and Brunei Darussalam do not provide national statistics to global agencies.

Income disparities are one driver of widely varying registration rates across the region. Countries with high-income disparities such as Indonesia and Myanmar have lower registration rates than countries with lower-income disparities, such as Thailand and Viet Nam (UNICEF, 2015).

We suggest that regional birth registration follows two general trends. The first characterises countries with overall high registration and low-income disparities, but with enduring pockets of low registration. This includes Thailand, Viet Nam, and the Philippines. The second trend is found in countries with overall low registration and high-income disparity. This includes Indonesia, Myanmar, Lao PDR, and Cambodia.

Exemplifying the first trend, *Thailand* has used innovative methods to register over 99 per cent of in-country births. Registration is free for every newborn within 15 days of birth and is tightly tied to the health sector. An online registration system in hospitals is complemented by a rural midwife programme to verify out-of-hospital births. Nonetheless, pockets of unregistered children remain: only 79 per cent of children living in homes with non-Thai speakers have their births registered, and most unregistered children are born to families who migrated from Lao PDR, Myanmar and Cambodia (National Statistical Office, 2013). Lack of knowledge of the Thai language and lack of required documents are

Table 1. Reported Southeast Asian country birth registration rates, 2013.

Country	Birth registration rate (%)
Thailand	99.4
Viet Nam	96
Philippines	90
Lao PDR	74.8
Myanmar	72.4
Indonesia	66.6
Cambodia	62.1
Timor-Leste	55.2

Source: UNICEF (2015).

barriers (UNICEF, 2013). Despite Thailand's goal to make birth registration the gateway to education, health care and the national child protection system, inequitable access persists.

Indonesia exemplifies the second trend of lower overall registration and higher-income disparities. Registration varies widely from rural to urban settings, by income level, and by education, and is as low as 29 per cent of children in poor households (AIPJ, 2014). Indonesia has recently expanded civil registry offices, simplified documents, and eliminated over-the-counter fees for registering within 60 days after birth. These efforts favour sedentary, urban, and literate families. Registration remains cumbersome with many hidden costs for low-income, rural, and migrant families (Butt, Ball, & Beazley, 2016). Large pockets of unregistered Indonesians live at risk of being treated as *de facto* stateless where access to basic services cannot be assured. Within a decentralised system of government, national registration drives have had more impact in the central area of the country. In more remote regions, a highly imperfect registration system continues to present barriers for families.

As a 'fundamental right,' when birth registration is effectively interlinked with national governance and technical systems, it provides a vital resource for identifying population trends for national planning and identifying social problems such as skewed birth ratios (Pham, Rao, Adair, Hill, & Hall, 2010), under-age marriage, or forced child labour or conscription (UNICEF, 2015). Yet, to provide for a child's 'foundation right,' birth registration must be geographically, linguistically and socially accessible, free at any age, protected from hidden costs, and clearly beneficial. Concurrently, birth registration must be linked to fungible goods such as access to food supplements, health care or schooling in order to motivate parents to obtain birth registration and secure their child's recognised tie to their nation of origin. Until such goods are closely tied to registration, with no competing alternate means of accessing resources, the wider benefits of a reliable and efficient national birth registration may be difficult to realise.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Funding

This work was supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Council of Canada under Grant #430-2013-001079.

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