

AN ID4AFRICA ONE-ON-ONE INTERVIEW WITH

Cornelius Williams

Associate Director and Global Chief of Child Protection

Cornelius, it is a pleasure to have you joining our Advisory Board on behalf of UNICEF. We are confident your contribution will bring a significant new dynamic to how we place greater emphasis on the importance of legal identity at its source through birth registration and its integration into foundational identity schemes.



ID4AFRICA: HOW DO YOU FEEL ABOUT JOINING THE ID4AFRICA ADVISORY BOARD?

I am very excited about it, particularly with respect to collaborating with an organization that takes an inclusive approach to bringing key stakeholder groups within the identity ecosystem, together. Having spent 5 years in Eastern and Southern Africa where I was part of the regional CRVS core group that founded the Africa Program on Accelerated Improvement

of Civil Registration and Vital Statistics (APAI-CRVS), I have seen the difference it makes to have the right mix of stakeholders working together to achieve great success. I see where this approach is becoming increasingly central to the development agenda and I'm pleased to be on the Advisory Board of ID4Africa as it works in favor of such partnerships.

Bringing key stakeholders together effectively helps fuel the turbines of change for modern-day policies and development of robust and harmonized national identity programs and systems. This will undoubtedly go a long way in bringing favorable results for African governments seeking to advance their programs and services for their citizens in the right way.

A RECENT UNICEF REPORT ON SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA ESTIMATES THAT ABOUT HALF OF ALL CHILDREN UNDER 5 (OR 95 MILLION) ARE UNREGISTERED AND 120 MILLION CHILDREN UNDER AGE 5 DO NOT HAVE A BIRTH CERTIFICATE. THESE FIGURES ARE EXPECTED TO INCREASE BY AN ADDITIONAL 20 MILLION BY 2030 IF DECISIVE ACTION ISN'T TAKEN.

ID4AFRICA: WHAT KIND OF ACTION IS NEEDED TO REVERSE THIS TREND?

There are several factors that must be taken into consideration to address this issue. The first is the importance of national ownership. The process of registration has to be owned by the country and driven by leaders who are committed to achieving the changes needed to prevent a negative outcome. Over time, we have seen the significant difference it makes when governments pursue true national ownership.

The second is to have a coordinated approach. Most of the structures and systems that exist today follow one of two administrative systems in the world - the Anglophone and the Francophone system. In Africa, we find that some of these systems have rigid traditions that hinder development or progress on legislation. This results in the case where a number of social legislations remain stuck in time. There needs to be both a systematic and coordinated reform of such systems, not only

as it pertains to national laws, but also to the structures and mandates that go directly to the grassroots. There must also be adequate training in place to build the capacity of functionaries who work with these systems, and this is often done well through private sector partnerships.

The third is knowledge exchange. There are countries that have made incredible progress regardless of having limited resources or countless setbacks due to various levels of crises. While there are others that have adequate resources but have not progressed. This tells us that there is often no correlation between the income/wealth of the country and the adequacy of the registration system. Progress really depends on the priority governments place in ensuring the population is on board for achieving success, particularly by investing in training of functionaries and driving informative public awareness campaigns etc.,



ID4AFRICA: WHAT IS UNICEF'S ROLE IN SUPPORTING MEMBER STATES IN ACHIEVING SDG 16.9?

Our first and fundamental commitment is to honor our mandate that seeks to ensure every child receives their right to have a legal identity. There are several ways we fulfill our commitments. For one, we provide technical advice to and support to help governments modernize their systems, especially where digital technology can and should be applied. We guide them on the laws required and the action plan. We also help them to apply the APAI-CRVS plan. We do not run their systems but we are there to support.

UNICEF now also focuses on supporting the governments and their systems to become more robust and efficient. One key approach is to provide the necessary technical assistance at the country level to advise governments. We help them design a plan, find the best solutions to some of the logistic blockages and inefficiencies in their systems etc. We conduct study tours and hold regional conferences twice a year to bring the governments together, build accountability and re-advocate around the issues both at the global and national level. We also maintain a database of all population-based surveys, to show the progress and improvement being made by different governments.



ID4AFRICA: WHY DO YOU THINK PROGRESS TOWARDS UNIVERSAL BIRTH REGISTRATION AND ACHIEVING SDG 16.9 CONTINUES TO CHALLENGE SOME AFRICAN COUNTRIES?

There are several factors involved. Some countries face demographic challenges whereby fertility rates are high and continue to out-pace the services or the capacity for governments to cope with the rising figures. Another is the inability for some governments to expand on and increase the efficiency of their systems whether due to rigid legislative policies or lack of financial resource. There are also cases where misguided funding is poured into new and costly systems that do not offer long-term value. A classic case we often see is where investments are poured into sophisticated national identity

systems while there remains no commitment to invest in the civil register as a breeder for these very same systems.

Then there are the financial or social barriers faced during the process of acquiring legal documents. For instance, the costs faced by low- or non-income earners who must arrange transportation or overnight accommodation to handle registration processes at remote centers which may be understaffed and have inconsistent operating hours. There is also the case of gender barriers whereby the law insists that fathers be present for a child's registration, but in some cases fathers are just not present, especially if they are migrants.

There are also cases where systems are not interoperable, example the health and civil registration system, which prevents information from being exchanged in a streamline and efficient manner. In relation, the inability to change the legal framework to facilitate interoperability is a hindering factor. If the legal framework remains unchanged then new technologies brought in will not work.

Having an efficient civil registration system in place is an indication that a country is moving forward in peace. We are convinced that with the right investment, political will and systems that are supported by the right legislation, then achieving SGD 16.9 will happen in all of Africa.

ID4AFRICA: WHAT ARE SOME KEY MESSAGES FOR HEADS OF STATE ABOUT THE IMPORTANCE OF BIRTH REGISTRATION?

If you aspire to be a middle or high income country, you cannot get there without having a well-established national registration system for your citizens. This is a two-fold investment which simply results in a more efficient population. Knowing your citizens means knowing the right services to provide for cultivating platforms that yield greater productivity that will boost your nation's economy. To get there, every person born as a citizen in a country needs an identity to access the services that governments intend to provide whether it be social assistance, cash transfers, education, health etc. This creates a truly inclusive economic model and it starts with something as basic as a birth certificate. This is the fundamental requirement of any modern economy, one which will even bring your nation and its citizens into the Dotcom era. We have done the math and the cost for this long-term investment is cheap. It's a good investment, good for money, good in practice, good for the rights of your children. Good all around!

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ID4AFRICA: WHEN YOU ASSESS WHAT’S HAPPENING WITH BIRTH REGISTRATIONS IN AFRICA, WHAT GIVES YOU CAUSE FOR CONCERN, AND WHAT GIVES YOU HOPE?

There is a personal story behind every single identity document. At the macro level when I see governments utilizing scarce resources in a way that is not efficient, or spending billions of dollars to implement ID Systems that are not linked to the civil registry, or when they become locked into contracts that are not suitable or the most efficient while people are left unknown and stateless, it is truly heart rending. In Africa 36 out of 54 countries require that children have a birth certificate in order to complete their education. It breaks my heart to see children crying because they are suddenly told they cannot sit the state examinations because they don’t have this document. It hurts to see a mother denied access to health care for her child because she doesn’t have a legal identity. Many times these are mothers with HIV/AIDS and are usually the poorest, the ones from dysfunctional families who just don’t understand these things. It saddens me to think people just look at a registration document as a piece of paper but they do not know its value.



Yet there is hope. I see it in countries such as South Africa, a nation once torn by a social divide which resulted in a large population being excluded from the civil registry, later turn around to achieve near universal registration coverage of 90% within just 10 years of implementing the right policies and systems. Or like in Uganda where within 5 years of committing to the right policies and practices, civil registration has already grown to nearly double their initial coverage. We’ve seen it in Namibia

where the population close to the Angolan border are being registered under efficient systems to ensure that people living there are given a legal identity. This is happening despite the fact that they are somewhat excluded, living close to the poverty belt where people don’t go to school and where infant mortality rates are high. There is hope. With the right political will it can be done, and it gives me hope to see where things are changing.

“WITH THE RIGHT POLITICAL
WILL IT CAN BE DONE”

ID4AFRICA: WHAT DO YOU HOPE TO INFLUENCE WITHIN THE ID4AFRICA CONSTITUENCY AND AGENDA?



“I SEE MY ROLE AS ONE
THAT ENSURES CHILDREN
ARE CENTRAL TO THE
IDENTITY AGENDA”

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ID4AFRICA: WHAT ROLE DO YOU SEE ID4AFRICA PLAYING WITH REGARDS TO ACHIEVING SDG 16.9, PARTICULARLY AS IT RELATES TO CIVIL REGISTRATIONS IN AFRICA?



With ID4Africa continuing to bring together and engage the key identity stakeholders to address the future development of identity systems, achieving these goals in 2030 becomes a stronger reality. At the Annual Meetings it is good to ensure that functional identity does not overshadow the primacy of civil registration which is a fundamental message that has to be made clear. By continuing to invite credible speakers who can hone the importance of civil registration as the cornerstone for functional registration systems, while guiding them on how they can go about making investments the right way, then ID4Africa will play a phenomenal role in helping African nations achieve SDG 16.9.



I see my role as one that ensures that children are central to the identity agenda in Africa from their birth straight through their life cycle, their inclusiveness within the state and their rights to access government services till death. If these children are to become citizens they need an identity so that they don’t fall into the all too familiar cycle of exploitation and rebellion. I would

like to use my role to influence all policies and messages that keep children central and that civil registration is recognized as the central breeder mechanism to identity management, the bedrock. It is my hope that civil registration becomes a focal part of the ID4Africa meetings and I’m very happy that Dr. Atick reached out to us to see this hope become a reality.