

Nigel speech

Your Excellencies and distinguished guests,

My name is Nigel Chapman and I am the CEO of Plan. It gives me great pleasure to welcome you on behalf of Plan to **Count Every Child**, the first global conference on birth registration of its kind.

For those of you who don't know, Plan was founded over 70 years ago; it is one of the oldest and largest international development agencies in the world. We are operational in 66 countries - in 48 developing countries in Africa, Asia and the Americas and a further 18 fundraising offices in the developed world. Plan is child-centred, independent and we have no religious, political or government affiliations.

Now to the subject of today's conference.

It coincides with the launch of Plan's final birth registration campaign report which will highlight the successes that colleagues in dozens of countries have achieved during the campaign.

We know why registration is so important, both for individuals and for whole nations. For individual children, registration acts as a way of ensuring child rights and as a type of protection – establishing an identity and helping to stop vulnerable children becoming victims of exploitation and abuse such as trafficking, prostitution and being thrown into adult prisons.

Plan has been working on birth registration since 1998 and it became the focus of Plan's first global campaign, in 2005 when it was launched by Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu at the United Nations in New York. And let me be clear – even though the 'campaigning' aspect ends for Plan today, we are committed to carrying on and completing the very necessary programme work at local and national level.

And why did we turn this issue into a global campaign? Because Plan is committed to the Convention on the Rights of the Child which emphasises the importance of birth registration in two articles. Despite this, estimates put the number of un-registered children at 51 million each year.

Before I joined Plan, I must confess I had no idea birth registration was so patchy and under-resourced around the world. In the UK, once you are registered and that is usually within days of being born, birth registration just becomes a non-issue. Indeed you rarely use your birth certificate unless it is to apply for other more portable forms of ID, like a passport or driver's licence.

But in many countries it is still seen as the main identity document. It guarantees proof of existence. A birth certificate is confirmation of a child's nationality, place of birth, family and age. Registration bestows a responsibility for a child, throughout his or her life, on the State in which they are born. It helps guarantee a child's right to survival, development and protection. Without a birth certificate a child may not be able to take exams, receive immunisations or claim an inheritance. And proof of age is critical in successfully prosecuting crimes against children such as child trafficking and sexual offences and later in life, it entitles young people with the right to vote.

Birth registration can help reunite children with their families after natural disasters and armed conflicts; it helps to reduce the number of children being forced to live as child soldiers or under-age brides. Registering a birth is a critical first step in ensuring the rights of a child and we cannot stress this enough.

For States, having a proportion of their population unregistered means they cannot accurately count their population or predict trends such as rising birth or death rates. This may lead to the under-resourcing of local services or uneven distribution of aid. It can also let them off the hook of their responsibilities.

So these are the reasons why Plan believes registration is so important.

So why is a more complete level of child registration so hard to achieve ? Well, the centralisation of registration – where parents from rural communities have to travel many miles into a city - is a major barrier as families lose wages and incur extra costs to travel. Often, the procedures are complicated or are administered in a national official language, which puts off many groups of people who speak in a local dialect.

Through the campaign, we aimed to address some of these barriers. We aimed to:

- act as a catalyst for birth registration, ensuring more children and adults were registered
- promote birth registration at grassroots level to increase awareness and demand for certificates
- directly support governments to increase numbers of registrations and certificates issued
- create innovative programmes for registration that were effective and sustainable yet reached even the most remote populations
- explain the importance of registration as a child-rights issue to those in a position to help.

And the way colleagues tackled the issues was often ingenious. Some examples include

- in Kenya mobile phones were used to text birth notifications to authorities – our partnership with Nokia has made that possible
- In Malawi, the message was spread at football matches, reaching masses of people
- In Tanzania old and new practice came together as traditional village registers were optically scanned to give the latest population figures.
- In a single project in Paraguay, 492 birth attendants were trained to increase infrastructure
- in Dhaka, Bangladesh, more than 20,000 street children signed up for birth certificates for the first time
- in Mozambique, Plan's mobile registration units cut the distance travelled in order to register from up to 75km to just 1km in many instances

And of course you will see many more examples in the report in front of you. Some of these programmes were so impressive that they have been replicated

The times we live in are making birth registration more important than ever. The global recession is pushing more children into trafficking, the sex industry and into illegal and hazardous child labour. Economic migration means children can be more easily made stateless and no one takes responsibility for their welfare and development. All those threats are made more profound if you are a child in a society who is already out of sight, out of mind and then becomes totally invisible when it comes to any formal and accepted public record of your existence.

Some of the results from our campaign evaluation are truly remarkable – 40 million registrations across 32 countries. That's 40 million more people – mostly children – who now have a legal identity, and a nationality and the consequent access to rights such as education, voting and health services which they would previously have been denied.

Plan also helped to change the law on registration in ten countries – making it easier to do, cheaper to do or completely free. We estimate that the number of people who could have benefitted from this is 153 million.

In areas where Plan has worked on registration, the changes have been dramatic. One area in Indonesia saw registration rates go up from only 3 per cent to 72 per cent in two years. In Cambodia, seven million people collected birth certificates in just ten months through the combined efforts of the government, Plan and others.

This sort of work is Plan at its best, delivering very concrete, practical outcomes for children and securing their rights. As a new Chief Executive it has been impressive to see.

Registration is often vital to child survival in the very early years. It can be a matter of life and death. Plan in Peru learned of one child who was refused treatment as her parents could not prove she came from the right catchment area as she had no certificate. Only by Plan's interventions was the little girl treated and her life saved.

It shouldn't have to be like that.

And that is why we are holding this conference. Today, we invite you all to not only hear about Plan's work, but also to learn from others that are speaking here today. To replicate or adapt the ideas which have proved successful so that as practitioners in this field, we do not have to reinvent the wheel to achieve registration.

Our ambition for today is that this event not only promotes learning between each other, but also promotes action. Action by governments, donors, international agencies, non-governmental organisations, companies and individuals.

Birth registration is a relatively inexpensive exercise; I believe registration systems are an investment; an investment for children, and an investment in a nation's long term development and planning.

Let us all work together today to Count Every Child.

Thank you.