

A history of birth registration in Iganga District, Eastern Uganda

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What is important about the topic of birth registration in Uganda?

In Uganda more broadly, in 2022 40 percent of estimated 43,3 million inhabitants live without formal proof of identification documents such National ID's, driving permits, registered sim cards and birth certificates. According to AU Commissioner Victor Harrison, that circumstance renders the children unseen and uncounted for. It affects their ability to enjoy their universal human rights, including the right to good education and health care services.

Why did you choose Iganga District as a case study?

Iganga with its 505,000 inhabitants is a persistently troubled district in Uganda due to insecurity (terrorism), poverty, diseases, high maternal rates and particularly low birth registration and certification accounts. More than half of the children in Iganga are not registered at birth. Nothing would seem simpler than recording a name, sex, parentage, time and place of a child's birth, but the reality is very complex.

Why was Iganga district historically different than other districts like Buganda and how did that affect birth registration?

Unlike in Buganda where birth registration and certification succeeded, the situation in Iganga was very different. In 1894, when Uganda was declared a British protectorate, civil registration was highly emphasized especially in Buganda, where it was first practiced through churches during baptism before it was shifted to the parishes, sub-counties and districts. In Iganga, birth registration started in 1915 but many people had no interest in it due to poverty, distance to and from the registration centres, disease, and the non-compulsory character of registration. According to the 1921 population census report, only 0.6% of the population of Iganga District had registered their birth and only 0.2% held birth certificates.

Between 1917 and 1920's birth registration declined in Iganga due to the rapid spread of diseases such as sleeping sickness that made some citizens in the area to fear registering the births of their children. Throughout the 1920s, it was mandatory in Busoga (now Iganga District) for every family to register its members including children to receive a treatment for sleeping sickness. However, the treatment process worried many citizens because it was long and unsafe, included severe side effects like paralysis or death, due to the unhygienic conditions and the strong effects of the medicine itself and was administered by harsh racist White doctors whom many mistrusted, according to a 94-years old respondent. Thus, many opted for non-registration.

In early 1930s, birth registration in Iganga was still very low due to the British Protected Persons Act of 1934. Through this Act, the Imperial British East African Company under F.D. Lugard deemed Ugandans as natives of the Protectorate but disregarded them as British citizens. Since they could not be granted citizenship, even their birth records were not considered vital. This made many Ugandans all over the country very reluctant and unable to register themselves and their children.

Birth registration rates only started to increase in the area from 1937 due to the reduction in the number of sleeping sickness patients. However, from 1947 birth registration rates in Iganga rapidly declined again, this time due to the unsuccessful introduction of an identity card system for the citizens of Busoga Province. The District Commissioner presented the identity card as the equivalent of a birth certificate and a passport, which could be issued on a purely voluntary basis. Indeed, nobody was compelled to have one against their own will. Since it was voluntary, many refused to register.

Why has the birth registration rate in Iganga remained so low even today?

Lack of awareness by the parents, especially in rural areas, is one of the reasons why birth registration rates remain low. Many parents in rural areas do not place much emphasis on birth registration because they think that the daily life of their children is not affected greatly by not having a birth certificate.

The study also established that traditional culture, norms, and beliefs held back many people in Iganga to register their births at NIRA (National Identification & Registration Authority). Most of the people have different norms and beliefs though all are based on similar clan system and “*Kyabazingaship*”. Indeed 85% of the Basoga (one of Uganda’s kingdoms stretching over 11 districts including Iganga) believe in witchcraft and sorcery. It is believed that one can bewitch a neighbour’s child when they know their personal details like the name, age, sex and birthday. Because birth registration by NIRA involves recording this information, some citizens of Iganga are afraid to reveal their details to registrars as personal enemies can easily corrupt them, obtain personal details, and bewitch them.

Furthermore, geographical and systemic barriers hinder parents from registering their children. On one hand, long distances from birth registration facilities in Iganga entail, besides the direct costs of obtaining a birth certificate, the costs in terms of time and thereby the absence from work and family responsibilities. On the other hand, the birth registration and certification process is too bureaucratic and complex so that it excludes applicants. Several study participants who felt birth certificates to be valuable, were not able to apply because they did not fully understand the application process. A majority of the respondents stated that they receive contradictory information on the application process, including where to apply, what documents to prepare and how much the process can cost. Furthermore, to go through the whole process quickly, corruption is prevalent. While bribery benefits some individuals, it discourages low-income citizens with limited social connections from getting a birth certificate.

My study results also indicate a lack of political will to prioritize civil registration in Iganga, e.g. curtailing the budget given to civil registration in the last years. Many of the informants expressed the view that the district authorities do not play a sufficient role to promote birth registration and certification. One NIRA official stated that although such problems are often reported, little research has been carried out by either the government or non-governmental organizations to determine why they persist.

The problem, therefore, escalates every day and the consequences include lack of legislation (inadequate laws) and its weak enforcement, inadequate human resources and lack of coordination and cooperation between the different departments and agencies that have a stake in birth registration and certification in Iganga District. The evidence points to poor governance, blurring lines of responsibility, and a decentralization process without adequate physical and human resources.

What are the main motivations for people to obtain birth certificates for their children?

Schools are some of the main enablers. Parents who obtained birth certificates for their children reported that they were required by schools for enrolment, securing grants and scholarships. The study also established that some informants felt a sense of parental responsibility to apply for their children's birth certificate. They described how providing a child with a birth certificate was a measure of being a good parent.

Some parents considered the birth certificate as an important form of identity legitimization particularly for the next generation, and recognized a shift in what constitutes legal recognition. For instance, when I asked parents if they would register their children's births if the school did not require a birth certificate, a 40-year-old parent replied: "Yes, so that our children will be smart citizens in the future."

Thirdly, effective awareness campaigns on the value of birth registration by the government, especially in urban centres, motivated some parents to register the birth of their children. Parents in five of the eight focus groups stated that they got birth certificates because the government required birth certificates for policy making, planning and accountability. Information on the importance of birth registration also reached parents through announcements on the radio, village health teams (VHT's), community meetings or through campaigns of non-profit organizations like PLAN International and UNICEF situated at Iganga main hospital.

Based on your research, what needs to change to improve the situation in Iganga or Uganda broadly with respect to increasing birth registration rates?

Basically, raising public awareness of the importance of a birth certificate for human welfare and not for witchcraft. The elites, politicians and Basoga as a whole need to initiate a public discussion on the relevance of birth certification to detach witchcraft as a social belief from any connection with the process of birth registration. They should embrace birth registration as it is a basic right for everyone and thus a fundamental step

towards acquiring citizenship and nationality, as well as realizing other human rights, including protection against child labour and during violent conflicts.

Furthermore, the government should make birth registration and certification free of charge in Iganga District to avoid exclusion through poverty, and capacity building should be ensured. Training for officers at the local level must be supported by adequate guidance in the form of appropriate, easily understandable, and regularly updated reference materials, as well as proper monitoring and supervision.

I suggest the integration of birth registration with other services such as immunization and primary health care. This can be a cost-effective way of providing a service at the grassroots level without creating a parallel delivery system. In addition, the government should involve different levels of society to solve the problem of limited awareness especially in rural areas, reaching from local communities to national institutions, from NGOs to local church organizations.

Taking a closer look at the research process itself, what challenges did you face during your fieldwork?

Firstly, the vastness of the study area. To get results giving a comprehensive picture of the various responses to birth registrations and their reasons, it was very important to carry out the study in at least three localities with minimum birth registration rates. But this is still a big area with many villages. Bad communication network and poor road conditions, especially when it rained, made it necessary to stay in the study area for several weeks consecutively during the data collection process.

Secondly, I experienced a certain suspicion on my academic work because of the contemporary relevance of the topic. Most of the respondents thought that this research was political since it was carried out when the government was also registering children of five years and below in the area. My study was also conducted at the same time when the nationwide registration for new national ID cards was announced. I had a hard time explaining to the respondents that the study was purely academic. But luckily, I could convince them by providing clearance letters from the Research Ethics Committee (REC), the Uganda National Council for Science and Technology (UNCST) and Makerere University.

How did you benefit from the CERTIZENS research project?

I was granted the CERTIZENS scholarship during the second year of my Master program in November 2022. Before the situation was very difficult because I had no funding for my fieldwork, but receiving the financial support by CERTIZENS eased the research process profoundly. I deeply thank my CERTIZENS family from Uganda, Ghana and Denmark for the cooperation, guidance, and moral support. Without you all, this study wouldn't have reached the completion stage on time.

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