



THE HOUSEHOLD DOCUMENT INVENTORY METHOD: A Qualitative Approach to Assessing Under-Registration Among Marginalized Populations

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INTRODUCTION

THE REGISTRATION GAP

- 1 in 4 children under the age of 5 have not been registered at birth (UNICEF 2019)
- Marginalized populations (e.g. irregular migrants, stateless persons) are especially vulnerable to:
 - Remaining unregistered in civil registration & identity management systems
 - Being overlooked by conventional data collection methods (e.g. censuses, surveys)
- Given its importance for accessing other fundamental rights, universal access to legal identity has been named a target in the Sustainable Development Goals
- While substantial research has been devoted to estimating the size of unregistered populations, more research is required to understand **why** people get left out of CRVS systems.



AN QUALITATIVE APPROACH...

- Is suited to investigating why certain populations get left out of CRVS systems because they allow for the identification of the processes & mechanisms that lead to outcomes of interest (i.e. non-registration)
- Centers the perspectives & experiences of families themselves, which are often overlooked in top-down data collection methods—especially those who are “hidden” or “hard-to-reach”
- Allows for communities to be involved in the knowledge generation process about the very issues that impact them

DOCUMENT INVENTORIES

DEFINITION

- A **document inventory** is a qualitative data collection method whereby households take stock of the material evidence they possess to prove their legal identities

AIMS

- To count the number and types of documents held within a household
- To understand how families ascribe meaning and value to different kinds of documents
- To identify the challenges to obtaining documents that families want
- To identify the impacts of not having documents for people’s lives across different domains

SUGGESTED TOPICS

- Household composition & demographics
- Migration history
- Labour market history
- Pregnancy and childbirth
- Contact with institutions

GOOD PRACTICES

- Conduct interviews in a semi-structured format, rather than as a standardized questionnaire
- Partner with community leaders (e.g. teachers, religious leaders, village heads) to build trust & rapport
- Work with community leaders to formulate questions & pick topics that are appropriate to the local context
- Rather than asking directly about legal status, allow interviewees to choose whether or not they want to disclose this potentially sensitive information throughout the course of the interview
- When possible, combine interviews with participant observation of interactions between families and registering bodies
- When possible, conduct follow-up interviews over time (e.g. for households with pregnant mothers, aim to conduct interviews both before & after childbirth)
- Supplement document inventory data with interviews with relevant stakeholders e.g. government officials, healthcare providers, village heads, religious bodies, employers, etc.

FINDINGS

CASE STUDY: MALAYSIA

105 document inventories conducted in Malaysia during an 18-month ethnographic study of access to civil registration among marginalized populations—especially irregular migrants and stateless persons

1. Births (as well as marriages, deaths, and other vital events) are socially constructed events that comprise complex social negotiations between multiple social actors
2. Seemingly technical, administrative processes of civil registration can involve subjective judgments about racial & moral deservingness & belonging
3. Under-registration is not only due to a lack of state capacity, but can also be the product of the exertion of state power
4. Given the significant sociolegal implications of registering vital events, states may raise administrative burdens & evidentiary standards to deter unwanted minorities from being able to obtain legal recognition & associated rights

CONCLUSIONS

1. Registration is a **process**, not an event
2. Document inventories, which capture the perspectives & experiences of vulnerable populations, can help elucidate the processes & mechanisms that lead to under-registration
3. Interventions seeking to expand awareness of the importance of having a legal identity may ignore the reality that many unregistered families are acutely aware of the impacts of not having documents. Interventions targeting **structural barriers**, rather than individual awareness, may help close the registration gap
4. Structurally-focused interventions should not only aim to improve state capacity (e.g. investments in infrastructure, technical expertise), but should also confront the political, material, & symbolic interests that states may have in deterring unwanted minorities from having access to legal identities

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