

Using the media to showcase evidence to improve population registries

Elizabeth Nansubuga in conversation with Laura Ferguson

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One of the challenges relating to changing how population registries are managed is getting people to understand that there may be shortcomings in the existing system. Raising public awareness about such challenges can put pressure on the agencies responsible for improving the inclusivity of their systems and processes.

For Dr. Elizabeth Nansubuga, one of the three 2023/4 IUSSP Population, Ethics and Human Rights fellows, having the opportunity to share her research on national television in Uganda provided an unparalleled opportunity for this type of awareness raising.

A single media experience opened Nansubuga's eyes to the practical value of rigorous research when it can be brought to the attention of the general public and the government agencies responsible for ensuring that work takes place. The visibility has opened new doors for her in terms of research and her network of contacts; the exposure has also changed how she approaches her research, ensuring that she is always paying attention to real-world dissemination and application of findings.

Fellowship mentor Laura Ferguson sat down with Nansubuga to learn more about her experience. Their conversation is summarized below.

LF: Elizabeth, your work focuses on what you call 'fatherless children'. Can you tell me who these people are and why it's important to research their experiences?

EN: 'Fatherless children' are persons whose biological fathers maybe unknown or 'absent' for various reasons. Often, children born to unknown fathers, such as children born from anonymous sperm donation or some children of rape, or to women who may not have information related to their children's paternal side or cannot access copies of their fathers' national identity cards are denied, delayed, or hindered from national identity and birth registration processes. They become majorly excluded from identity registration due to the patriarchal nature of Ugandan society and laws.

LF: And why does this exclusion matter?

EN: It matters because it raises different ethical and human rights issues. It matters for them as individuals as there are certain entitlements and services they can't access – like a bank account, health services, a passport, even a Sim card – because they don't have a legal identity. As a demographer, it matters because it introduces unreliability into our population data. Any weakness in population data limits the government's ability to allocate resources appropriately.

LF: Do you have a sense of how many 'fatherless children' there are in Uganda?

EN: Unfortunately, we don't. The data simply don't exist. But we have a lot of stories from different parts of the country that tell us this is a problem. As an example, one group of fatherless children are children born of war, who are children fathered mostly by rebels or uniformed personnel, or born to abducted women in war zones in northern Uganda and nearby countries. We know that there are an estimated 6,000 such children in the Acholi sub-region in northern Uganda who are unregistered and have no form of legal identity. But, that's just one group; for *all* fatherless children, we truly don't know the scale. And for each individual person affected, the impact is huge. We can't talk about 'leaving no one behind' without trying to understand more about this group that we know exists and is being left behind. They're being excluded from health and other government services, even the daily things like bank accounts or phones are out of their reach.

LF: You were invited onto national television in Uganda to talk about this issue. Can you tell me a bit about that experience?

EN: The panel was about understanding the readiness of Uganda's new identity system to leave no one behind. I was on a panel alongside a member of Parliament, the head of the National Identification & Registration Authority (NIRA) and one of the fellowship's mentors, Elizabeth Atori, from the Initiative on Social and Economic Rights (ISER) in Uganda. I had the opportunity to explain and give real world examples of what's happening to fatherless children in the country. The head of NIRA was there, and she listened to what I said, she said she'd take it away and talk to the relevant committee within her organization. Many people were watching. Now we can hold her accountable for improving their systems.

LF: You've said to me in another context that this was a real highlight of the fellowship for you. Why is that?

EN: I'm a lecturer at Makerere University. When I started the fellowship, I was excited about the opportunity of spending time at Wits University in South Africa. Spending time with ISER seemed ok but I didn't really understand why time with a non-profit was part of an academic fellowship. But now I realise the importance of other dissemination beyond academic literature. I understand how research underpins ISER's advocacy, which is carried out through multiple different channels to maximize the potential for change. This experience has helped deconstruct the 'academic bubble' and highlight the need for broader communication of research findings to reach the general public and policy makers so that they can be used to inform change. This has opened my desire to engage more with media – everyone cares what's said on TV, it provides a platform for national impact. Lots of people have watched the panel because it resonates with our society. It has started conversations in a way an academic article simply doesn't. This experience has positioned me as an expert on civil registration in Uganda.

LF: That's amazing. And, Elizabeth, what has happened about all of this since the panel, which I believe aired in November 2023?

EN: There has been a lot going on! In May 2025, NIRA launched a nationwide mass enrollment registration and renewal exercise for National Identity Cards or 'IDs'. This exercise aims to ensure that all eligible Ugandans – both those who have never registered and those whose IDs were expiring or have expired, are captured in the National Identification Register which now supports enhanced biometric features. According to NIRA, the aim is to renew approximately 15.8 million IDs that have expired or are about to expire, and also to register about 17.8 million who have never had an ID including children.

LF: That's a huge number of people who they're hoping to reach, particularly the notion of registering almost 18 million people who have never been registered. What do people need when they want to register for the first time?

EN: For first-time registration, the key requirements include a letter from an area leader that is local council I chair and local council III chair, birth certificate (if available) and, for minors, a parent's or guardian's national ID. To date, it's estimated that NIRA has registered about 6.1 million new applicants and over 600,000 ID cards have been printed and issued.

LF: These new registrations are great, and yet they're still far below NIRA's targets for first-time registrants. Do you have a sense of why this is and what might be done about it?

EN: You're right - based on the targets, first time registration of eligible Ugandans remains low. This could be attributed to lack of documentation which creates structural exclusion for children and young adults, and longer processing and verification time compared to renewals. Young adults may also delay registering due to school or lack of information or they may not perceive any urgency for services as compared to older citizens.

But, as part of this enrolment initiative, for the first time ever, NIRA provided strong assurance regarding registration of children with unknown parents noting that any child below five years whose parents are unknown is presumed to be a Ugandan national under the law. However, even in such cases, one would need minimum supporting documentation, so we have to keep a keen eye on the situation. It will be important to further examine the barriers to registration of first-time applicants and fatherless children amidst this mass drive for ID registration countrywide. We have to follow up, working with people at ISER, NIRA and even other parts of government whose mandate relates to civil registration to see what is really happening, and to help identify which populations may still be struggling to register, why and, most importantly, what can be done about it.

LF: So, what's the take-away message from all of this? What should the government of Uganda do differently moving forward? And are there even lessons for other countries?

EN: Wow, we've learnt so much. First, it's important to say that it's not enough to have good laws and policies in place to promote inclusion in population registries; they also must be implemented. Our policies are good but sometimes there's cultural bias of patriarchy in how they are implemented, which disadvantages fatherless children. So, people working on population registration should be trained so they understand their obligations and how to fulfill them. Overall, the lesson is that it's important to think about who might be being left out of population registration efforts and to find ways to increase inclusivity. Hopefully

that's what NIRA will do now. And there are lessons for researchers and civil society as well – we have to help the government understand what's happening, who's being left behind, and raise the public awareness so there's pressure on the government to act. We can use the media for government accountability. We have to keep doing that here in Uganda. In other countries, those left behind might be the same, they might be different... they have to identify those groups and find the stories to raise awareness and make the government respond too.

LF: Thank you, Elizabeth, it's clear that there's still lots of important work ahead. I want to finish by noting that the IUSSP Fellowship in Population, Ethics and Human Rights set out to leverage partnerships across disciplines and sectors. This one experience that you have had is the perfect illustration of what can happen when this works well. Thank you so much for sharing your story with me.

This interview has been edited for clarity.

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