

Regional Expert Meeting
Our Children, Our Future: Belonging and Identity
League of Arab States, Cairo – Republic Arab of Egypt
17th-18th October, 2016
(Press Release)

The General Secretariat of the League of Arab States (Social Affairs Sector, Department of Women, Family and Childhood) in partnership with United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), is organizing a Regional Expert Meeting on the theme of “*Our Children, Our Future: Belonging and Identity*”, on 17th – 18th of October at the League of Arab States Headquarters in Cairo, Republic Arab of Egypt.

As the crisis in Syria enters its sixth year, conflicts in the region including in Iraq, Yemen, and Libya threaten to affect millions. The region hosts 4.8 million Syrian refugees, while 13.5 million persons in Syria itself remain in need of humanitarian assistance, including 6.5 million IDPs. The region also hosts over 230,000 Iraqi refugees, with 3.34 million additional persons displaced internally within Iraq since 2014.

Conflict and displacement on this scale are placing children at greater risk due to increased family separation and difficulties in registering new births and marriages. High levels of family separation have led to an increasing number of refugee families being led by women alone.

Over 300,000 Syrian children have been born in exile, but there can be significant challenges in registering their births. Unregistered children face risks at each stage of life, including higher risks of illegal adoption and trafficking as infants, denials of health and education in childhood, early marriage and child recruitment during adolescence and, possibly, a lifelong lack of proof of their legal identity and nationality.

In November 2014 UNHCR launched the #I Belong Campaign to help ensure all children enjoy their rights to legal identity, which includes the right to a name, to be registered at birth, to know and cared for by their parents and to acquire a nationality. The belonging is fundamental to the success of individuals and to reach their highest potentials and to be more secure in their families, their communities and their countries. Increased participation and belonging strengthens local and national economies, it strengthens academic achievement and improve social cohesion and stability. Traditions have taken place a long time ago in the Arab region on the recognition of the rights of all individuals, especially children, in the sense of belonging and enjoying family life and reunification, as well as getting a name, an identity, a certificate of birth and a nationality; but the recent global and regional crisis threatens to marginalize millions of people, including children. Given the unprecedented challenges facing the region, this regional meeting "our children, our future: belonging and identity" is taking place, in implementation of the recommendation of the thirteenth meeting of the committee to stop violence against children (Sharm El-Sheikh: January 2016).

The Regional Meeting aims at safeguarding the right of all children to legal identity, family unity and belonging in the Arab Region. By hosting this event – a first of its kind in the region – UNHCR and League of Arab States aim to promote a comprehensive regional strategy to design protection measures and develop concrete solutions. At the closing of the Expert Meeting, Member States are expected to adopt a declaration outlining their shared commitment to enhancing the protection of women, children and families in the region by strengthening civil registration systems and access to documentation, with particular attention to individuals at risk.

The Regional Expert Meeting will be held over two days 17-18 October 2016, where it is expected to lead to a number of practical recommendations to be submitted to the Ministerial Conference to be held in the coming period on this topic.

The Regional Expert meeting will be involving high level participation from Ministries of Childhood, Justice, Interior, Human Rights and other entities whose portfolios are related to the issue of legal identity, and a number of concerned International, Regional and Civil Society Organizations, National Human Rights Institutions, United Nations Agencies, international experts, and diplomatic representatives of Member States from across the region.