



# What is Statelessness?

It is estimated that at least **10 million** people are stateless worldwide: they are **not considered as nationals by any State under the operation of its law**. Statelessness is sometimes referred to as an invisible problem because stateless people often remain unseen and unheard. They often aren't allowed to go to school, see a doctor, get a job, open a bank account, buy a house or even get married. Denial of these rights impacts not only the individuals concerned but also society as a whole, in particular because excluding an entire sector of the population can lead to social tensions and significantly impair economic and social development.

## HOW DO PEOPLE BECOME STATELESS?

Statelessness can be caused by a number of factors such as: **discrimination in nationality laws (e.g. racial, religious or gender), conflict between and gaps in nationality laws and State succession**. Being undocumented is not the same as being stateless. However **lack of birth registration can put people at risk of statelessness** as a birth certificate provides proof of where a person was born and parentage – key information needed to establish a nationality. **Risks of statelessness can also arise in situations of displacement**. For example, in the context of the Syria crisis, the risk of statelessness is increased by a combination of gender discrimination in Syria's nationality law coupled with a lack of civil documentation amongst the displaced population.

## WHERE DO THEY LIVE?

Although statelessness may in many contexts be a hidden problem, **stateless people are found in all regions of the world**. The majority of stateless people were born in the countries in which they have lived their entire lives. Countries with notably large stateless populations include Myanmar, Kuwait, Cote d'Ivoire, Thailand, Iraq, and the Dominican Republic. Significant populations also live in the **countries around the world which do not allow mothers to confer their nationality to their children on an equal basis as fathers**. This can result in children being left stateless when fathers are unknown, missing or deceased. Statelessness due to the dissolution of former states also continues to affect many people, including hundreds of thousands of people in Europe alone.

## WHAT ARE THE CONSEQUENCES OF STATELESSNESS?

Without any nationality, stateless persons often don't have the basic rights that citizens enjoy. Statelessness affects socio-economic rights such as: education, employment, social welfare, housing, healthcare as well as civil and political rights including: freedom of movement, freedom from arbitrary detention and political participation. When thousands of people are stateless, the result is communities that are alienated and marginalised. In the worst cases, statelessness can lead to conflict and cause displacement.

## WHAT IS THE LEGAL FRAMEWORK TO ADDRESS STATELESSNESS?

States set the rules for acquisition, change and loss of nationality as part of their sovereign power. At the same time, the discretion of States with regard to nationality is limited by obligations under international treaties to which they are party, customary international law and general principles of law.

The **1954 Convention relating to the Status of Stateless Persons** is the cornerstone of the international protection regime for stateless persons. It provides the definition of a stateless person and establishes minimum standards of treatment for stateless people with respect to a number of rights. These include, but are not limited to, the right to education, employment and housing. The 1954 Convention also guarantees stateless people a right to identity, travel documents and administrative assistance.

Specific obligations relating to prevention and reduction of statelessness are established under the **1961 Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness**. The 1961 Convention requires that States establish safeguards in legislation to address statelessness occurring at birth or later in life. It also sets out important safeguards to prevent statelessness due to loss or renunciation of nationality or state succession. The 1961 Convention also sets out the very limited situations in which States can deprive a person of his or her nationality, even if this would leave the person stateless.

**Regional treaties** complement the international statelessness conventions and establish additional obligations for States Parties relating to the prevention of statelessness.

International instruments such as the **Universal Declaration of Human Rights**, the **International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights**, the **International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination**, the **Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women**, the **Convention on the Rights of the Child**, the **International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families**, and the **Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities** also contain provisions relating to the right to nationality and contribute to the protection of stateless persons and the prevention of statelessness.

## WHAT CAN BE DONE ABOUT STATELESSNESS?

UNHCR is mandated by the UN General Assembly to identify and protect stateless people and to prevent and reduce statelessness. UNHCR fulfills its mandate by working with governments, other UN agencies and civil society to address the problem. On 4 November 2014, UNHCR launched the **#IBelong Campaign to End Statelessness by 2024**. To achieve the goals of the #IBelong Campaign, the **Global Action Plan to End Statelessness: 2014 – 2024** establishes a guiding framework comprising 10 Actions to be undertaken by States, with the support of UNHCR and other stakeholders. The Global Action Plan is intended to resolve existing major situations of statelessness and prevent new cases from emerging.

### THE 10 ACTIONS TO END STATELESSNESS ARE:

- 1 Resolve existing major situations of statelessness.
- 2 Ensure that no child is born stateless.
- 3 Remove gender discrimination from nationality laws.
- 4 Prevent denial, loss or deprivation of nationality on discriminatory grounds.
- 5 Prevent statelessness in cases of State succession.
- 6 Grant protection status to stateless migrants and facilitate their naturalization.
- 7 Ensure birth registration for the prevention of statelessness.
- 8 Issue nationality documentation to those with entitlement to it.
- 9 Accede to the UN Statelessness Conventions.
- 10 Improve quantitative and qualitative data on stateless populations.