

Children's right to identity in Sierra Leone

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Creation of identity

Civil registration:

- Under National Civil Registration Act 2016, birth notification, birth registration, and obtaining a birth certificate are separate but connected steps. Specified health personnel notify the National Civil Registration Authority (NCRA); parents or another qualified informant supply the particulars for registration and sign the register within 3 months from birth; and a certified copy is obtained separately as documentary proof.¹ Registration is required within three months; after 12 months the Director-General's written consent is required.² Registration is free during the first three months.³ UNICEF has supported NCRA to establish a digital birth and death registration application, used at registration centres sited in the hospitals where babies are born; the record passes to the Central Registry System, an identification number is generated, and a certificate is ready for collection within 24 hours.⁴
- The 2019 Demographic and Health Survey found that 90% of children under five were registered with the civil authorities, but only 31% had a birth certificate. Both birth registration and birth-certificate possession were higher in urban areas and among wealthier households. Birth registration was highest in the Southern Province and lowest in the Eastern Province, and it was also lowest among children in the poorest wealth quintile.⁵ UNICEF reports that 91% of children under five in Sierra Leone had their births registered, including 90% of boys and 90% of girls. Registration among children under one was 93%.⁶
- The NCRA stated in its 2022 report that the regulations and administrative directives under the National Civil Registration Act, 2016 had been drafted.⁷ A complete review of the Act has now been undertaken, especially between 2025-2026, and it is expected to be tabled in Parliament at the end of 2026.
- UNICEF-supported services registered nearly 67,500 children among the approximately 280,000 children whose births were notified in 2025. This figure reflects a UNICEF-supported programme result and should not be interpreted as the national birth-registration rate. A found or abandoned newborn must be registered within three months of being found and the birth date may be medically estimated; an unmarried mother may provide the information; and registration extends to refugees, persons with humanitarian status, asylum seekers, stateless settled residents and specified citizen children born abroad where foreign records are unavailable.⁸ Of the 225,501 births in NCRA's 2022 analysis, 215,900 occurred in health facilities and 9,601 outside; NCRA operates 16 district registration offices.⁹

Nationality and statelessness:

- Sierra Leone acceded to the 1954 Convention relating to the Status of Stateless Persons and the 1961 Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness in 2016.¹⁰ UNHCR noted that the Citizenship (Amendment) Act 2017 removed the discrimination preventing women from conferring nationality on children born abroad; however, whether every foundling, and every child born in Sierra Leone who would otherwise be stateless, is guaranteed nationality could not be established.¹¹

- Children of cross-border families, particularly those born outside health facilities or living in remote border districts, continue to face barriers to birth registration and proof of nationality owing to limited documentation, distance from registration centres, lack of awareness, and gender-discriminatory requirements that may prevent mothers from registering children without the father, placing them at risk of statelessness and exclusion from essential services.¹²

Third-party reproduction and surrogacy:

- The Child Rights Act, 2025 recognises a child's right from birth to a name, nationality and identity and, as far as possible, to know their natural parents and extended family. No express provisions on assisted reproduction, gamete donation or surrogacy were identified in the Act. Its parentage provisions establish a Family Court procedure for confirmation of parentage, identify several forms of evidence of parentage, and permit the Court to order medical testing.¹³

Potential considerations:

- *What is the government undertaking to ensure that children in the districts with the lowest rates are actually registered?*
- *What is being done to ensure that a registered child actually obtains proof of identity?*
- *What is the progress made on the review and enactment of the National Civil Registration Act, 2016 and the development of secondary legislation?*
- *What measures are in place to ensure the preservation of identity, nationality and family relations of unaccompanied, separated, migrant and trafficked children, including through birth registration, case management, family tracing, reunification and the maintenance of records concerning family origins and identity?*
- *What is being undertaken to safeguard the genetic, gestational and biological identity of children conceived through third-party reproduction?*

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Modification of identity

Alternative care:

- Under the Child Rights Act, 2025, removal must be a last resort, temporary where possible, brief and regularly reviewed; poverty must not be the sole justification; identity and sibling relations must be safeguarded; and the Minister must devise protections for informal care. It provides for court approval of non-relative foster placements, permits relatives to foster without that application and requires Ministry monitoring.¹⁴
- These principles are reinforced by Sierra Leone's Alternative Care Policy 2025, which prioritizes family strengthening, prevention of unnecessary separation, and family-based care over institutional care. The Act requires court approval for foster placements with non-relatives, permits relatives to assume care without a formal application, and requires Ministry monitoring of foster care placements.

- Available data on residential alternative care show 2,249 children in 80 children's homes, compared with 1,596 in 2017.¹⁵ This is an important increase in the number of children placed in alternative care.
- Sierra Leone's Alternative Care Policy, 2025, prioritises preventing unnecessary family separation and reintegrating children with their biological families wherever this is safe and in the child's best interests. It calls for individual care plans, immediate family tracing, regular reviews, and transition support for children leaving residential care. Support measures include cash transfers, food and housing assistance, healthcare, parental counselling, and positive-parenting programmes. It proposes monitoring the percentage of children successfully reunified, the number transitioning to permanent family-based care, and the timeliness of care reviews and permanency planning.¹⁶

Adoption:

- The Child Rights Act, 2025 retains the Adoption Act 1989 as the basis for adoption applications.¹⁷
- NCRA registered 233 adoptions in 2022, compared with 195 in 2021; it is unclear how many of these are domestic or intercountry adoptions. Of the 233 adoptions registered in 2022, 10 involved infants under one year, 72 involved children aged 10–14, and 49 involved children in the combined 15–18 age band.¹⁸
- Sierra Leone is not a Contracting Party to the 1993 Hague Adoption Convention.¹⁹

Potential considerations:

- *What is being undertaken to ensure that identity and family ties of children without parental care who live in informal arrangements are recorded and preserved?*
- *Adoption is still governed by the Adoption Act 1989. What is being undertaken to bring it into line with the Child Rights Act 2025, including on a child's right to know their natural parents and extended family?*



Falsification of identity

Illicit adoptions:

- In May 2024, a Justice of the Court of Appeal published, on the national legal information platform, a warning that the Adoption Act, 1989 is outdated and is being abused; that there is a growing trade in the intercountry adoption of healthy children under five; that young birth parents are coached into placing children with orphanages that then match them with foreign applicants; and that non-accession to the 1993 Hague Convention is itself a driver of demand.²⁰

Child marriage and early unions:

- The Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, 2024 prohibits marriage involving a person below the age of 18, makes child marriages contracted after the Act's commencement void, and provides for the annulment of pre-existing child marriages, court-ordered compensation, protection, and recovery, rehabilitation, reintegration and case management for victims. Child Marriage Prohibition Officers must liaise with NCRA.²¹
- NCRA recorded 938 marriages arising from solemnisation in 2022, involving 1,876 people, and reported a crude marriage rate of 0.22 marriages per 1,000 population. It suggested that people are more likely not to register their marriages once solemnisation has occurred. Because the report's age-at-marriage statistics are based on registered marriages, unregistered unions are not captured in those statistics.²²

- Age verification remains an implementation challenge. Although the legal minimum age of marriage is 18 and registrars are required to verify the ages of both parties, verification is reportedly inconsistent, particularly in rural and customary settings.²³

Trafficking and child labour:

- A 2023 report on child trafficking and the worst forms of child labour in Sierra Leone, which involved field research in the east of Sierra Leone, concluded that much of the trafficking of children is from poor rural areas to urban areas, and identified children aged 12–17 years, children who have lost one or both parents and children who are not in school as those most vulnerable to trafficking.²⁴

Potential considerations:

- *Has there been progress in legislation to prevent illegal adoption and the sale of children, and is accession to the 1993 Hague Adoption Convention being considered?*
- *What is being undertaken to give effect to the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act 2024 and to establish the age and parentage of those concerned?*
- *How many marriages have been registered in each year since the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act 2024 came into force, and how many child marriages have been identified or annulled?*



Preservation of identity and access to origins

Civil registration records:

- The National Civil Registration Act, 2016 requires manual Personal Registration Files and corresponding electronic records, preserves the chronology of changes to civil-registration data, protects records against accidental destruction or loss and unauthorised access, alteration or disclosure, and retains each Personal Registration File for 150 years before transferring it to the national archive. Corrections retain the original entry, and paternity re-registration retains the existing birth entry.²⁵
- NCRA reported in 2024 using an integrated civil-registration and identity system, securitised documents, digital verification and centre inspections.²⁶
- In relation to age verification, this is also relevant to children in contact with the law, who may be alleged or suspected of a crime, for whom it is essential to be able to prove their identity.

Care, adoption and access to origins:

- The National Civil Registration Act, 2016 repealed section 18 of the Adoption Act 1989 and requires adoption orders to be entered in the Register of Adoptions. It permits correction of errors, amendment of entries following amendment of an adoption order, and cancellation where an adoption order is set aside. Searches and disclosure are restricted to authorised NCRA access or an order of the Authority or a competent court, with court disclosure subject to a best-interests test.²⁷
- For adoptions, the National Civil Registration Act, 2016 allows a probable birth date to be replaced when the actual date becomes known, and provides for restoration of the adopted person's pre-adoption name when the adoption is terminated by a court.²⁸
- The Child Rights Act, 2025 recognises, as far as possible, a child's right to know their natural parents and extended family, but the provisions reviewed do not establish a clear procedure for adopted persons to access origin information.²⁹

Potential considerations:

- *What is being undertaken to ensure that adopted children and adults can obtain information about their identity of origin?*
- *What is being done to preserve the records of children in residential and foster care, particularly where a facility closes?*



Correction, re-registration and replacement records:

- The National Civil Registration Act, 2016 permits correction of factual errors while retaining the original entry; re-registration to add the father's name, subject to the statutory conditions; evidence-based changes to a child's forename; and applications to search the registers and obtain certified copies.³⁰

Child marriage and early unions:

- The Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, 2024 provides that child marriages are void or subject to annulment, and allows compensation, injunctions, safe homes, counselling, recovery, rehabilitation, reintegration and case management for victims.³¹

Restoration of identity following the 1991-2002 conflict:

- The Truth and Reconciliation Commission recommended special assistance for children who had not found their families, were orphaned by the war, or were born to girls and women as a result of rape.³²
- The Sierra Leone Reparations Programme, established in 2008 and administered by the National Commission for Social Action, extended to child war victims.³³ In 2011 the High Commissioner for Human Rights reported that the TRC follow-up committee had never been established and that only 20,000 of 32,000 registered victims had received partial benefits.³⁴
- In 2014 the Human Rights Committee found that the Programme did not fully guarantee adequate reparation, including the full reintegration of child soldiers; that a significant number of victims had received nothing; that the War Victims' Trust Fund faced serious funding constraints; and that victims in remote and rural areas were often never registered and so do not qualify as beneficiaries.³⁵
- Many children placed in institutions during the conflict were victims of illegal adoption and child trafficking. The Government suspended adoptions from May 2009 to April 2012 over concerns about their legality and the welfare of adopted children, and established an interagency committee to draft new adoption laws and procedures; the suspension was lifted in April 2012 on the basis of the existing framework.³⁶
- As of December 2022 that committee's work was still continuing.³⁷ No new adoption legislation has been enacted and the Adoption Act 1989 remains in force. No tracing programme, reunification support or reparation for children adopted in that period was identified based on publicly available information.

Potential considerations:

- Children separated, orphaned or born of rape during the conflict are now adults. What is being undertaken to allow them to trace their families, establish their parentage and recover their identity?*
- Will the mandate of the new National Commission for Children include the search for, and restoration of, the identity of children whose origins were concealed or falsified?*

Sources:

¹ Republic of Sierra Leone. (2016). *National Civil Registration Act, 2016* (Act No. 14 of 2016; Gazette No. 37 of 4 August 2016), ss. 45, 52, 64 and the First and Second Schedules, <https://ncra.gov.sl/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/The-National-Civil-Registration-Act-2016.pdf>.

² Ibid, s. 46.

³ UNICEF Sierra Leone, Making birth registration more accessible for every child in Sierra Leone, 2023, <https://www.unicef.org/sierraleone/stories/making-birth-registration-more-accessible-every-child-sierra-leone>.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ministry of Planning and Economic Development and UNICEF, *Situation analysis of children and adolescents in Sierra Leone*, 2024, pp. 25 and 207, <https://www.unicef.org/sierraleone/media/2351/file/UNICEF%20Sierra%20Leone%20SitAn%20Main%20Report.pdf>; NCRA's Vital Statistics Report 2022 – the first edition in a series of annual Vital Statistics Reports – presents birth-registration completeness of 52.1%, based on 225,501 reported live births occurring in 2022 against 432,748 estimated live births. It recorded

238,569 live-birth registrations in 2022, comprising 225,501 current, 15 late, and 13,053 delayed registrations. District completeness ranged from 77.2% in Pujehun and 75.5% in Moyamba to 25.0% in Falaba and 30.3% in Kono. Death-registration completeness was 13.4% in 2022, down from 17.4% in 2020, with an intermediate rate of 16.3% in 2021. See: National Civil Registration Authority, *Vital statistics report 2022, 2023*, pp. 12-14, 20. Data year: 2022, <https://ncra.gov.sl/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/Sierra-Leone-VS-Report-2022-Final-2.pdf>.

⁶ United Nations Children's Fund, The State of the World's Children 2025: Statistical Compendium, Table 12: Child Protection, 2025, p. 79 (Sierra Leone). <https://data.unicef.org/resources/sowc-2025/>.

⁷ National Civil Registration Authority, Supra 5, pp. 6, 8, 13.

⁸ Supra 1, ss. 28, 34, 47, 48, 51.

⁹ National Civil Registration Authority, Supra 5, pp. 22, 8.

¹⁰ *Convention relating to the Status of Stateless Persons*, New York, 28 September 1954: Status table [checked 3 August 2026],

https://treaties.un.org/pages/ViewDetails.aspx?src=treaty&mtsg_no=v-3&chapter=5&Temp=mtsg2&clang=en; *Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness*, New York, 30 August 1961: Status table [checked 3 August 2026], https://treaties.un.org/pages/ViewDetails.aspx?src=TREATY&mtsg_no=v-4&chapter=5.

¹¹ United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Submission on Sierra Leone, Universal Periodic Review, pp. 1-3, <https://uprdoc.ohchr.org/uprweb/downloadfile.aspx?filename=8684&file=English Translation>.

¹² West Africa Youth and Children's Advocacy Network – Sierra Leone, *Advancing legal identity and nationality rights for stateless and at-risk children in Sierra Leone* [Online Marketplace project snapshot], n.d., pp. 2-3, Global Alliance to End Statelessness, <https://statelessnessalliance.org/en/online-marketplace/advancing-legal-identity-and-nationality-rights-for-stateless-and-at-risk-children-in-sierra-leone/>.

¹³ Republic of Sierra Leone, *The Child Rights Act*, 2025, Ministry-published text, especially ss. -4, 6, 7, 41 and 68-79, <https://mogca.gov.sl/wp-content/uploads/2026/02/The-Child-Right-Act-2025-1.pdf>.

¹⁴ Ibid, ss. 13, 62-64, 67, 96-102.

¹⁵ Ministry of Planning and Economic Development and UNICEF, Supra 5, p. 202.

¹⁶ Ministry of Gender and Children's Affairs, Republic of Sierra Leone. *Alternative Care Policy*, 2025 [Final draft], developed with the support of UNICEF Sierra Leone, 2025, pp. 10, 14, 21, 22. <https://mogca.gov.sl/wp-content/uploads/2026/03/Final-Draft-Alternative-Care-Policy-2025.pdf>.

¹⁷ Supra 18, s. 103.

¹⁸ National Civil Registration Authority. Supra 5, pp. 34, 38-39.

¹⁹ Hague Conference on Private International Law, *Convention of 29 May 1993 on Protection of Children and Co-operation in Respect of Intercountry Adoption*: Status table [checked 3 August 2026], <https://www.hch.net/en/instruments/conventions/status-table/?cid=69>.

²⁰ Alhadi, F. B., The law on adoption of children in Sierra Leone. Sierra Leone Legal Information Institute. 2024, <https://sierrallii.gov.sl/articles/2024-05-15/Bintu/the-law-on-adoption-of-children-in-sierra-leone>.

²¹ Republic of Sierra Leone. *Prohibition of Child Marriage Act*, 2024 (Act No. 5 of 2024; Gazette No. 54 of 11 July 2024; commencement 14 December 2024), ss. 1-2, 15-24 and 27-28, https://mogca.gov.sl/wp-content/uploads/2026/03/The-Prohibition-of-Child-Marriage-Act-2024-1_240822_100204.pdf.

²² National Civil Registration Authority. Supra 3, pp. 34-36.

²³ Sinnah, J. S., Sierra Leone: Birth registration and child marriage [Presentation]. Chief Director, Ministry of Gender and Children's Affairs, and Expert, African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child. ACERWC webinar. 2025, <https://www.child-identity.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/SIERRA-LEONE-Sierra-Leone-CM-and-BR-presentation-26-May-2025.pdf>.

²⁴ Ministry of Planning and Economic Development and UNICEF, Supra 5.

²⁵ Supra 1, ss. 33, 34, 37, 40.

²⁶ National Civil Registration Authority, Press statement by the Director General on the seventh Africa CRVS Day; and unannounced inspections of securitised births and deaths outstation registration centres in Freetown. 2024, <https://ncra.gov.sl/press-statement-by-the-director-general-national-civil-registration-authority-on-the-commemoration-of-7th-africa-civil-registration-and-vital-statistics-day-10th-august-2024-2/>.

²⁷ Supra 1, ss. 53-55.

²⁸ Supra 1, ss. f53, 31.

²⁹ Supra 18, s. 4.

³⁰ Supra 1, ss. 44, 49, 50, 63.

³¹ Supra 28, ss. 15-17, 20-21.

³² Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Sierra Leone, Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report for the Children of Sierra Leone (child-friendly version, with UNICEF), 2024, p. 32. <https://www.sierraleonetrn.org/downloads/childrensreport.pdf>; Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Sierra Leone. <https://www.sierraleonetrn.org/index.php/background-to-the-recommendations-matrix>.

³³ United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Assistance to Sierra Leone in the field of human rights, A/HRC/16/78, 2011. paras. 48-49, https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/700065/files/A_HRC_16_78-FN.pdf.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Human Rights Committee, Concluding observations on the initial report of Sierra Leone, CCPR/C/SLE/CO/1, 2014, para. 8.

³⁶ Ibid, p. 7.

³⁷ Ibid, p. 7.

