



Case Study

From Budget Cut to Budget Increase: Building Political Will for Civil Registration in Zambia



'Digital ID plans need to be built on strong ground'

BY FELIX NKINKE
In 115 months, Zambia will witness the birth of a Parliamentary Caucus on Civil Registration and Vital Statistics, signalling new momentum to officially register all births and deaths in the country. This comes at a crucial moment as Zambia embarks on modernising its national identity system through the new Integrated National Registration Information Services (INRIS) in full digital platform.

Zambia's digital identity documents (ID) reforms must be built on a foundation of universal birth registration and a strengthened civil registration system to ensure security, industry and effectiveness. There is only 22 percent of children under five who are registered nationally and 14 percent in rural areas) - one of the lowest registration rates in the whole world. Only 50 out of 116 districts in Zambia have the capacity to issue birth certificates. In short, the government needs to prioritise and invest in Zambia's civil registration system alongside the huge investments in digital ID systems.

Reverend Father James Bwalya, director of Caritas Kafuma Thonse said: "I appeal to the Government... to strengthen Civil Registration and Vital Statistics by providing necessary resources because a nation cannot plan effectively for education, health or development if its people are not counted." Here is why.

Reducing fraud
According to Maternal Health Action Zambia (MHAZ), civil registration provides a verifiable, official legal record of a person's existence from birth.

UNICEF asserts that "every person's identity begins with a birth certificate."

Birth registration should be the first step in securing legal identity and the basis for all other identity documents.

Currently, people without birth certificates can obtain national registration cards or digital IDs. This represents a profound human rights crisis and a major barrier to inclusive socio-economic development.

Without universal birth registration, digital ID reforms will perpetuate the exclusion of those who lack foundational documentation, undermining the goal of comprehensive coverage and leaving vulnerable populations behind.

Supporting Zambia's development
As segments of the population remain "statistically invisible", they are excluded from government planning. Vital statistics from civil registration - birth and death rates, causes of death, population growth, life expectancy, fertility rates and population distribution - enable the state to undertake effective development planning.

Research shows well-functioning civil registration systems enhance economic development by providing accurate and up-to-date population data for informed planning, resource allocation, and service delivery.

For example, Rwanda linked civil registration to its tax and service systems, which broadened the tax base and supported performance-based budgeting.

Mr Chanda says, at the moment, Zambia stands at a crucial juncture with a unique opportunity to establish a solid and secure foundation for the modernisation of its national ID system.

"At the core of this transformation must be civil registration, well as obtaining national registration cards or digital IDs. This represents a profound human rights crisis and a major barrier to inclusive socio-economic development.

Without universal birth registration, digital ID reforms will perpetuate the exclusion of those who lack foundational documentation, undermining the goal of comprehensive coverage and leaving vulnerable populations behind.

Supporting Zambia's development
As segments of the population remain "statistically invisible", they are excluded from government planning. Vital statistics from civil registration - birth and death rates, causes of death, population growth, life expectancy, fertility rates and population distribution - enable the state to undertake effective development planning.

Research shows well-functioning civil registration systems enhance economic development by providing accurate and up-to-date population data for informed planning, resource allocation, and service delivery.

For example, Rwanda linked civil registration to its tax and service systems, which broadened the tax base and supported performance-based budgeting.

Mr Chanda says, at the moment, Zambia stands at a crucial juncture with a unique opportunity to establish a solid and secure foundation for the modernisation of its national ID system.

"At the core of this transformation must be civil registration, prioritised as the cornerstone of legal identity for every citizen. Birth registration should be elevated beyond a peripheral administrative function and integrated into national development plans, digital transformation strategies, and public sector reform," he says.

But improving civil registration systems will not happen overnight. It requires sustained investment and political commitment to improve people's access to registry offices, increase mobile units for remote areas, integrate health systems with the civil registry system and digitalise the process.

The second National Strategic Action Plan (NSAP-CRVS 2021-2025) estimated a funding requirement of K136.38 million to strengthen civil registration services, particularly at the sub-national level.

However, the actual government allocation over the same period was only K24.74 million, resulting in a shortfall of K111.64 million.

To substitute for increased domestic resources for civil registration and vital statistics (CRVS), MHAZ, in partnership with the National Assembly, has identified the formation of a Parliamentary Caucus as a key mechanism for advocating increased domestic investment.

The caucus represents an important step toward securing political prioritisation and sustainable financing for civil registration, a foundational government service that is often overlooked despite its critical importance to both individuals and society at large.



*MATERNAL Health Action Zambia advocacy and communications officer Mulenga Muscuela at an on-site issuance of birth certificates during the Ne'wala traditional ceremony.



"This Parliamentary Caucus on CRVS is not just another group; it's a vital legislative force for national development, security and the protection of citizens' fundamental rights."

- Hon. Cliff Mpundu, MP, Member of the Parliamentary Caucus on CRVS

Op-eds in national newspapers were geared at reaching policymakers commuting to work, who subsequently became CRVS champions.

In Zambia, the national government increased funding for its civil registration services by 67%, following advocacy by the Global Health Advocacy Incubator (GHA) and our civil society organization (CSO) partner Maternal Health Action Zambia (MHAZ). Prior to civil society engagement the initial budget proposal had called for a funding cut.

"You cannot secure a population you cannot identify."

- Hon. Brig. General Sitwala (RTD), MP, Chairperson of the Parliamentary Committee on National Security and Foreign Affairs.



As a result of the advocacy campaign, 26 Members of Parliament established a Parliamentary Caucus on CRVS October 2025.

This means more births and deaths will be registered, more Zambians will be able to enjoy their civil rights and access social services and the country will have a more secure legal identity system.

The Challenge

A baby's arrival should mark the beginning of their legal identity with a birth certificate that will one day unlock opportunities for education, healthcare and citizenship. But in Zambia, just 22% of children under five have their births registered, and only 15% in rural areas – one of the lowest registration rates in the world. Without birth registration, these children are invisible to the government systems meant to protect and serve them and they are excluded from the national statistics used for planning purposes.

Death registration in Zambia, likewise, remains significantly low at 28%, even though registration is critical for the country's vital statistics, which relies on civil registration records to generate population and health data for the government's planning and resource allocation. Cause of death information is especially important for public health planning.

The government of Zambia has prioritized national ID cards, which to be optimally

effective requires a more robust system for birth and death registrations. People without a birth certificate could obtain ID cards using self-asserted affidavits or immunization cards as evidence. This made the system more vulnerable to fraud, duplication and mistakes. As Zambia prepares to digitize their ID card system, it is critical that Zambia's digital ID reforms be built on a foundation of universal birth registration and a strengthened civil registration system to ensure security, inclusivity and effectiveness.

GHA's Role

When Zambia's Ministry of Home Affairs released its draft 2026 budget in late 2025, civil society advocates from MHAZ, supported by GHA, spotted a troubling line item: funding for civil registration services, already low, was set to be even further reduced.

MHAZ and GHA responded rapidly with an evidence-driven budget advocacy strategy that was anchored in four pillars:

1. **Credible Evidence Generation:** GHA, MHAZ and the Department of National Registration, Passport and Citizenship (DNRPC) jointly conducted a gap analysis of the national civil registration and vital statistics (CRVS) system to identify operational and financing constraints. The



Hon Christopher Kang'ombe signs a call to action as a Member of the Parliamentary Caucus on CRVS.

analysis found that the budget allocation for civil registration fell short of the National Strategic Plan's requirements by 82% (Z\$111.6 million, about US\$5.8 million in 2025). This analysis provided a credible and government-owned evidence base for the advocacy campaign.

2. Strategic Solutions-Focused Framing:

Recognizing the need for a compelling policy narrative that would move the stakeholders to action, GHAI supported MHAZ to position CRVS as a solution to several national security issues Zambia was facing. This framing was chosen because national security issues due to lack of registration were in Zambian news and public discourse. For example, Zambians were facing travel restrictions to the United States due to "[poor civil registration processes](#)." Our narrative offered a solution to this problem: strong CRVS systems lead to more secure legal identity systems. This resonated strongly with senior policymakers and security sector stakeholders. Hon. Brig. General Morgan Sitwala (RTD), MP, Chairperson of the Parliamentary Committee on National Security and Foreign Affairs, explained: "You cannot secure a population you cannot identify."

3. Coalition Building:

GHAI and MHAZ organized a joint media and multi-

stakeholder convening in May 2025, bringing together line ministries, parliamentarians, CSOs and journalists. As a result of increased awareness and demand for deeper engagement on CRVS, parliamentarians in attendance agreed to establish a Parliamentary Caucus on CRVS to coordinate learning, budget advocacy and policy dialogue. In October 2025, the CRVS Caucus was formally launched with 26 members of parliament. GHAI provided technical support to formalize the caucus, including supporting the drafting of its Terms of Reference and clarifying its mandate.

4. Public Engagement:

Journalists were part of the caucus as stakeholders, which resulted in strong media advocacy partners and the production of articles and radio programs that linked CRVS to national security and development. Policymakers and journalists called MHAZ after reading the op-eds and listening to the radio shows and asked how they could move this forward. Traditional and religious leaders were engaged as trusted community messengers, and advocacy activities were integrated into a major traditional ceremony, generating public demand for birth certificates and legal identity through community mobilization and human-interest storytelling.

Results

Following this advocacy campaign, the Budget Committee of the National Assembly adopted the campaign's recommendations and reversed its initial decision to cut funding for civil registration services in the 2026 national budget. Instead, the committee increased the funding by 67%. Additionally, a Notice of Amendments was issued to the Ministry of Finance and the Ministry of Home Affairs and Internal Security, implementing the funding increase and influencing civil registration services priorities within the 2026 national budget.



Case Study



We must ensure every child is registered at birth and every death.

Traditional and religious leaders, such as Rev. Fr. James Bwalya, were engaged as trusted community messengers.

Lessons Learned

- **Building Credibility:** Advocates built their credibility with decision-makers in multiple ways, including by using technical evidence, coalition pressure, strategic messaging, engaging journalists as trusted partners and training partners in budget literacy.
- **Building Political Will:** The positioning of the CRVS program as vital for national planning and development, rather than merely a legal obligation, significantly boosted Members of Parliaments' political will.
- **Cultivating Political Champions:** The launch of the Parliamentary Caucus improved oversight and ensured that the CRVS program remained visible during budget discussions.
- **Early Engagement in the Budget Cycle:** Early outreach led to greater influence, making it easier for advocates to understand the budget cycle and identify key entry points, such as when the budget call circular was presented by the Ministry of Finance and during budget hearings.
- **Community-Level Advocacy:** Partnering with community leaders brought campaign messages to traditional and cultural events, elevated public awareness and enhanced public pressure on decision-makers.

Lessons Learned:



Build Credibility



Prioritize Political Will



Cultivate Political Champions



Engage Early in the Budget Cycle



Emphasize Community-level Advocacy

Global Health Advocacy Incubator

1400 I St. NW, Suite 1200,
Washington, DC 20005 USA

info@advocacyincubator.org
advocacyincubator.org
@IncubatorGHA1

The Global Health Advocacy Incubator uses the power of advocacy to tackle critical public health challenges across the globe - including food and nutrition policy, injury and overdose prevention, and building resilient and equitable health systems. We are an initiative of the **Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids**, which is the leading advocacy organization working to reduce tobacco use and its deadly consequences in the United States and around the world.

Our vision is a healthier and more equitable future for all.