

## Why a campaign to end statelessness matters

Dear friends and colleagues,

It is not easy to imagine what life would be like if you did not hold any nationality. In fact, it is not easy to even imagine this even being possible. Everyone has a birthplace, a family, a home, a community: surely everyone has a nationality? Sadly, no. Millions of people around the world are stateless. They are perpetual foreigners, disenfranchised, not recognised as or able to exercise the rights of citizens in any country. This is a serious problem – for those affected, but also for those of us who do enjoy a nationality and can make a difference, as people who care about and want our children to grow up in a free, fair, safe and democratic world.

We welcome, admire and support the ambitious campaign launched today by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to end statelessness by 2024. Statelessness fundamentally and unequivocally deserves more attention than it has received to date and the time has come for it to take its rightful place amongst other pressing and worrying issues that are already vying for international attention. We are not powerless in the face of statelessness. Citizenship is our own modern-day creation and we set the rules. Bad laws can be amended. Discriminatory policies can be repealed. We believe that with greater awareness of the issue, stronger collaboration and a firm commitment to act, statelessness can be solved. Indeed, we not only believe that statelessness can be tackled, we believe that it must. Statelessness matters, to all of us, for many reasons. Here are just some of them...

### If people matter...

Stateless persons are among the world's most vulnerable. They are seen and treated as foreigners by every country in the world, including the country in which they were born, the country of their ancestors, the country of their residence, the country they happen to find themselves in today and any country they may find themselves expelled to tomorrow. Stateless persons face an extreme form of exclusion that impacts their sense of dignity and identity, as well as their ability to do all sorts of everyday things that most of us take for granted, like go to school, get a job, be treated by a doctor, get married or travel. **So, if people matter, statelessness matters.**

### If children matter...

Many of the world's stateless persons are children. In fact, in every region of the world, children continue to be born into statelessness and grow up never knowing the protection and recognition that comes with a nationality. Some children inherit their statelessness from stateless parents, creating an intergenerational problem. Others aren't able to acquire their parents' or any other nationality due to discriminatory laws and policies or the failure of governments to implement simple legal safeguards that prevent childhood statelessness. Without a nationality, children can have difficulty exercising their rights, become outcasts in their own country, struggle to feel like they belong and grow up to be disenfranchised and excluded adults. **So, if children matter, statelessness matters.**

### If human rights matter...

The contemporary human rights framework is premised on notions of equality, liberty, dignity and universality: we *all* hold basic rights because we are human beings. But the human rights system also recognises that states may reserve some rights for their citizens, such as the right to vote or be elected, placing these out of reach for stateless people. And in practice, statelessness is a proven barrier to the exercise a wide range of other rights. So the very universality of human rights rests on the premise that everyone enjoys a nationality – laid down, for that reason, as a right in most major human rights instruments. Until statelessness is eradicated, the fundamental aspiration of universal human rights remains just that, an aspiration. **So, if human rights matter, statelessness matters.**

### If development matters...

Difficulties accessing education and employment; restricted property rights; lack of opportunities to own or register a business; limited access to a bank account or a loan; and, in some cases, the threat of extortion, detention or expulsion; these factors can trap stateless persons in poverty and make it extremely challenging for them to improve their circumstances. Where statelessness affects whole communities over several successive generations – as it often sadly does – such communities can be neglected by development actors and processes. Statelessness means a waste, of individual potential, of human capital and of development opportunities. **So, if development matters, statelessness matters.**

## If democracy matters...

Nationality is the gateway to political participation. Stateless persons have no right to vote, stand for election or effect change through regular political channels. Their statelessness suppresses their voices and renders their opinions obsolete. In countries with large stateless populations, whole sectors of the constituency are disenfranchised. Elsewhere, statelessness is a tool in the arsenal of those who would seek to manipulate the democratic process, with deprivation of nationality a means of silencing the opposition. To ensure a level and inclusive democratic playing field, stateless persons must also be heard. **So, if democracy matters, statelessness matters.**

## If addressing displacement matters...

Statelessness is a recognised root cause of forced displacement, with stateless persons fleeing their homes and often countries in order to find protection elsewhere. Preventing cases of statelessness is vital for the prevention of refugee flows – a link that has been a key motivation for UNHCR to further operationalise its statelessness mandate and now call to end statelessness. Addressing nationality disputes and tackling statelessness where it arises can also be a key tool in resolving existing refugee situations because it can pave the way for successful voluntary repatriation and reintegration. **So, if addressing displacement matters, statelessness matters.**

## If peace and security matter...

The vulnerability, exclusion, despair, frustration and sometimes persecution experienced by stateless persons can spark other problems. Casting a group as “others” or “outsiders” by denying them access to nationality – in spite of clear and lasting ties to the country – can contribute to attitudes of suspicion and discrimination. This can cause a dangerous build-up of tension within and between communities that may lead to conflict. Disputes surrounding nationality, membership, belonging and entitlement can also hamper peace-building efforts. **So, if peace and security matter, statelessness matters.**

## If size matters...

Many millions of people are affected by statelessness around the world today. UNHCR estimates that there are at least 10 million stateless persons under its mandate and if stateless refugees and stateless Palestinians under UN Relief and Works Agency mandate are added to this tally, the figure is higher still. This means that there are enough stateless persons to create a medium-sized country (although this is not suggested as a solution). Moreover, these numbers do not include the many more who feel the impact of statelessness, for instance because a close family member lacks any nationality. **So, if size matters, statelessness matters.**

## What can you do?

The launch of the campaign led by the UNHCR to end statelessness by 2024 is a great opportunity to reach out to all individuals, communities and organisations, who have it within their capacity to help address statelessness. Please take a moment to reflect on statelessness and its many impacts. Is it relevant to your field of work? Does it affect people in your country? Do people near you experience the vulnerability and exclusion of statelessness?

Sign up to UNHCR’s **#ibelong** campaign to end statelessness: <http://ibelong.unhcr.org/>. Start a conversation, discuss the issue, raise awareness and try to use your position and expertise to help. Share this note on ‘Why Statelessness Matters’ with people in your network; watch and share this [short video](#) too. If you would like to learn more about statelessness, if you want to do something but are not sure what, or if you are looking for partners to collaborate with, get in touch with us and we will try to help. If you think your organisation can better integrate statelessness into its work but would like to brainstorm ideas to make this happen, we will support you. If you want to further study the link between your field of expertise and statelessness, we welcome your plans. Together, we can end statelessness. We can also, in the interim, protect and include the stateless. This issue matters.

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The Institute on Statelessness and Inclusion is a newly established, independent non-profit organisation dedicated to leading an integrated, inter-disciplinary response to the injustice of statelessness and exclusion. In December 2014, the Institute will release its first publication, “The World’s Stateless”, assessing the challenge of ending statelessness by 2024 by taking a closer look at what we know (and what we don’t know) about who is stateless and where. To find out more or support the Institute’s work, please visit [www.InstituteSI.org](http://www.InstituteSI.org) or contact us at [info@InstituteSI.org](mailto:info@InstituteSI.org).