



MECHANISMS FOR ACCESSING LEGAL IDENTITY FOR MIGRANTS IN BELIZE

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Regional Office for Central America, North America and the Caribbean
San Jose, Costa Rica
Tel: +(506) 2212-5300
Email: rosanjose@iom.int
Website: www.iom.int

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Programme Coordinator: Andrea Dabizzi
Research coordinator: Estela Aragón
Author: Gabriel Vargas
Collaborators: Mónica Barrantes and IOM Country Office in Belize

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Everyone has the right to a legal identity recognized before the law (IOM, 2021b). Legal identity is defined as "the basic characteristics of a person's identity, such as name, sex, place and date of birth that are granted through the registration of birth and the subsequent issuance of a birth certificate by a civil registration authority" (United Nations, 2023). These characteristics are not static and change due to different events in a person's life, such as name changes, marriages, changes of nationality, among others. Proof of legal identity also includes identification cards issued by national authorities, passports, residence cards or identification cards for migrants. Such documents are essential for accessing multiple rights and state services, including health care, education, work, regular migration and travel, participation in elections, banking services and full integration into society. However, more than 10 per cent of the world's population lacks proof of legal identity accredited by a competent State authority (Clark et al., 2022). The number of people without proof of legal identity in Belize has been estimated at 4.3% for children under five years of age while there are no official estimates for the number of adults without identification documents (World Bank, 2023).

Access to legal identity is linked to safe, orderly and regular migration. Migrants without proof of legal identity are at risk of being rendered invisible by States, exploitation, statelessness or not being able to participate in regularization, family reunification or voluntary return processes (IOM, 2021b). Migrant rights related to legal identity are not only subject to owning identification documents from their country of origin, but also to having such documents recognized by the authorities and legislation of the destination country for use in regularization processes or access to other types of services.

This report provides an overview of access to legal identity in Belize. It examines three systems for managing the legal identity of individuals: 1) the national civil registration and identity management system; 2) the system for managing the identity of immigrants; and 3) the system for managing the identity of Belizeans residing abroad. Based on recommendations from IOM's Legal Identity Toolkit (IOM, 2023a), it discusses factors related to existing regulations, the institutions in charge of the administration of each system, the way regulations are implemented and the nature of the demand of legal identity services.

The analysis reveals significant progress in both the coverage of civil registration services and the implementation of extraordinary regularization programs targeting the foreign population in need of regular immigration status and access to legal identity documents from their country of origin. The main areas of improvement lie in institutional modernization, as well as in the capacity to communicate clear and accessible information to different demographic groups. This goes hand in hand with the need to strengthen inter-institutional collaboration to optimize services related to people's legal identity.



Five semi-structured interviews were conducted with representatives of public institutions in Belize and neighboring countries, as well as with international organizations. This was complemented with a desk review of national legislation, institutional and academic publications, public databases and newspaper articles. In addition, from 12 to 14 June, 2023, a seminar on consular protection took place with representatives of the Member States of the Regional Conference on Migration (RCM), including Belize. Preliminary findings of the study and best practices identified in all countries were discussed at the seminar. Additionally, a series of technical recommendations for actions to consider within the RCM Strategic Plan, and in line with IOM's Institutional Strategy on Legal Identity, were approved during the event. Both, these recommendations and the inputs from the semi-structured interviews, form the basis for the recommendations in this report.

CIVIL REGISTRATION AND NATIONAL IDENTITY MANAGEMENT SYSTEMS

The management of a person's identity begins with the registration of birth in the national civil registry system of the person's country of origin. Throughout a person's life, other vital events such as marriages, name changes, adoptions, among others, must be registered in the civil registry to ensure having updated and verifiable information for accessing public and private services without inconveniences related to legal identity. This facilitates the fulfilment of the person's human rights as well as the possibility of travelling or migrating internationally in a safe, regular and orderly manner (IOM, 2021b).

In Belize, the Vital Statistics Unit, which operates under the jurisdiction of the Attorney General's Ministry (AGM), is responsible for maintaining and managing records of vital events such as births, deaths, marriages and other vital statistics. Based on the Substantive Laws of Belize, the main regulations governing the registration of vital events are the Marriage Act, Chapter 174; the Registration of Births and Deaths Act, Chapter 157; and the Families and Children Act, Chapter 173 (AGM, 2022).

The head office of the VSU is located in Belize City, and there are a total of seven branches in various districts, located in the national hospitals and with two offices per location. The availability of civil registry offices in hospitals facilitates the registration of newborns since parents can proceed with the registration immediately after receiving the birth certificate from the hospital. Registration of birth is free of charge; however, late registrations (more than 12 months after birth) do carry a fee of USD 8.5. Hospitals may also charge an additional USD 4 for the forms needed to carry out the process of registration at their facilities (CDF, 2022).

Additionally, the VSU has a [website](#) with public information on the location and services offered. The website of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Foreign Trade and Immigration also offers the possibility of downloading the forms needed to request birth, death, marriage or divorce certificates.

The documentation required for registering a child includes valid identification for both parents (only one parent's identification may suffice for married couples) and a birth certificate from the hospital or a notification to the competent authorities from a midwife for births that did not take place inside a healthcare facility (CDF, 2022). The Ministry of Health maintains a database of registered midwives certified to notify births. While most communities in the country have at least one formally registered midwife, there may still be cases of births attended by an unregistered midwife. In such instances, additional documentation may be necessary, such as a statutory declaration from the midwife, a family member, a neighbor, or a representative from a school or church. Statutory declarations are also required in cases where registration does not occur within one year after birth. In such situations, a late registration procedure is initiated, which may include additional documentation such as baptism records, school records, or medical records. This circumstance is more common when registering adults who were not registered in infancy (ibid.).

The scope of civil registration services has allowed 95.7 per cent of the Belizean population to have their birth registered (World Bank, 2023). While the majority of the population has had access to this service, the goal is to reduce the remaining gaps. Table 1 presents a summary of the main reasons identified in the literature to explain why sectors of the population have not been able to register their births or have access to legal identity documents.

Figure 1: Reasons associated with under-registration of births and lack of legal identity



Source: Clark et. al, 2022; and interviews with key informants.

Unlike most Central American countries, Belizean citizens do not have a personal identification number or a single national identity document. Therefore, other identification documents are used to access services, such as social security cards, electoral cards or passports. Partly because of this, there are no official estimates of the number of adults or persons over 15 years of age who do not have an official identification document (World Bank, 2023).

Interinstitutional and regional collaboration

The various regional headquarters of the VSU are connected in such a way that any information processed is sent to a central system. With respect to the access that other state institutions have to the data, only the Social Security Board has the authorization to access the system and verify the information of registered individuals.

At the regional level, Belize is not currently an active member of the Latin American Council of Civil Registries, Identification and Vital Statistics (CLARCIEV for its acronym in Spanish), a multilateral initiative that brings together several civil registry institutions from Latin American countries for the exchange of experiences to strengthen the registration and identification of persons (CLARCIEV, 2023). Nevertheless, representatives of the VSU have participated in different regional meetings organized by CLARCIEV, where they have shared their perspectives and benefited from dialogue with representatives of other countries, providing information on the situation of civil registry services during the COVID-19 pandemic and keeping their status as one of the countries receiving support (RENIEC, 2013; OAS, 2021; CLARCIEV, 2022).



BEST PRACTICE

- ✓ To ensure the protection of personal data, VSU staff must sign a confidentiality agreement and are not allowed to access the system outside of working hours. This is done under the instructions of the Supreme Court to limit who can access the information of users.

MANAGEMENT OF LEGAL IDENTITY IN RELATION TO REGULARIZATION PROCESSES AND ACCESS TO CIVIL REGISTRATION FOR MIGRANTS

Belize is one of the few countries in Latin America and the Caribbean with a positive net migration rate, meaning that the number of immigrants is greater than the number of emigrants. By 2020, more than 62 000 foreign nationals resided in the country, which corresponds to more than 15 per cent of its population (UN DESA, 2020). The majority of these persons are labor migrants from other Central American countries with a female representation of almost 50 per cent (IOM, 2021a). In addition, Belize has been characterized by the presence of irregular migrants for whom access to legal identity is of paramount importance (MFAFT, 2023a).

Access to legal identity through regularization processes

The management of legal identity in relation to the processes of regularization and access to the civil registry is mediated by the existence of regulatory frameworks that define which documents from the country of origin are necessary for a migrant to prove legal identity; the distribution and coordination of responsibilities between migration authorities, civil registry and identity management, as well as the provision of regularization and civil registration services for migrants and the ways in which they access them (IOM, 2023).

The main entity in charge of managing migration issues in Belize is the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Foreign Trade and Immigration (MFAFT). Some of the most important legislation concerning migration processes are the Migration Act, Chapter 156; the Nationality Act, Chapter 151; and the Aliens Act, Chapter 159 (IOM, 2021a).

Regularization mechanisms stipulated in laws and policies allow migrants to acquire identification documents that prove their legal identity and to access basic services. In Belize, there are different immigration categories for different profiles of migrants; these include temporary residence, permanent residence and various temporary permits. For the purposes of this report, the categories of permanent residence, temporary employment permit and dependent permits are stressed as these are the ones frequently sought by persons with irregular immigration status or with greater obstacles to accessing legal identity (IOM, 2021a).

Table 1. Immigration categories available, main identity documents required, and identity documents issued to foreign nationals in Belize

Immigration category	Beneficiary population	Identity documents issued	Required identification documents ¹
Permanent residence	Persons who have been continuously legally residing in Belize for a minimum of one year at the time of submitting their application	Permanent residence card	Passport
	Minors (under the age of 16) who have resided in Belize for a minimum of 10 years (regardless of their immigration status)		
Temporary employment permit	Persons who need to reside in Belize for work purposes	Temporary employment permit	Passport
Dependent permit	Immediate family members of a resident of Belize with one of the following characteristics:	Dependent permit	Birth Certificate / Marriage Certificate
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • is of retired age (55 years of older) • has a disability • is under five years of age • married women-spouse of a Belizean or permanent residence holder, or women in a recognized common law relationship who does not wish to work 		Passport Proof of Belizean identity of the Belizean resident Birth certificate of children to support the established common law relationship

Source: Own elaboration based on information available in the MFAFT web page (2023a).

To apply for residency, nationality and different types of permits, individuals can visit one of the eight authorized immigration offices located in different parts of the country (MFAFT, 2023b). In addition, on the MFAFT website, individuals can perform procedures such as requesting appointments for nationality, residency and passports, checking the status of residency applications, and downloading forms.

Amnesty Programme 2022

The 2022 Amnesty Programme is the most significant migration regularization initiative in Belize in the 21st century. This programme comes in response to several needs identified by the Government of Belize, including migration management, national security, economic development and humanitarian assistance. According to estimates by the Ministry of Immigration, the number of irregular migrants in Belize in 2021 was between 40 000 and 60 000, many of whom face situations of vulnerability such as labor exploitation or human trafficking (MFAFT, 2023a). In addition, irregular migrants often have children in Belize, who acquire Belizean

¹ There are other requirements for these categories and their respective subcategories; here are included only those directly related to the legal identity of individuals.

nationality by birth but are not always enrolled in the education system because their parents fear exposure to the authorities (ibid.).

To participate in this programme, beneficiaries must submit their passport or birth certificate accompanied by an identity document from their country of origin. In addition, several categories of beneficiaries have been established, each with specific requirements in terms of identity documentation. Table 2 provides a summary of the legal identification requirements for each of these categories:

Table. 2 Specific identification requirements of the Belize Amnesty Programme

Beneficiary population	Required identification documents
Asylum seekers with registration of application prior to March 31, 2020	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Official letter from the Department of Refugees signed and sealed by the Director of Refugees indicating the file registration number and personal particulars of applicant (and family)
Persons residing in Belize before December 31, 2016	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Complete copy of passport used to enter Belize that shows date of arrival • Complete copy of any travel document used to enter Belize
Parent of a Belizean child born before December 31, 2021	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Child original Belize birth certificate issued by the Vital Statistical Unit which must include the name of the parent • Proof of residing in Belize (i.e. travel documents, temporary travel permits, legal tenders, etc. obtained while in Belize)
Persons who completed primary, secondary and or tertiary education in Belize	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Proof of continuous residence in Belize (i.e. travel documents, temporary travel permits, legal tenders, etc. obtained while in Belize) • School certificate
Persons who are married to a citizen of Belize for at least one year	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Married Certificate issued by the Vital Statistics Unit • Spouse Belize photo identification (Belize Social Security Card, Belize Voters Registration Card, Belize Passport) • Spouse proof of Belizean nationality • Death certificate if spouse is deceased
Person who is in common-law union with a citizen of Belize for at least five years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Statutory declaration along with a photo identification and proof of relations from either parent or sibling of the Belizean spouse attesting knowledge of union. • Birth certificate of the Belizean spouse issued by the VSU and photo ID, or certificate of Belizean nationality of the Belizean spouse together with an official Belizean document (passport, social security card or voter's card)
Referrals by the Department of Human Services (minors/ adolescence and victims of human trafficking)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Official letter of referral, sealed and signed by the Chief Executive Officer or the Director of Human Services
Person who has maintained gainful employment in Belize for five years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Temporary employment permits

Source: Own elaboration based on information available on the MFAFT web page (2023a).

The goal of the 2022 Amnesty Programme was to regularize at least 40 000 persons with irregular immigration status. However, by the deadline of the application period in March 2023, only 13 540 applications had been received. Among the reasons for the lower than expected number, the IOM cites the lack of some of the legal identity documents listed in the table above, for example, the birth certificate of a child with Belizean nationality or the identity card of the migrant's country of origin. The existence of stateless persons who did not have any type of documentation, fear of the migration authorities, finances, lack of knowledge of the programme, as well as persons who decided to return to their country of origin were cited as obstacles (Love FM, 2023a). This happened despite efforts of information campaigns, including information and downloadable forms on the official MFAFT websites, and the implementation of legal identity fairs and Mobile Migrant Hubs, where the IOM National Office in Belize collaborated with the country's authorities and diplomatic representations of several of the countries of origin to provide information and assist migrants in obtaining the required documents (IOM, 2022 and 2023). One notable example was the participation of Guatemalan authorities, which accompanied almost all the migrant hubs, provided hundreds of birth certificates to Guatemalan nationals and facilitated the processing of Guatemalan ID cards along de Belize-Guatemala border.

Access to civil registration services for children born in Belize to foreign parents

According to the country's Political Constitution, all persons born in Belize are considered citizens of the country by birth (Government of Belize, 2021). In order for a foreign parent to register a child, they need to present the same documentation needed for Belizean nationals; that is, parents' identification and proof that the birth took place in Belize.

Key stakeholders consulted for this study emphasize that birth registration services are a right for all children regardless of the immigration status of their parents. However, it has been pointed that some migrants with irregular immigration status do not register the births of their children born in Belize out of fear that their immigration status might be exposed to the immigration authorities. It is also important to note that births attended by midwives must be notified to the authorities within three days for cases where the mother is a foreign national without regular immigration status.



BEST PRACTICE

- ✓ During September 2022, IOM country offices in Belize, El Salvador and Honduras organized a legal identity fair with the support of civil registry, migration and foreign affairs institutions of said countries, so that migrants residing in Belize could obtain documents proving their legal identity and thus be able to apply for the Amnesty Programme. On that occasion, about 800 persons benefited from the process (IOM, 2022).

LEGAL IDENTITY FOR BELIZEAN MIGRANTS



The population of Belizeans residing abroad is estimated at over 52 000 (UN DESA, 2020), which represents over 13 per cent of the country's total population. Close to 89 per cent of Belizean migrants reside in English speaking countries, mainly in the United States of America, but also in Canada and the United Kingdom. Additionally, there are over 2 000 Belizeans in Mexico and close to 3 000 in other countries of Central America.

The first and most essential element to travel through regular means is having a passport. In Belize, passport application and issuance are handled by the Department of Nationality and Passport (DNP) of the MFAFT. Belizeans need to present documents such as birth certificate, identity documents with a photograph and, when necessary, any other evidence that the person holds Belizean citizenship. Passport fees are USD 100 for a 10-year validity of the document for adults, and USD 75 for a five-year validity of the document for children (MFAFT, 2023b).

To address the needs of Belizeans abroad, including legal identity needs, the country has 13 diplomatic missions with consular functions. These include embassies in El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Mexico. Additionally, there are 60 honorary Belizean consulates around the world. The consular services at these missions include assisting and guiding nationals to obtain travel documents and any other needed documentation. Moreover, consular or diplomatic missions are also in charge of receiving applications of citizenship by descent, the process by which persons born abroad to at least one Belizean parent can obtain Belizean nationality. This process requires both the birth certificate of the person who is applying for citizenship as well as any identification documents that prove that one of the parents is of Belizean nationality (MFAFT, 2023b).

In addition to the conventional migration options outlined earlier, Belizean citizens have the opportunity to enter Mexico using either a Border Worker Visitor Card or a Regional Visitor Card. The Border Worker Visitor Card serves as a work permit for Belizean employees in various southern Mexican states. It grants them the flexibility to cross the border regularly and acquire a Mexican Unique Population Registry Code (CURP). To apply for this card, individuals must submit their passport and a photo ID to the Mexican authorities. Conversely, the Regional Visitor Card permits Belizeans to enter several southern states of Mexico for stays of up to seven days. The necessary documentation for this includes a passport or another valid travel document, a Belizean photo ID or permanent residence card, and a birth certificate for minors. Finally, there is Belize Digital Border Crossing Card, available to citizens from Mexico and Belize.²

² The law also provides for the card to be issued to Guatemalan nationals, but this has not commenced as of yet.



BEST PRACTICE

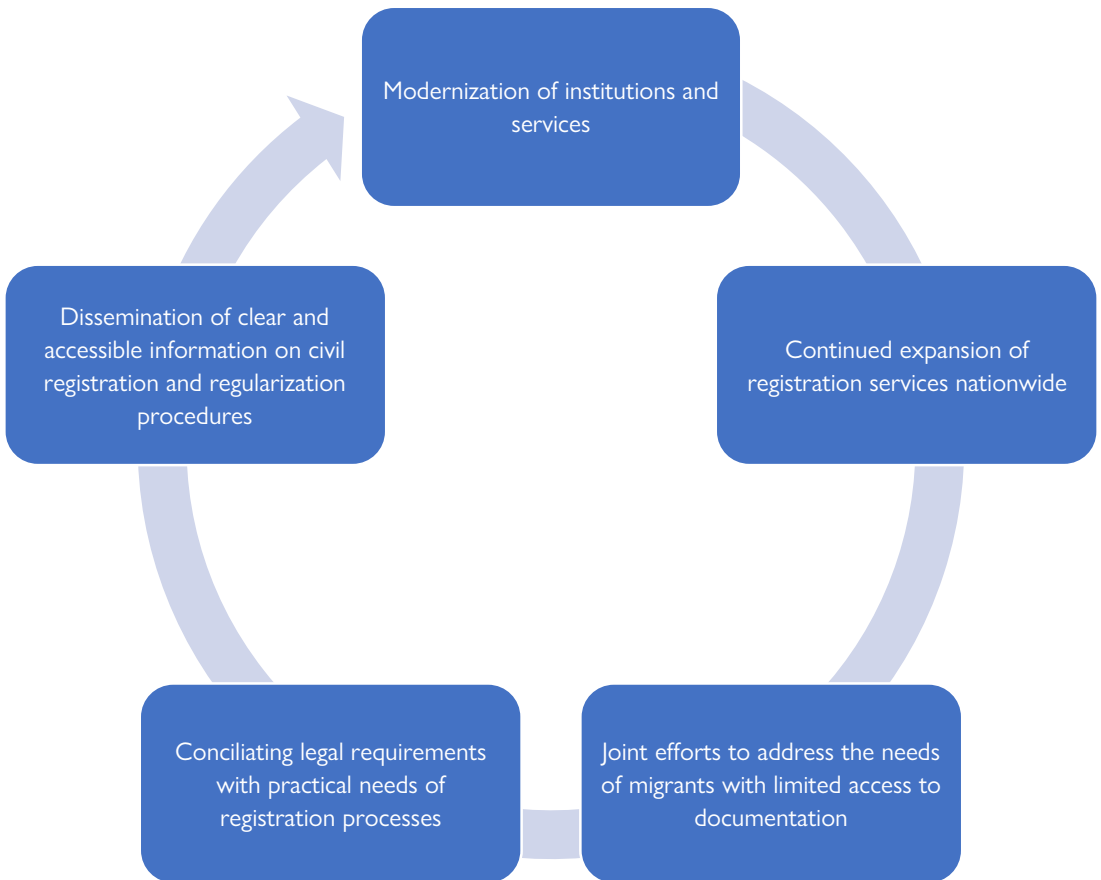
- ✓ Belizean and Mexican residents benefit from a bilateral agreement between Belize and Mexico, which facilitates the issuance of a Digital Border Crossing Card (BCC) for citizens crossing their shared borders. To apply for a BCC, Belizeans must submit a passport, a birth certificate and photo identification, or alternatively a Belize nationality certificate along with photo identification. A nominal fee of USD 20 per year is applicable for these cards (MFAFT, 2023b). Particularly advantageous for individuals working in or visiting the Corozal Free Zone, the BCC is also accessible to non-Belizeans holding Temporary Employment Permits and for permanent residents (Government of Belize, 2017).

NEEDS TO ENSURE ACCESS TO LEGAL IDENTITY FOR MIGRANTS IN BELIZE



Legal and institutional mechanisms are in place in Belize to enable nationals and immigrants to access legal identity in the country while working to provide services to Belizeans abroad. However, this research identified a series of cross-cutting needs in relation to the implementation and access to legal identity services. These needs have been divided into five categories and are discussed below:

Figure 2. Main needs identified to ensure access to legal Identity in Belize



Source: Own elaboration.



Modernization of institutions and services

Stakeholders consulted for this study agree that, in order to improve legal identity access for both Belizean citizens and foreign nationals, further modernization steps are necessary.

At present, the Vital Statistics Unit (VSU) is in the initial stages of transitioning from manual record-keeping to a digitized system, a crucial response to recent internal needs assessments. This shift aims to address challenges associated with outdated data on citizens and migrants without proper birth registration, fostering improvements in efficiency, accessibility, and inclusivity. Given the priority attributed to this initiative, signed contracts with software developers are already in place, with ongoing efforts expected to result in the completion of an online platform by the end of 2024 (Love FM, 2023b).

The need of modernization and digitization has also been identified for Belize's diplomatic missions with consular services abroad, as most of the services are conducted manually. Belizean embassies and consulates in Central America do not currently have institutional websites, requiring all procedures to be completed in person. Key informants point out that some of these consulates are undergoing preliminary stages for setting up websites.

As the country aims to transition to a more modernized system, it is important to consider and plan for the potential effects of the digital divide on persons who lack access to optimum connection or electronic devices, or who do not have enough experience using online and digitized services.



BEST PRACTICE

- ✓ An Organization Management Strategy has been developed, involving various stakeholders and supported by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in Belize, contributing to the pursuit of more efficient VSU services (EGDD, 2023).



Continued expansion of civil registry services nationwide

Alongside institutional modernization efforts, Belizean authorities are also working on the continued expansion of their services, especially in remote areas or in areas inhabited by historically marginalized communities, such as indigenous communities. These actions are important since legal identity access tends to be more limited in populations and communities that experience other barriers such as discrimination and economic exclusion (Clark et. al, 2022).

In addition to hospital registration, other steps have been taken to expand the outreach of the VSU services. For example, bilingual clerks fluent in English and Spanish are available at several locations, including Corozal, Orange Walk and Belmopan. However, such services are not yet available in Punta Gorda or Stan Creek. Challenges are also identified in areas with a combination of Q'eqchi Mayas and Creole speaking individuals who may not be fluent in English

or Spanish. As part of the internal needs assessment at the VSU, there are plans to implement Spanish lessons for clerks and to look for staff who is fluent in indigenous languages as well.

Likewise, mobile hubs are considered essential for expanding access to legal identity in remote areas. As of the writing of this report, ideas are being explored for the possibility of carrying out monthly birth registration campaigns when health authorities travel to deliver vaccines in rural remote communities.



BEST PRACTICE

- ✓ VSU Mobile Clinics are a project that has taken the Unit's services to remote areas, including indigenous communities. These services were halted during the COVID-19 pandemic but have been recently retaken. In May 2023, a team from the Unit provided services to more than 230 residents in the District of Toledo, including registration of births, birth papers and marriage certificates (Love FM, 2023c).



Joint efforts to address the needs of migrants with limited access to documentation

According to informants, migrants encounter significant challenges in registering vital events and undergoing regularization processes due to the lack of updated or scanned documents. A household survey conducted by IOM National Office in Belize showed that, in the villages of the Toledo District, migrants needed both documentation from Belizean institutions and from their countries of origin. For example, a Permanent Resident Cards and Social Security Cards were the two most needed documents from Belizean authorities. On the other hand, from their countries of origin, migrants needed primarily birth certificates, passport and national ID cards.

In cases where documentation is missing for the registration of vital events, individuals are directed to their respective consulates. While it is typically the responsibility of the Ministry of Immigration, Foreign Trade, and Foreign Affairs to contact accredited missions in Belize, key informants noted during interviews that increased involvement of the Vital Statistics Unit (VSU) could provide valuable support to the legal identity needs of migrants. However, due to the VSU's current priorities and resource limitations, such involvement has not been feasible thus far.

It has also been identified that consular representations may not always have the capacity to address all the needs of their citizens. Belize hosts consular representations of major countries of origin for migrants, such as Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras. However, resource allocation in countries of origin tends to prioritize destinations with a larger number of migrants like the United States of America or Mexico. This prioritization leaves fewer resources for smaller countries like Belize. For instance, Belize ranks as the third most important destination for Guatemalan migrants globally. Despite Guatemala's notable efforts in modernizing consulate services, such as introducing an online appointment system in the United States, this progress has not extended to other countries, including Belize.

Effectively addressing the challenges posed by limited consular services in these locations requires bringing together stakeholders, including migration authorities, civil registration authorities, consulates of countries of origin, international organizations, and civil society groups. This collaborative approach is essential for developing joint programmes that cater to the needs of migrants in areas where consular services are currently constrained



BEST PRACTICE

- ✓ IOM Country Office in Belize has been implementing Mobile Migrant Hubs. These are activities held in remote communities where migrants in vulnerable circumstances receive information about regularization opportunities, immigration procedures and consular processes needed for their application to the Amnesty Programme. In 2023, the Hubs included the participation of staff from Belize's immigration authorities as well as embassy service stations where representatives from the Embassy of El Salvador, the Embassy of Honduras and the Consulate of Guatemala supported migrants with obtaining legal identity documents from their respective countries (IOM, 2023).



Conciliating legal requirements with practical needs of birth registration

Although every child born in Belize is granted nationality regardless of the immigration status of their parents, there are practical obstacles for prompt registration, especially when a birth takes place outside a hospital.

Many childbirths are attended by midwives who are required to notify the Ministry of Health for the formal registration process. Midwives must promptly communicate information regarding new births to the relevant authorities within a three-day period. In the past, this timeframe was of three months; however, new guidelines were instituted to counteract instances where foreign mothers would cross the border into neighboring countries, give birth, and subsequently return to Belize to falsely assert that the child was born within its borders. The modification in timeframe aims to mitigate fraudulent registrations, wherein a child could potentially hold dual nationalities. This practice is subject to legal consequences, but according to key informants, parents who engage in it do so to take advantage of the associated benefits of holding citizenship in two countries, such as social security, healthcare benefits, and reduced university education fees in Belize.

Consequently, if a birth is not reported within three days, parents with irregular immigration status, whose child was indeed born in Belize, may encounter difficulties in registering their child with the Ministry of Health. This challenge arises from the inability to certify the birth took place in Belize after the specified timeframe, highlighting a dichotomy between upholding legal standards to prevent fraud and the practical constraints faced by parents with legitimate intentions. The tension underscores the need to find balance between regulatory measures and accommodating the genuine challenges of adhering to the specified reporting timeframe.



BEST PRACTICE

- ✓ The Amnesty Programme serves as an illustration of the flexibility in legal requirements, specifically tailored to address the regularization needs of migrants who have been residing in the country with irregular immigration status. This initiative aims to assist them in formalizing their situation and gaining access to a variety of essential services and rights.



Dissemination of clear and accessible information on civil registration and regularization procedures

A cross-cutting need in Central America, including Belize, is the dissemination of information to beneficiary populations in a clear and accessible manner. The 2022 Amnesty Programme faced challenges related to public awareness; and with regard to civil registration, key informants highlighted a common misconception that parents with irregular status may face prosecution if they approach the services of the VSU. Despite the existence of provisions in Belizean laws for penalizing irregular immigration to Belize (IOM, 2021a), the VSU does not engage in immigration control activities. Even when a parent with an overstayed visa is detected, there are no penalties or reports to other authorities. Key informants stressed the importance of educating migrants about the legal pathways for registering children. The authorities have identified fraudulent registrations, underscoring the need to inform parents about nationalization procedures for obtaining lawful citizenship. Stakeholders responsible for disseminating this information include both Belizean authorities and authorities in the countries of origin of immigrants.

This research has also observed that Belizean authorities do not make as much use of social media as other countries in the region have in recent years. A more active use of social media, including platforms used by citizens and migrants in their daily interactions, has proven successful in spreading relevant information. However, social media presence should be accompanied by strategies addressing digital divides and combating the spread of fraudulent information on these platforms. Authorities should ensure that people access correct information from official and reliable sources.



BEST PRACTICE

- ✓ Civil society organization Child Development Foundation (CDF) and IOM Country Office in Belize operate several Migrant Information Hubs. Among the services offered by the Hubs are the provision of up-to-date information on migration procedures, assistance in filling out immigration forms, coordination with embassies for legal identity documentation needed in different migration procedures, and assistance with payments for services such as passports, birth certificates and translation of documents (CDF, 2021).



The recommendations outlined in this section stem from best practices discerned during the research, specifically from the insights shared during the interview process. Additionally, they are informed by the propositions set forth by government representatives who participated in the Consular Protection Seminar within the framework of the Regional Conference on Migration.



INTER-INSTITUTIONAL RECOMMENDATIONS

- Advance in the modernization of digital services so that they can be centralized in single platforms with the possibility of digitally validating documents, making online payments and interconnecting with other institutions.
- Create coordination mechanisms between health-care, civil registry, migration and consulate institutions for the registration of vital events of migrants and their families (births, deaths, etc.). Coordination mechanisms should also include law enforcement authorities and specialized diaspora entities that have competence in the registration and issuance of identity documents.
- Generate more alliances with civil society organizations for the creation of communication and operational strategies so that people know and understand the functioning of the different processes related to the registration of vital events and migration regularization processes, and to mitigate fear or distrust towards the authorities.
- Use alternative communication channels to disseminate information such as social networks that people use in their daily lives; for example, WhatsApp, Instagram or TikTok; including live chats managed by people in real time.
- Aim to reduce the digital divide through direct assistance, creation of informative tutorials and outreach to populations with the greatest information access challenges.
- Aim to create user-friendly online platforms that utilize simplified language regarding registration and migration processes available nationals and non-nationals migrants.



RECOMMENDATIONS FOR STRENGTHENING THE CIVIL REGISTRATION SYSTEMS

- Strengthen the culture of registration in national populations, through awareness-raising campaigns, about the benefits of having registries of vital events and how these are requirements to access many other services.
- Continue efforts to implement mobile civil VSU Mobile Clinics for areas that are difficult to access.
- Consider strengthening the national identification system by assigning a unique personal identification number and national identity card to every Belizean citizen.
- Invest in the involvement of midwives in birth registration processes through training and joint work ensuring that they understand the significance of timely reporting and the potential consequences of delayed registration for parents and children.
- Accommodate requirements for the registration of births, particularly of populations in with limited access to documentation from their country of origin or populations with practical constraints to register births within preestablished time frames.
- Extend bilingual or multilingual services and culturally sensitive procedures to areas inhabited by individuals who are not fluent in English and Spanish or who come from different cultural backgrounds.



RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMMIGRATION AUTHORITIES

- Strengthen and diversify information campaigns to reach a broader audience. Utilize various channels, such as social media, community meetings, and local radio, to disseminate information about the Amnesty Programme or similar procedures in the future, its benefits, and the required documents.
- Sustain collaborations with international organizations, diplomatic representations, and local authorities. Strengthen partnerships to provide ongoing support in facilitating documentation and disseminating information, ensuring a coordinated approach to addressing obstacles.
- Develop communication strategies so that migrants know the link between the registration of vital events in the civil registry and the procedures to access regularization of immigration status.



RECOMMENDATIONS FOR STRENGTHENING THE CAPACITY FOR THE ISSUANCE OF DOCUMENTS ABROAD AND THE FUNCTIONS OF THE CONSULAR REPRESENTATIONS

- Strengthen human resources at consulates through the professionalization of consular personnel as a prerequisite for undertaking duties, the assignment of more personnel in accordance with needs and demands, the continuous implementation of training, and the use of internships or professional practices to complement the availability of human resources.
- Strengthen the linkage and participation of diasporas in each country through strategic alliances with diaspora organizations, mapping of legal identity needs, awareness-raising campaigns on the importance of consular registration, design of communication strategies on consular services, and mapping of economic resources to support the supply of services for people in vulnerable situations.
- Strive to establish official websites for Belizean embassies and consulates, offering a centralized and easily accessible online hub for consular services.



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