

Ending statelessness in Europe is high priority for realizing human rights



Berlin conference on statelessness participants in "Bread for the World",

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A regional conference held 5-6 September in Berlin allowed participants to look at statelessness in the European context through the lenses of human rights and development.

The conference, with the theme "Statelessness in the European Context: Prevention, Reduction and Protection," approached statelessness as an issue that is often invisible even though it occurs in so many countries around the world.

Most stateless people are not displaced but "in situ," meaning "in place," with their lives complicated by political and social obstacles.

"Cases of statelessness tend to be discovered in the context of other work related to refugees, migrants, human rights and discrimination," explained World Council of Churches (WCC) deputy general secretary Dr Isabel Apawo Phiri. "When you combine this with an increasing xenophobic backlash, we see even more urgency for churches to speak out for the inherent God-given human dignity of every human being."

Conference participants agreed that a crucial question within each nation is how to determine statelessness, and that means engaging with government authorities to address the issue as well as networking and collaborating with ecumenical, interfaith, civil society and UN partners.

Chris Nash, director of the [European Network on Statelessness](#), said the conference provided an opportunity to plan, strategise and connect churches and faith groups with member organisations across Europe in support of their shared commitment to address statelessness. “We look forward to continuing this strong collaboration with the World Council of Churches and Brot fur die Welt at both the national and the regional level in order to continue to raise awareness and bear witness to the plight of those who lack a nationality,” he said.

Melanie Khanna, chief of the [UNHCR](#) statelessness section, agreed: “The meeting was a wonderful opportunity to reflect on what more can be done, with the help of those faith leaders who gathered for the event, to end the scourge of statelessness in Europe once and for all,” she said.

Conference participants also agreed that establishing standardized screening for statelessness, based on best practice experience, could be applied in many different areas of work.

Being stateless means being without rights, without freedom - and it is the fate of about 10 million people globally, noted Rev. Dr Cornelia Füllkrug-Weitzel, president of [Bread for the World](#).

“The existence of statelessness can be viewed as the most extreme violation of the international law,” she said. “In addition to violations of their right to a nationality, stateless persons are subject to several other human rights violations like lacking access to education, health facilities, courts, official labour markets, land rights, and political and social participation.”

In extreme cases – such as the Rhoingyas have faced recently in Myanmar – their property can be destroyed and they can be forcefully expelled at any time, added Füllkrug-Weitzel.

“Governments, the humanitarian community, development actors as well as the WCC and ecumenical partners have to join efforts to address statelessness, to identify and overcome obstacles to birth registration and acquisition of nationality, to raise awareness among those who are vulnerable to become stateless and to become familiar with procedures”, she concluded.

Birth registration, and the absence or loss of birth registration documents, is a key issue in addressing and reducing risk of statelessness. Some conference participants said they are already involved in assisting those without birth registration records. The possible relevance of baptismal and other church records in providing useful evidence in lieu of official birth records was noted.

“As an ecumenical body of pilgrims for justice and peace, we have a responsibility to be the voice of those who don’t have a voice and shed light on their struggles and aspirations”, said Segma Asfaw, WCC programme executive. “This is why we organise these yearly regional events to raise awareness in our constituency about the experience of stateless people globally.”

Participants agreed on the importance of developing referral networks of organizations and professionals - particularly legal professionals - who can assist in advising, representing and intervening on behalf of stateless people or people at risk of statelessness.

Zahra Albarazi, co-founder and senior researcher for the [Institute on Statelessness and Inclusion](#), The Netherlands, said having the opportunity to learn from the experiences of people working across Europe directly with those affected by statelessness and migrants at risk of statelessness was extremely useful.

“I am looking forward to future collaboration with the various churches and faith groups to concretely address statelessness in the region,” said Albarazi.

Representatives from many organizations pledged to continue the momentum to end statelessness in Europe. “Churches’ Commission for Migrants (CCME) in Europe will continue to mobilise against statelessness with churches in Europe, hoping that indeed statelessness will be ended by 2024,” said Doris Peschke, general secretary of CCME.

[WCC Assembly Statement on the Human Rights of Stateless People](#)

[WCC recognizes efforts of UNHCR #IBelong campaign to end statelessness](#)

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