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CLAIMING AFRICAN CITIZENSHIP: Civil Society Statement on the Right to Nationality and the Eradication of Statelessness in Africa

21 October 2026

We, the undersigned civil society organisations and human rights activists, affirm that the right to a nationality is fundamental to human dignity, equality, belonging and the effective enjoyment of human rights.

Across Africa, individuals and communities continue to experience statelessness, insecure nationality and difficulties proving or accessing the nationality to which they are entitled. These challenges arise from the enduring legacies of colonisation; gaps and conflicts in nationality laws; discrimination on the basis of gender, race, ethnicity, origin or community membership; barriers to birth registration and nationality documentation; forced displacement and migration; the particular circumstances of cross-border and nomadic communities; and, increasingly, the digitalisation of civil registration and identification systems.

The consequences extend far beyond the absence of a document. Statelessness and insecure nationality can restrict access to education, health care, employment, social protection, freedom of movement, political participation and other rights, and can leave individuals vulnerable to exclusion or detention and expulsion. Without adequate safeguards, insecure nationality status can also be transmitted from one generation to the next.

We therefore welcome the adoption by the African Union on 18 February 2024 of the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights Relating to the Specific Aspects of the Right to a Nationality and the Eradication of Statelessness in Africa.

The Protocol represents an important development in the African human rights system. It strengthens protections relating to childhood statelessness, non-discrimination, documentation, arbitrary deprivation of nationality, nomadic and cross-border communities, and includes provisions on the identification and protection of stateless persons. It also connects the right to nationality to the wider continental aspiration for African citizenship, contributing to a more decolonial understanding of nationality on the continent

Yet adoption is only the beginning. More than two years later, the Protocol has not entered into force. At the same time, action to protect nationality rights cannot wait for its entry into force. The challenges it seeks to address already affect individuals and communities across the continent and engage States' existing human rights obligations.

Experience across Africa shows that legal recognition alone is not enough. People may be citizens under the law but unable to prove it. Children may be entitled to safeguards against statelessness but unable to access them in practice. Refugees, internally displaced populations, nomadic and cross-border communities may face particular barriers to establishing nationality. Digital identity systems may improve access to services, but where they are built on exclusionary laws or inaccessible documentation requirements, they can also entrench existing exclusion.

Addressing statelessness therefore requires accessible procedures, functioning institutions, effective legal safeguards and remedies, regional cooperation and the meaningful participation of people directly affected.

We call upon African States to take action in five priority areas:

1. **Advance ratification and implementation of the AU Protocol:** States should advance domestic processes towards signature and ratification of the Protocol and review national nationality laws, policies and administrative practices in light of its standards.

2. **Prevent childhood statelessness and eliminate discrimination:** States should ensure universal and accessible birth registration, strengthen safeguards for children who would otherwise be stateless, and eliminate discrimination in nationality laws and practices, including discrimination based on gender, race, ethnicity, origin or community membership.

3. **Make nationality and legal identity systems accessible, fair and accountable:** States should ensure accessible, transparent and non-arbitrary procedures for establishing and documenting nationality, including appropriate alternative evidence where documentary proof is unavailable; effective administrative and judicial remedies; and safeguards to ensure that digital civil registration and identification systems do not reproduce or deepen exclusion.

4. **Strengthen protection and regional solutions for people at heightened risk of statelessness:** States should identify and protect stateless persons and work with Regional Economic Communities and African Union and UN institutions to prevent and reduce statelessness affecting refugees and displaced populations, children on the move, nomadic communities, and cross-border populations.

5. **Centre affected communities and strengthen accountability:** States should facilitate the safe and meaningful participation of stateless persons, people affected by insecure nationality, and stateless-led and community-led organisations should participate meaningfully in the development, implementation and monitoring of nationality laws, policies, and solutions.

The eradication of statelessness in Africa will require sustained cooperation across countries and regions and stronger connections between legal, policy, advocacy and community-based action. As civil society, we commit to strengthening collaboration across the continent; supporting affected communities to claim their rights; sharing knowledge, strategies and tools; and holding States and institutions accountable for translating legal commitments into meaningful protection.

On African Human Rights Day and on the occasion of the 65th anniversary of the 1961 Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness, we call for renewed continental action to ensure that no person is denied their rights because they lack a nationality or cannot prove the nationality that is theirs.

The right to a nationality is not simply a question of legal status or documentation. It is a question of dignity, equality, belonging and full participation in society.

Endorsing individuals and organisations:

Amnesty International Zimbabwe

African Institute for Migration and Youth Development (AIMYD) (The Gambia)

Catalysts for Change (South Africa)

Centre 4-HAKI (Kenya)

Centre for Child Law (University of Pretoria) (South Africa)

Centre for Human Rights (University of Pretoria) (South Africa)

Chapter One Foundation (Zambia)

Citizenship Program, Namati (Kenya)

Consortium Senegal African Youth Commission (Senegal)

Coordinating Assembly of NGOs (CANGO) (Eswatini)

DIGNITY Kwanza - Community Solutions (Tanzania)

Dobsonville Human Rights Center (South Africa)

Eastern Africa Nationality Network (EANN)

Equality Now

Global Alliance to End Statelessness (GAtES)

Global Campaign for Equal Nationality Rights (GCENR)

Global Movement Against Statelessness (GMAS)

Global Strategic Litigation Council (GSLC)

Haki Centre Organization (Kenya)

Hawiati MENA Statelessness Network

Horn-Afric Centre for Policy Analysis (Kenya)

Institute for Human Rights and Development in Africa (IHDRA) (The Gambia)

Kopanang Africa Against Xenophobia (KAAX) (South Africa)

Lawyers for Human Rights (South Africa)

Legal Assistance Centre (Namibia)

Maragoli Community Association (Uganda)

Nubian Rights Forum (Kenya)

Pan African Nationality Network (PANN)

Pare Council of Elders (Kenya)

Pax Afrika Network (PAN) (South Africa)

Refugee Social Services (South Africa)

Rights2Live Africa Foundation (South Africa)

SALAM for Democracy and Human Rights (SALAM DHR)

Scalabrini Centre of Cape Town (South Africa)

Somali Association of South Africa (SASA) (South Africa)

South Africa Refugee Led Network (SARLN) (South Africa)

Southern Africa Network For Immigrants and Refugees (SANIR)

Southern African Nationality Network (SANN)

Swatini Action Group Against Abuse (SWAGAA) (Eswatini)

Taita-Taveta Human Rights Network (TTHRN) (Kenya)

This is Home (South Africa)

The Fruit Basket (South Africa)

University of Cape Town Refugee Rights Unit (South Africa)

Village of Hope(VOH) (South Africa)

Women on Journey (WoJ) (South Africa)

Western Cape Coalition Against Xenophobia (WCC-AX) (South Africa)

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