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So, when I was 14, my family was in the process of adopting my little brothers from Ethiopia. And one day my mom asked, "What day should we put for their birthday?" "Uh, the day they were born, obviously?" Ridiculous question. And then my mom said, "Well, Kristen, neither of your little brothers have a birth certificate, so how do you suggest we find out when that was?" Mind blown. Now, 20 years later, I'm still working on it, except instead of trying to solve the mystery of my brothers' missing birth certificates, I try to solve this problem globally.

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So what do birth certificates have to do with international development? To answer that, we have to look back at the original development agenda, the human rights agenda.

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So in 1948, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, for the first time, set a shared vision of basic human rights and dignities that apply to all people in all nations: Article 6, the right to be recognized as a person before the law. Or, a legal identity. For children, this is a birth certificate. And despite this being a universal human right, one billion people today have no record they exist, making it one of the greatest human rights violations of our time, yet nobody seems to know about it.

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In the face of world poverty and hunger, making sure everyone in the world has a legal identity doesn't really seem important, but in reality it is. See, early in my career, I was working with a social worker in a slum community in Mumbai, and we were following up on a case with this little girl who had contracted polio as a baby and was paralyzed from the waist down. When we arrived at the home, we found her on the floor. Her legs were badly scarred and infected, she was malnourished, she had never gone to school and she had spent most of her life confined to this small, dark room. When we left, I asked the social worker what the case plan was, and she said, "Well first, we have to get her a birth certificate." I was a little taken aback. I said, "Well, don't you think we need to get her some social assistance and a safe place to live and into a school?" She goes, "Exactly, which is why we need to get her a birth certificate."

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See, without a legal identity, you are not recognized as a person by the government. And a person who doesn't officially exist can't access government services, and the government can

only provide services for the number of people they know about. Hence, people are overlooked, for example, by routine immunization services.

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People without a legal identity are both uncounted and unprotected. They're among the poorest members of society from the most marginalized communities. They're victims of trafficking. Human traffickers know that it's nearly impossible to find someone if there was never a record they existed in the first place. They're victims of exploitation, such as child marriage and child labor. Without a birth certificate, how do you prove a child is still a child? They're among the stateless; birth certificates provide proof of who your parents are and where you were born, the two main factors for acquiring nationality.

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Of the one billion people in the world without a legal identity, the vast majority are children who were never registered at birth. In the least developed nations, the births of over 60 percent of children have never been recorded. A study across 17 countries in sub-Saharan Africa found that 80 percent of children did not have a birth certificate. Out of the countries that have not yet achieved universal birth registration coverage, in 26 countries, a birth certificate is required to access health care, including vaccines. In 37 countries, it's required to access social assistance intended to bring people out of poverty. And in 59 countries, a birth certificate is required for a child to be enrolled or complete school. A birth certificate is also often required for other forms of legal identity, like a national ID or a passport. And some form of legal identity in almost every country is required to vote, get a SIM card or open a bank account. In fact, of the 1.7 billion people in the world who are unbanked, 20 percent is due to not having a legal identity document.

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Now, you don't have to be an expert to see that this, times a billion, is a big problem. So it's not surprising that evidence shows that improved birth registration coverage goes hand in hand with improved development outcomes, from poverty alleviation to better health, nutrition, education, economic improvement and safe and orderly migration.

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In 2015, world leaders came together and promised that they would uphold human rights of all people and leave no one behind in efforts to end poverty, hunger and reduce inequalities. But how are they going to uphold human rights and how do they know if anyone is being left behind if they do not know who they are or where they are in the first place?

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So what can countries do about this? Now, there's no one-size-fits-all model, because every country context is unique. There are five proven interventions that can be applied to any system. Number one, reduce the distance. Two, remove the cost. Three, simplify the process. Four, remove discrimination. Five, increase demand.

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Gender discrimination remains a hidden problem, because statistically, there's no difference between registration rates of boys and girls. But the discrimination isn't against the child -- it's against the mother. Angola was one of 35 countries that required a father's name or to be present in order for the child's birth to be registered. So in situations where the father is unknown, unwilling or unable to claim paternity, the mothers are legally prevented from registering the births of their own children. So to address this, Angola put a policy in place allowing mothers to register their children as a single parent.

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In Tanzania, in 2012, only 13 percent of children had a birth certificate. So the government came up with a new system. They put registration centers in existing infrastructure, such as community wards and in health facilities. So they brought the services closer to the people who needed them. They removed the fee. They simplified the process and automated it, so the birth certificate could be issued on the spot. To increase demand, they rolled out a public awareness campaign, letting people know that there's a new process and why it was important to register the births of their children. In just a few years in the districts where the new system was put in place, 83 percent of children now have birth certificates, and they're in the process of rolling this out nationwide.

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So what can you do? See, I believe we are all united by our humanity. We live on the same earth. We breathe the same air. And while none of us chose to be born or the situation we were born into, we do get to choose how we live. Change occurs when a moment of awareness or a moment of compassion inspires a person to act. And through our collective action, we become the most powerful agents of change. And when the cost of inaction is innocent children are left unprotected, unvaccinated, unable to go to school, growing up to be adults who are unable to find decent work or vote, trapped in a cycle of poverty, exclusion and invisibility, it comes down to us to take this issue out of the darkness and into the light. Because it's not every day you get the opportunity to change the world, but today, you do.

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Thanks.

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(Applause)