

Birth Registration in Bangladesh

KEY STATISTICS

Basic data (from The State of the World's Children 2007)	
Children under 18 years	59.5 million
Birth registered (children younger than 5 in %)	7-10
Adolescent girls married (by age of 18 in %)	69
Child workers (aged 5 to 14 years)	7

BACKGROUND

Article 7 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child stipulates that every child has the right to a name, identity and nationality. Birth registration (BR) is a first and significant step in meeting child rights as it becomes the State's first official acknowledgement of the child's existence and the recognition of the child's status before the law. Birth registration also becomes the means to secure other child rights such as the access to services and state benefits such as immunization, health care and education. In addition, specifically for children, it ensures protection through legal age limits for employment, recruitment of armed forces, children in conflict with the law and child trafficking. In extreme cases, the lack of recognition of the status can threaten the physical survival of the child. In relation to the State, registration is essential for national planning and also as a demographic base to build effective strategies.

In Bangladesh, the BR rate is currently at approximately 10% of the total population. This low rate is attributed to several factors, such as the absence of an effective and functioning birth registration system, the weak capacity of the relevant local government authorities and low level of awareness.

ISSUES

The biggest obstacle facing birth registration in Bangladesh has been the extremely low level of awareness on the importance of birth registration, which has led to the low demand for the certificates.

However, the 2004 Births and Deaths Registration Act that replaced previous legislation from 1873 came into force on 3 July 2006. It provides for birth registration to adopt a cross sectoral approach by linking its activities to the health and education sector. The Act requires birth certificates to serve as proof of age and identity for services such as

enrolment in educational institutions, issuance of passports, and transfer of property. Certificates will also be requested for voter registration, issuance of driving licences and passports, as well as for employment in government or non-government organizations. In addition, the Government of Bangladesh has decided to adopt a Universal Birth Registration strategy which provides for free registration for the following two years after the Act came into force. The strategy aims at registering all by the end of 2008.

ACTION

UNICEF is working closely with the Government of Bangladesh to establish a functional nation-wide registration system founded on the legal framework. Based on successful past experiences and aiming to clear up the backlog in an efficient way which ensures sustainability at the same time, the BR activities will be merged with the health, education and NGO sector. As an important note, the distribution of birth certificates is being considered as a priority as the registration of a child will not be counted unless the certificate is delivered.

Materials and orientation sessions

In order to establish a functional system, the registrar offices at the different administrative levels are to be equipped with the necessary administrative materials such as application forms, register books and birth certificates, as well as copies of the new Act and Government UBR strategy. In addition, duty-bearers at the national and sub-national level are to receive orientation on the importance of birth registration. Orientations at District, Upazila and Union Parishad level will also include practical explanations on the registration process. Several government training institutes have incorporated birth registration and child rights into the training curricula of registrars and support staff. The developed training manuals explain the BR process and the role of duty bearers (registrars, local government officials, teachers and health workers).

Task Forces

National and sub-national task forces, at all administrative levels, have been created. The task forces will undertake the major tasks of a) implementing the time-bound planning on UBR, b) carrying out advocacy, social mobilisation and awareness raising, c) ensure materials for UBR are adequately distributed and utilised and d) attend bi-monthly progress monitoring and reporting meetings. Registrars will be responsible for carrying out the registration process and handing out birth certificates with the involvement of the ward level task forces.

Birth Registration Information System (BRIS)

In order for birth data to be computerized and centralized at the national level, UNICEF has supported the use of an electronic software programme called Birth Registration Information System (BRIS). Computer equipment and trainings have been provided in several areas. This system will maintain birth data, link the database to immunization and other services, and also become a monitoring mechanism.

Special initiatives for most vulnerable

In addition to the law and strategy for general national application, special initiatives are necessary in order to register the most vulnerable and excluded children, such as those from landless peasants, slum families, brothels and other marginalized groups. NGO partners, already working with children and adolescents at risk, are therefore included in the BR activities to cover these children. The capacity of NGOs will be strengthened in order to



establish a network between various government departments, which will in turn play a major role in supporting the UBR process.

Communication strategy and awareness raising

As the low level of awareness amongst the general public was identified as one of the obstacles in realising the above strategy, sensitisation campaigns on the importance of BR will be conducted. Communication and advocacy materials such as posters, leaflets, and commemorative birth

certificates will be produced and distributed, including audiovisual resources for mass media outlets. One of the key messages will be the time-bound activity of free birth registration until 2 July 2008. Priority will be given to children as registration realises the right to a name, as well as providing a protection mechanism against exploitation and abuse.

IMPACT

From 1996 to 2004, the initiatives carried out by UNICEF and other partners resulted in the registration of approximately 5 million births. During a consolidated one-year campaign in 2006, 6 million births were registered.

Other achievements include:

- New Act and its corresponding rules, in line with the CRC and based on best field practices, have been adopted and come into force;
- In order to give the Act and Rules the momentum needed, the Government adopted the Universal Birth Registration strategy to register all by 2008 and included a provision on free registration for the first two years;
- The birth registration components have been included in the curricula of Local Government Training Institutes;
- A network of Government Organizations and NGOs was established to promote birth registration;
- A communication and advocacy strategy on birth registration has been adopted;
- Following the orientation sessions on UBR, task forces are being formed and activated at all administrative levels.

FUTURE ACTION

The Government of Bangladesh has set the target to reach **universal birth registration by the end of 2008**. An important milestone was achieved on 3 July 2006, when the 2004 Birth and Deaths Registration Act entered into force.

The Government of Bangladesh, with the support of UNICEF and other partners, is to raise awareness on the legal framework among duty bearers of the birth registration process. Key duty-bearers will be teachers and immunization workers who will take responsibility in the process. By registering students at schools and children under the immunization programmes, the push for universal birth registration will cover an estimated 23 per cent of the total population. Health workers will support registration of all under one year old children, covering 2 per cent of the population. The government plans to reach the remaining 65 per cent through local volunteers with household visits.

The Local Government Division (LGD) will monitor the progress of the strategy in cooperation with UNICEF and NGOs. It will subsequently enhance the LGD's capacity to monitor the registration system and will hone the overall BR system as it expands into other intervention areas.