Birth registration

The situation

Namibia has traditionally had a relatively well-developed civil registration system, with a well-functioning national identity (ID) system that has been in place for years. One single ministry is responsible for both civil registration and national ID registration, a clear advantage for accelerating birth registration and all vital events by streamlining procedures and integrating systems. The country has a good system of hospital-based birth registration across the country, in all high density hospitals, in addition to regular mobile campaigns.

However, Namibia’s population of 2.3 million is scattered over a territory covering about 830,000 km², including vast areas of inaccessible desert. In remote and deprived areas, people cannot afford the cost of travelling to registration points and mobile outreach campaigns are expensive.

In some areas, cultural practices such as the naming of a child at home and not in a health facility can delay timely registration of births. Late registration – the registration of children over the age of 1 – remains a concern. In 2012/2013, 57 per cent of all registrations were late registrations.

Other challenges in birth registration relate to abandoned or orphaned children. Registration for such categories of children can be difficult, even if there is proof of birth, because the details of at least one parent are required. This is particularly challenging where a child is living with a relative and the relative has no record of the child’s birth.

There is also a lack of awareness among parents of the value of birth registration to access social services and of the supporting documents needed for registration. Confusing guidance from the existing legislation (Birth, Marriages and Deaths Act of 1963) and unclear standard operating procedures translate into regions applying the law differently. A new National Civil Registration Bill is expected soon.

78% of children under 5 have had their birth registered with civil registration authorities

69% of 0-to-1 year-olds are registered

49% of children under 1 have birth registration in Kavango East and West compared to 93% in Karas

Source: Census 2011

© UNICEF Namibia/2015/T Uukongo
UNICEF in action

UNICEF and the Government of Namibia began a major push towards universal birth registration in 2007. In the years that followed, UNICEF and partners worked closely with the Government to generate evidence, build cross-sectoral partnerships and advocate to make birth registration a priority. As part of the broader initiative to strengthen civil registration and vital statistics (CRVS) systems across Africa, UNICEF supported key ministries to develop a CRVS Strategic Plan, which forms the road map to action on birth registration and related civil registration systems for years to come.

Results for children

The Ministry of Home Affairs and Immigration, with UNICEF support, is increasing access to birth registration through mobile campaigns in remote areas and through hospital-based registration. Given that the vast majority of babies are born in health facilities, a hospital-based registration system was piloted with UNICEF support and subsequently expanded to other facilities. Today, registration is available in 22 hospitals with high numbers of births. This has led to a rapid increase in registration of children under the age of 1, from 31 per cent in 2008 to 55 per cent in 2010. UNICEF provided all the equipment and materials needed by the hospital registration offices while the Ministry of Home Affairs and Immigration covers recurrent costs (salaries, telephone costs), and the Ministry of Health and Social Services provides the space and pays for water and electricity.

Death registration is also very important for orphans to access child grants. The hospital-based registration pilot also included death registration, which was scaled up to all 22 hospitals in the country. Moreover, UNICEF supported the decentralisation of civil registration and operationalisation of sub-regional offices. Currently, 53 sub-regional civil registration offices register births. To bring registration services to hard-to-reach areas, UNICEF provided financial support to outreach campaigns in 13 regions that registered around 39,000 children.

UNICEF contributed to accelerating laws, policies and national strategies that impact on the protection of children in Namibia, including birth registration. The most significant were the adoption of the Child Care and Protection Bill and the development of the Strategic Plan on Civil Registration and Vital Statistics in 2014.

What more needs to be done?

UNICEF is working with partners to scale up access to birth registration using innovative and strategic solutions in the following areas:

- Using laptops with secure Internet lines (VPN) that can access the national population registration system remotely; this could facilitate verification to confirm identity of parents and help reduce late registrations,
- Strengthening birth registration in lower density hospitals/clinics through outreach upon a birth notified by the clinic, or a home birth notified by the traditional leader,
- Employing cell phone technology to transmit birth notifications to a regional or sub-regional office from remote locations. This would also facilitate some cultural renaming practices, while ensuring there is still the proof of birth required for registration,
- Expanding one-stop approaches to link the registration of birth with registration for a social grant, for example, by offering grant registration services in hospital or civil registration offices and conducting joint outreach on birth and social assistance registration by the Ministries of Health, Gender Equality and Child Welfare and Home Affairs,
- Implementing a communications campaign and social change interventions to address traditional practices and cultural barriers to timely registration.

UNICEF partners in birth registration

- Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture
- Ministry of Gender Equality and Child Welfare
- Ministry of Health and Social Services
- Ministry of Home Affairs and Immigration
- Office of the Prime Minister