A Rapid Overview of Birth Registration Systems in Namibia: Taking Stock

Ministry of Home Affairs and Immigration
GOVERNMENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF NAMIBIA
Contents

Foreword ........................................................................................................... 2

Preface ........................................................................................................... 3

Summary .......................................................................................................... 5

Purpose and Methodology ............................................................................... 7

Country Context ............................................................................................ 9

Recording Births and Deaths – the Challenge .............................................. 10

Potential barriers to birth registration .......................................................... 12

The Relevance of Civil Registration in Namibia .......................................... 13

UNICEF’s Approach to Supporting the Government to Achieve
Universal Birth Registration in a Middle-Income Country ....................... 14

  Enhancing national ownership and government leadership .................... 15
  Maximising results and ‘doing more with less’ ........................................ 16
  Promoting inter-sectoral partnerships ...................................................... 16
  Strengthening monitoring and evaluation systems .................................... 16
  South-South cooperation .......................................................................... 17
  Promoting attention to major issues of disparity, exclusion and
discrimination ................................................................................................ 17
  Advocating for child-sensitive laws, policies and budgets ....................... 17

Government Strategies for Scaling Up Birth Registration ......................... 18

The Impact of Government Strategies for Scaling Up
Birth Registration ........................................................................................... 20

Summary of Observations and Recommendations ..................................... 22
Namibia has demonstrated tremendous results over the last four years in scaling up registration services, with 21 fully functional registration facilities in hospitals registering children at birth, and 13 regional offices and 26 sub-regional offices registering births. Between 2008 and 2011 we saw more than a doubling of registration rates (56%) and a significant increase in early registration rates.

The Ministry of Home Affairs and Immigration (MHAI) is committed to registering every birth, marriage and death in Namibia. The Ministry is the custodian of national identity documents and citizenship records. An identity document enables a child to claim the constitutional rights afforded to children in Namibia, and to access critical services (e.g. health, education, and social welfare services) offered by other government departments.

The national development and socio-economic prosperity of Namibia relies on ensuring that children are able to access their rights. For this reason, civil registration is integrated into national development planning tools including Vision 2030, the Fourth National Development Plan (2012/13 to 2016/17) (NDP4) and the National Agenda for Children (2012-2016).

To attain the Vision 2030 goals of achieving “a prosperous and industrialised Namibia, developed by her human resources, enjoying peace, harmony and political stability”, the Ministry is committed to registering every birth in Namibia. The National Development Plan recognises civil registration as a key strategy for addressing poverty, and the National Agenda for Children, launched by our Prime Minister, states that “All children are registered at birth, and have access to a deceased parent’s death certificate if required.” The inclusion of civil registration in these national documents confirms our national commitment to meeting our international obligations under Article 7 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

I would like to thank the MHAI Permanent Secretary for his leadership in the Ministry towards making this significant progress, and UNICEF for the collaborative technical and financial support received.

Hon. Rosalia Nghidinwa
Minister of Home Affairs and Immigration
The purpose of this document is twofold: to highlight the tremendous progress made and challenges overcome by the Government of Namibia in making birth registration accessible, even in the most remote of areas; and to highlight UNICEF’s partnership with the Government of Namibia and other partners to achieve this universal right.

This document was initiated during the preparation for the Ministerial Conference on Civil Registration and Vital Statistics Systems held in Durban, South Africa, on 6-7 September 2012. The United Nations Economic Commission for Africa requested Namibia’s Ministry of Home Affairs and Immigration (MHAI) to provide some reflections on Namibia’s birth registration systems. Importantly, this report has also been timed to reflect the Concluding Observations of the 61st Plenary Session of the Committee of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), held in Geneva, Switzerland, in September 2012. The Committee recognised the significant progress made by Government of Namibia in increasing birth registration rates.

I would like to congratulate the Government of Namibia for its leadership and remarkable action to ensure that the fundamental human right of every child to identity is met. This is a critical step towards the realisation of children’s rights in Namibia. Of all the obligations under the CRC, universal access to birth registration is not the easiest to fulfil, yet it is linked to the realisation of many rights of citizens, including the rights to education, employment, protection and social welfare, and the right to vote and participate actively in society.

Working with partners, UNICEF has provided strategic technical policy advice while helping to strengthen the capacity of key institutions by supporting logistics and procuring basic equipment in 34 registration facilities. UNICEF is also supporting the revision of legislation, such as the Births, Marriages and Deaths Registration Act of 1963, to bring it in line with international law.

As UNICEF, we would like to congratulate the Government of Namibia, led by the MHAI, on these innovative approaches to birth registration. We thank our partners, including community leaders and UK Aid, for their technical and financial support for birth registration initiatives in Namibia, and UNFPA and UNHCR for joint advocacy. We are optimistic that our collective efforts will contribute to achieving universal registration in Namibia, ensuring that the right of every Namibian child to birth registration is met. Namibia’s children deserve no less!

Ms Micaela Ma fques De Sousa
UNICEF Representative in Namibia
Above left: The Permanent Secretary of Home Affairs and Immigration, Ambassador Patrick Nandago, addressing an inter-sectoral planning meeting.

Above right: The MHAI Head of Civil Registration, Ms Lydia Kandetu (centre), with colleagues at the annual civil registration planning meeting.

Right: The Spanish Ambassador to Namibia, Her Excellency Carmen Diez Orejas (standing, third from right), and UNICEF Country Representative Ms Micaela Marques De Sousa (seated left) with staff of the MHAI and UNICEF during a visit to the birth registration facility at Katutura State Hospital.

Below: The inter-sectoral Technical Working Group on Birth Registration with the Minister of Home Affairs and Immigration. The group is composed of representatives of the MHAI (lead ministry), the Ministry of Health and Social Services, the Ministry of Gender Equality and Child Welfare, and UNICEF.
Summary

This document provides a rapid overview of the birth registration system in Namibia. It draws together and analyses the mission field reports of 2012, the available civil registration data and the observations of the UN Committee on the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). It also articulates UNICEF Namibia’s approach to supporting the Government of Namibia in its efforts to achieve universal birth registration in the country.

The Namibia Demographic Health Survey (NDHS) published in 2007 revealed a significant decrease in under-five birth registration rates – from 70.5% in 2000 to 67.4% in 2006. This occurred concurrently with burgeoning numbers of vulnerable children, many of whom were living with extended families. The Government responded with an innovative strategic approach of establishing birth registration facilities in 22 hospitals to register children at birth, scaling up sub-regional offices from seven in 2007 to 26 in 2012, and targeting hard-to-reach areas through strengthened inter-ministerial outreach partnerships and mobile campaigns.

These strategies have shown positive results in a short time, as illustrated by the significant increase in registration rates from 42,303 in 2008 to 65,828 in 2011. This is a doubling (56%) of the birth registration rate increase in approximately three years. Significantly early registration (defined as under one year) have also doubled – from 20,417 to 41,443 births registered over the same period – with late registration rates remaining largely unchanged because of the existing backlog.

In 2012 the United Nations Economic Council for Africa requested the Namibian Government to present before the Second Conference of Ministers in Charge of Civil Registration and Vital Statistics (CRVS) (6-7 September 2012). In preparation, the MHAI hosted an expert mission to assist the delegation to prepare for the conference, and to document some of the Namibian birth registration experiences. The Namibian Government had also submitted its State Party report on the CRC, and shortly thereafter, on 20 September 2012, met with the UN Committee on the CRC at the 61st Plenary Session. The Committee was impressed with the tremendous progress made over the last three years in prioritising civil registration, but raised concerns about statelessness and the registration of births of children of undocumented migrants.
Namibia’s 61 Birth Registration Facilities

**CAPRIVI**
- Katima Mulilo Regional Office
  - Katima Hospital Sub-Regional Office
  - Linyanti Sub-Regional Office
  - Cheto Sub-Regional Office
  - Impalila Sub-Regional Office

**ERONGO**
- Swakopmund Regional Office
  - Swakopmund Hospital
  - Walvis Bay Sub-Regional Office
  - Walvis Bay Hospital
  - Karibib Sub-Regional Office
  - Omaruru Sub-Regional Office

**HARDAP**
- Mariental Regional Office
  - Rehoboth Sub-Regional Office

**KARAS**
- Keetmanshoop Regional Office
  - Keetmanshoop Hospital
  - Lüderitz Sub-Regional Office
  - Karasburg Sub-Regional Office

**KAVANGO**
- Rundu Regional Office
  - Rundu Hospital
  - Kahenge Sub-Regional Office
  - Mukwe Sub-Regional Office
  - Nyangana Hospital
  - Nankudu Hospital
  - Andara Hospital

**KHOMAS**
- Khomas Regional Office
  - Katutura State Hospital
  - Windhoek Central Hospital

**KUNENE**
- Opuwo Regional Office
  - Opuwo Hospital
  - Okawati Sub-Regional Office
  - Kamanjab Sub-Regional Office
  - Khorixas Sub-Regional Office

**OHANGWENA**
- Eenhana Regional Office
  - Eenhana Hospital
  - Engela Hospital
  - Okongo Sub-Regional Office
  - Omungewelume Sub-Regional Office

**OMAHEKE**
- Gobabis Regional Office
  - Gobabis Hospital
  - Aminuis Sub-Regional Office
  - Talismanus Sub-Regional Office

**OMUSATI**
- Outapi Regional Office
  - Outapi Hospital
  - Oshikuku Hospital
  - Tsandi Hospital
  - Ruacana Sub-Regional Office
  - Okahao Sub-Regional Office

**OSHANA**
- Oshakati Regional Office
  - Ondangwa Sub-Regional Office
  - Oshakati State Hospital

**OSHIKOTO**
- Omuthiya Regional Office
  - Tsumeb Sub-Regional Office
  - Onandjokwe Hospital

**OTJOZONDJUPA**
- Otjiwarongo Regional Office
  - Otjiwarongo Hospital
  - Grootfontein Hospital
  - Grootfontein Sub-Regional Office
  - Tsumkwe Sub-Regional Office
  - Okakarara Sub-Regional Office
  - Okahandja Sub-Regional Office

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Four Regions Visited for Rapid Overview:

- **KAVANGO**: Rundu Regional Office, Keetmanshoop Regional Office, and Khomas Regional Office.
- **KUNENE**: Opuwo Regional Office, Eenhana Regional Office, and Gobabis Regional Office.
- **OHANGWENA**: Eenhana Hospital, Engela Hospital, and Okongo Sub-Regional Office.
- **OMUSATI**: Outapi Hospital, Oshikuku Hospital, and Tsandi Hospital.
- **OMUSATI**: Outapi Hospital, Oshikuku Hospital, and Tsandi Hospital.
- **OSHANA**: Ondangwa Sub-Regional Office and Oshakati State Hospital.
- **OSHIKOTO**: Tsumeb Sub-Regional Office and Onandjokwe Hospital.
- **OTJOZONDJUPA**: Otjiwarongo Hospital, Grootfontein Hospital, Grootfontein Sub-Regional Office, Tsumkwe Sub-Regional Office, Okakarara Sub-Regional Office, and Okahandja Sub-Regional Office.
Purpose and Methodology

UNICEF Namibia facilitated a rapid overview of the birth registration system in Namibia in preparation for the Second Conference of Ministers in Charge of Civil Registration and Vital Statistics (6-7 September 2012). The United National Economic Council, the conference organiser, requested the Namibian Ministry of Home Affairs and Immigration (MHAI) to prepare a presentation on its innovative partnership with the Ministry of Health and Social Services (MoHSS).
In preparation, an expert on birth registration, Mr Gopalan Balagopal, undertook a mission to Namibia (6-13 August 2012), the purpose of which was twofold: (i) to assist the MHAI delegation to prepare for the conference; and (ii) to document some of the Namibian birth registration experiences as a contribution to an assessment of new strategies to be pursued by other African countries.

This report, compiled by UNICEF Namibia, is sourced from the expert mission field notes as well as updated government monitoring and reporting data.

This report would not have been possible without the MHAI staff – including the Minister, the Permanent Secretary and other senior officials – generously providing their time for briefing the expert in detail on the work undertaken in the country, and accompanying him on field trips with UNICEF Namibia.

The delegation visited sites in four of Namibia’s 13 regions, namely Khomas, Hardap, Oshana and Oshikoto. Table 1 shows the sites visited.

**Table 1: Site visits between 6 and 13 August 2012**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sites visited</th>
<th>Aim of visit</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Katutura, Mariental, Oshakati and Onandjokwe, and State Hospitals in Khomas, Hardap, Oshana and Oshikoto</td>
<td>To study the partnership between the MHAI and the MoHSS in registering births and deaths at the hospital sites</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Windhoek headquarters</td>
<td>To observe the processes around the preparation of national IDs and the scanning of voluminous data for digitising the National Population Register</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hardap Regional and Sub-regional Offices, Oshana Regional Office and Ondangwa Sub-regional Office</td>
<td>To observe the processes around registration of births and deaths and the preparation of national IDs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hardap Regional Council</td>
<td>To meet with the Hardap Regional Governor who briefed the expert on some of the traditional and cultural barriers in registering the names of children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andimba Toivo Senior Secondary School, Oshikoto Region</td>
<td>To observe the partnership with the Ministry of Education, which has resulted in a pro-active intervention to help young people to obtain national IDs by the time they turn 16 years old</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eenhana Ministry of Gender Equality and Child Welfare Regional Office, Ohangwena Region</td>
<td>To understand the challenges that social workers face in registering children, and the partnership between the two ministries to overcome these challenges</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Namibia is one of the most sparsely populated countries in the world, with 2.6 persons per square kilometre. The population of 2.3 million is scattered over a territory covering 834,292 km², including vast areas of inaccessible desert, which poses a major challenge for the delivery of social services (including civil registration) to all communities.

Blessed with abundant natural resources, Namibia has a per capita GDP of US$7,357, and as a result was reclassified in 2009 as an upper-middle-income country. This places Namibia beyond the reach of much developmental assistance directed to developing countries. At the same time, Namibia has fallen behind in some key social indicators as illustrated by the country’s Human Development Index (HDI) of 0.625 (below the world average of 0.682), and is ranked 120 out of 187 countries. Namibia also has one of the highest income inequalities with a Gini Coefficient of 0.58 in 2009/10 (Fourth National Development Plan, 2012), and high levels of poverty, with the child poverty rate officially estimated at 34.4% (Namibia Household Income and Expenditure Survey, 2009/10).

Table 2: Review of Development Performance (Source: NPD4, 2012, page 14)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Indicators</th>
<th>1993/4</th>
<th>2003/4</th>
<th>2009/10</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total GDP (US$ million)</td>
<td>3,945</td>
<td>5,763</td>
<td>7,357</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poorest 20% per capita income (US$)</td>
<td>167</td>
<td>413</td>
<td>1,012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second-poorest 20% per capital income (US$)</td>
<td>359</td>
<td>783</td>
<td>1,508</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle 20% per capita income (US$)</td>
<td>646</td>
<td>1,242</td>
<td>2,023</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second-richest 20% per capita income (US$)</td>
<td>1,374</td>
<td>2,299</td>
<td>3,329</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Richest 20% per capita income (US$)</td>
<td>9,396</td>
<td>10,411</td>
<td>10,557</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gini Coefficient</td>
<td>0.70</td>
<td>0.60</td>
<td>0.58</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Namibia faces a significant challenge with HIV and AIDS as well as with an adult HIV ANC prevalence rate of 18.8% (MoHSS, 2010).

This situation contextualises the challenge of building a strong civil registration infrastructure for the country.
According to the Namibia Demographic and Health Survey (NDHS) of 2006-07, the births of 70.5% of children under five have been registered. In 2000, 67.4% of the registered children under five had birth certificates to hand, but this dropped to 60.4% in 2006. There are also major urban-rural disparities: only 52% of the births were registered in rural areas, whereas 82.1% were registered in urban areas.

In 2006 the national death registration rate was 67%, with the urban rate at 76.2% and the rural rate at 64.1%.¹

**Figure 1: Percent of children under five whose births have been registered and who have birth certificates to hand** (Source: NDHS 2000 and 2006-07)

There is also considerable regional variation in registration rates: in Hardap and Khomas Regions the rates are higher than 90%, whereas in Caprivi and Kavango Regions they are only around 40%. There is also an interesting convergence of registration rates and under-five stunting, implying that registration could contribute to reducing the incidence of stunting. Further research is needed to identify the convergence precisely, but, given that a child requires a birth certificate to access social services, education, health services and food handouts, there is a logical inference that stunting rates would decrease among children who have a birth certificate.

¹ Namibia Inter-Cesnal Demographic Survey Analytical Report, National Planning Commission, 2006.
Figure 2: Birth registration regional registration rates compared to under-five stunting rates
(Source: DHS 2006)

Figure 3: Birth registration rate and wealth quintile in Namibia
(Source: DHS 2006)

Figure 3 shows that children from poor households are more unlikely to be unregistered, and the wealthier the household, the more likely that the child is registered. Only 46.2% of children from the poorest households are registered.
Potential barriers to birth registration

A comprehensive assessment of the status of civil registration in Namibia has yet to be undertaken. However, the following are some of the barriers hampering efforts to increase the country’s birth registration rates:

- Populations live in remote areas, far from registration points.
- People cannot afford the cost of travelling to registration points.
- Difficulties are posed if a child’s parents are unmarried or not living together. For example, the father has to consent to his name appearing on the birth certificate, and the Ministry cannot simply assume that a man said to be the father is indeed the father.
- Cultural practices, such as requiring the presence and identity details of the father, which may not be possible or readily available, and requiring the father-in-law to provide the child’s name, which can take time.
- For a child who has been abandoned or orphaned, registration can be difficult even if there is proof of birth, because the details of at least one parent is required, but both parents are absent or deceased. This is particularly challenging where a child is living with a relative and the relative has no record of the child’s birth.
- Parents not knowing or understanding the importance of birth registration and its gatekeeping role for accessing services.
- Unclear guidance from the existing legislation and unclear standard operating procedures translate into regions applying the law anecdotally.
The Relevance of Civil Registration in Namibia

It is well known that the right to be registered soon after birth, and the right to a name and nationality, is guaranteed to every child under Article 7 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. This right is very important in the context of Namibia, where, due to poverty and geographical barriers, many children may not be able to access opportunities that should be available to them.

**Article 7 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)**

1. The child shall be registered immediately after birth and shall have the right from birth to a name, the right to acquire a nationality and, as far as possible, the right to know and be cared for by his or her parents.

2. States Parties shall ensure the implementation of these rights in accordance with their national law and their obligations under the relevant international instruments in this field, in particular where the child would otherwise be stateless.

*Adopted by the UN General Assembly on 20 November 1989, the CRC entered into force on 2 September 1990.*

Access to education, health facilities and social safety nets, particularly in the context of the HIV situation in the country, depends to a large extent on whether or not the child’s birth is registered. In addition, the ability to prove one’s age through registration of birth is essential to secure the protection of law, i.e. for young people who come into contact with the criminal justice system, or those who may be pushed into child labour or underage marriage.

Namibia is modernising and developing rapidly. But people who do not have a legal identity are unable to gain access to this modern economy, as they cannot open a bank account or enter into property transactions or take a loan for starting a business without a national ID. This is available for all citizens from the age of 16, but a a birth certificate is a prerequisite for obtaining a national ID. Therefore, for the benefits of modernisation to reach all citizens of Namibia, universal birth registration coverage is essential.
Ensuring children access to their rights: the Namibian Prime Minister, Hon. Nahas Angula, launched the National Agenda for Children (2012/13-2016/17) in Windhoek in June 2012.
Namibia’s status as an upper-middle-income country has implications for the development approach of UNICEF and other development agencies. While there are high income levels, not all are synonymous with development, and significant disparities (e.g. income), inequalities (e.g. urban/rural) and widespread discrimination (e.g. registration of children of undocumented migrants) appear to exist. However, there are tremendous opportunities for reducing disparities in middle-income countries which potentially have the resources and capacities to strengthen social protection systems and ensure a minimum standard of living. UNICEF Namibia has adopted the following key strategic approaches to maximise the achievement of child development outcomes in a middle-income country.

Enhancing national ownership and government leadership

The United Nations system is underpinned by a clear principle of strengthening national ownership and people-centred approaches. UNICEF Namibia has committed to strengthening the country’s national sovereignty and ownership of civil registration through its inclusion in national development plans, and by supporting the government in bringing people, including children, into the centre of policy-making. UNICEF’s support for finalising the National Agenda for Children (2012-2016) has ensured that civil registration is a key result:

“All children are registered at birth, and have access to a deceased parent’s death certificates if required.”

The Agenda was launched by the Right Honourable Prime Minister, Mr Nahas Angula, in June 2012, and served as the basis for informing the development of the Fourth National Development Plan (2012/13 to 2016/17) (NDP4). The NDP4 chapter on extreme poverty identifies civil registration as a critical barrier to people accessing critical services, and recommends national prioritisation of civil registration. This is an important step towards strengthening national ownership, government leadership and accountability.
4. All children have an adequate standard of living and a legal identity

4.1 Child vulnerability is addressed through a comprehensive national social protection system.
4.2 Vulnerable children have improved access to social grants.
4.3 All children are registered at birth, and have access to deceased parents’ death certificates if required.

Maximising results and ‘doing more with less’

UNICEF’s budget is hardly visible compared to those available to government counterparts and many developmental partners. In the 2012/13 financial year, the MHAI has a national budget of N$82 million for Population Affairs, which is used to staff and run the national office, 13 regional offices, 26 sub-regional offices and 21 hospital-based registration sites. UNICEF’s contribution to the government has been a mere N$500,000 in October 2012, with a further commitment of N$1.25 million (i.e. 0.03% of the Ministry’s contribution) for revising the Births, Marriages and Deaths Registration Act of 1963. UNICEF’s approach has been to use its comparative advantage to focus on high-end value-adding activities that generate knowledge and deliver results. This approach has enabled UNICEF to influence fiscal policy to leverage additional resources for investment in key outcomes.

Promoting inter-sectoral partnerships

UNICEF strengthens social dialogue between multi-sectoral line ministries and civil society partners to leverage resources for investing in children’s rights, and for addressing critical challenges and disparities in this regard. Support provided to the MHAI for bringing together other ministries (including the Ministry of Gender Equality and Child Welfare, the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Health and Social Services) has clearly increased registration rates, particularly where there are high disparities and complex blockages. Social workers are now working closely with registration officials to register vulnerable children, and health staff are taking the opportunity afforded by antenatal classes to sensitisie mothers to the importance of registration and what documents they will need for registration.

Strengthening monitoring and evaluation systems

Focused research, advocacy and awareness of duty-bearers regarding the key trends and disparities affecting children are key strategies utilised by UNICEF to influence government policies and programmes. Support provided to the MHAI for undertaking field visits and research in areas with low registration rates has contributed to a better understanding of the barriers to registration. Routine monitoring data is increasingly available as a result of UNICEF seconding a full-time technical specialist to the Ministry.
South-South cooperation

The partnership between the MHAI Department of Civil Registration and the health sector has attracted widespread interest, and Namibia has hosted government delegations from Tanzania, Ethiopia and Malawi to study this experience. This partnership builds on the fact that the reach of the health infrastructure is much broader than that of Civil Registration: among other benefits, the partnership considerably reduces the costs of registering births. A South-South visit to the South African Department of Home Affairs was organised in 2011.

Promoting attention to major issues of disparity, exclusion and discrimination

UNICEF Namibia, on the basis of principles of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, advocates for national strategies and measures to eradicate disparities and sources of exclusion and discrimination. Where resources have been available, UNICEF has supported small-scale innovations to address such issues, and has advocated for government scale-up. The government mobile registration campaigns in hard-to-reach areas in 2009 and 2010 are examples of such innovations.

Advocating for child-sensitive laws, policies and budgets

Strengthening the legislative, policy and budgetary environment has potential to influence national planning processes, which would translate into measurable progress for the most disadvantaged and vulnerable families. UNICEF has committed to supporting the MHAI to revise the Births, Marriages and Deaths Registration Act of 1963, and is optimistic that this revision will contribute to removing registration bottlenecks and aligning the laws to the Convention on the Rights of the Child. In 2011 UNICEF assisted the MHAI in developing an Operational Framework for 2012/13 as a step towards addressing some of the Ministry’s funding gaps while awaiting treasury allocation for its newly approved structure.

School outreach registration is a highly effective innovation in government efforts to achieve universal coverage.
Government action to improve access to registration has followed two broad strategies:

1. **Registering children at birth**: Facilities for birth registration were established in 21 major hospitals in the country by posting Ministry of Home Affairs and Immigration (MHAI) staff in these hospitals. Death registration services are provided at 12 of these hospital sites, and are being expanded. There are 34 major health facilities, and the remaining 13 hospitals are reached through the regional and sub-regional offices of the MHAI.

2. **Increasing service provision in rural areas**: New sub-regional registration offices have been established to take registration facilities closer to where people reside. In 2007 there were four sub-regional offices, and in 2012 there are 26.

The MHAI also undertook two major mobile registration campaigns in 2009 and 2010, in which a total of about 38,000 children were registered. In 2011 the Ministry undertook outreach visits to a number of areas in response to specific requests for such visits. The campaigns were designed to respond to the high levels of unregistered children, but are not a first-line strategy given that the civil registration system is starting to capture births routinely.

Recognising that there are hard-to-reach populations such as families residing on remote farms, the MHAI is collaborating with the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Gender Equality and Child Welfare and community-based organisations to reach the children in such families. In addition, a decision has been taken to amend the laws relating to birth and death registration to facilitate more effective action in scaling up registration.

The MHAI staff posted in hospitals are supervised by the Ministry of Health and Social Services (MoHSS). This unusual arrangement transcends ‘turf’ considerations that usually do not permit such arrangements between ministries in many countries. Namibia has formulated a simple Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between the MHAI and the MoHSS to institutionalise this arrangement. The MoU stipulates that the MoHSS is responsible for providing office space...
and ensuring electricity, water and cleaning services. This MoU has been of much interest to many countries.

A second major advantage is that the health facilities are the first point of contact for pregnant women. A small qualitative study supported by UNICEF in Kavango Region in 2012 demonstrated that the health worker is an important source of information for mothers: of the mothers interviewed, 63% who had registered their children were informed about registration by health workers providing antenatal care services – these services having a 95% coverage in Namibia. Such direct face-to-face contact has proven to be the most effective communication channel for developmental messages the world over.

Namibia is currently establishing a web-based integrated National Population Registration System (NPRS). To this end, the MHAI is scanning all of the written birth, marriage and death registration records. All 2.1 million birth registration records have been scanned – an estimated 10 million sheets of paper as each record usually consists of an application form and the birth certificates of both parents, hence at least 3 sheets of paper per record. The NPRS will streamline the identity verification process required at registration. It is expected that the NPRS database will be ‘inter-operable’ and accessible to all ministries that need this information. So far about 60% of the civil registration offices are online, and it is possible to routinely access registration data remotely. This has already greatly reduced transaction time and costs. In expectation of the NPRS being fully functional, the MHAI also went to tender and has produced new secure birth and death certificates which are expected to be rolled out in 2012 and 2013.

An official of the MHAI registering a birth in Mariental Hospital.
These strategies have shown positive results in a short time, as illustrated by the significant increase in registration rates from 42,303 in 2008 to 65,828 in 2011. This is a 56% birth registration rate increase in approximately three years. Significantly early registration (defined as under one year) has also increased, from 20,417 to 41,443 births registered over the same period, with late registration rates remaining largely unchanged because of the existing backlog.

**Figure 5:** Birth registration rates by normal (<1 year) and late registration (>1 year) in the period 2008-2011

The increased registration rates combined with the partnerships with inter-sectoral ministries (in particular the Ministry of Gender Equality and Child Welfare) has had an impact on the total number of child welfare grant beneficiaries in the same period. Children benefiting
from the N$200 monthly social cash transfer from the government has increased from approximately 100,000 in 2008 to 140,000 in 2011 (a 40% increase). Birth certificates are a prerequisite to qualify to apply for a child welfare grant.

**Figure 6: Scale-up of birth registration and child welfare grants**
(Source: MHAI and MGECW programme data)

![Graph showing scale-up of birth registration and child welfare grants](image)

The new Namibian birth certificate

![Sample birth certificate](image)
Seven countries presented their experiences in implementing new strategies for rapid scaling up of birth and civil registration at the Durban conference in South Africa. It was interesting to note that Namibia is already engaged in many of the major strategic interventions that were showcased in Durban. Apart from the health partnership, Namibia is rapidly developing a digitised National Population Register. A well-organised national ID system has been functional for several years. Having a single ministry responsible for both civil registration and national IDs is a clear advantage that Namibia enjoys, as compared to the situation in some other countries.

With HIV and AIDS having a major impact in the country, social protection and child grants – wholly funded by government – are very important, and birth registration is critical for accessing these benefits. Therefore, despite its small population and its status as an upper-middle-income country, Namibia offers an interesting model for a system that works with most of the new strategic approaches deemed effective for strengthening civil registration. A few areas to which closer attention could be paid to strengthen the system further are as follows.

1. The hospital-based registration system is highly effective, particularly in high-volume facilities, but in low-volume facilities it may not make sense if only a handful of children are registered. Alternative registration means need to be put in place, i.e. a system that still captures the births, but without a registration office being set up at the site.

2. In health facilities where a significant number of births are not being registered despite the presence of MHI staff on the premises, supervision, training and motivation need to be strengthened. The performance of the staff at Mariental State Hospital where staff members visit and register infants at the bedside in the maternity ward was truly impressive, and this practice should be studied further to identity elements that have made it so successful for the purpose of replicating it. The same practice and level of performance were not evident in any of the other hospitals visited.

3. The utility and sustainability of a mobile registration system using large vehicles could be reviewed. Experiences in many countries show that mobile registration arrangements are difficult to sustain on account of costs.

4. The challenge for all social services is that of the sparse population. In the case of civil registration, it is necessary to adopt approaches that piggyback on other institutions, e.g. strengthening ties to the health outreach programme. The manner in which national ID registration for children approaching 16 years of age was undertaken at Andimba ya Toivo Senior Secondary School is a good example of this approach. It would be useful to examine whether the school network would offer an outreach programme for the registration of children located in distant and hard-to-reach places such the many rural farms.
5. The MHAI could explore testing out a birth notification process at the point of birth. This could facilitate some cultural naming practices while ensuring that there is still the proof of birth required for registration.

6. The MHAI could explore the possibility of introducing laptops with secure internet lines (VPN) that can access the National Population Registration System remotely. This could facilitate remote verification to confirm the identity of the parent(s) and to ensure that the child was not registered before. It would also help to reduce late registration numbers.

7. The MHAI could explore the use of ICT as a means to streamline the registration process. The use of cell phones could be explored as a means of transmitting birth notifications to a regional or sub-regional office from remote locations such as schools, post offices and points where pensions are distributed in Namibia. In this regard, experiences in other parts of Africa (e.g. Uganda) should be studied, and if possible, visits of MHAI staff to such countries should be considered.

8. The Births, Marriages and Deaths Registration Act of 1963 is being revised, and this process should be completed urgently. It should be ensured that the legal provisions fully cover the current requirements, including the arrangements in place at hospitals for registration of births and the legal validity of electronically produced records and documents. The finalisation of the Act will also allow the MHAI to formulate clear guidelines for complex registration cases such as those involving orphaned and vulnerable children.

9. Namibia has to deal with the situation of undocumented minors who face the risk of statelessness. This was a major concern raised by the United Nations Committee on the Convention on the Rights of the Child at the 61st Plenary Session in September 2012. This is another area in which special solutions have to be found urgently within the framework of international law.
Reaching hard-to-reach areas.

Reaching minority groups: mobile registration of San in Okongo, Ohangwena Region, in 2009.

Birth registration banners are displayed in all birth registration facilities to promote registration.
A crucial MHAI undertaking: Over 2 million civil registration records (over 10 million pages) which have been manually stored are being scanned into a database linked to the forthcoming web-based integrated National Population Register.

Regeneration of vulnerable children at a residential care facility.
“The child shall be registered immediately after birth and shall have the right from birth to a name, the right to acquire a nationality and, as far as possible, the right to know and be cared for by his or her parents.”

Article 7, UN Convention on the Rights of the Child