

Child protection case study

COUNTING EVERY CHILD

PARTNERSHIPS LIFTING BIRTH REGISTRATION NUMBERS IN VANUATU



Australian Government

Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade



EUROPEAN UNION



unite for children



In 2008, only one quarter of Vanuatu's population was formally registered. Since then, the Government of Vanuatu, UNICEF and development partners, have worked tirelessly to more than double this number to 56 per cent in 2014. This case study will explore the range of strategic and highly targeted initiatives that addressed the barriers hindering people from registering the birth of their children across the country.

Vanuatu is a geographically dispersed country with 83 islands organized into six provinces over a vast distance of 160,000km². Seventy per cent of the population of approximately 266,000 lives in rural areas with limited access to government services such as education and health. Many people still reside in kastom villages, microcosms of customs, attitudes and beliefs. Many people living in these villages do not celebrate birthdays as they do not know their exact age. They were not registered at birth, and neither were their children.

Birth registration is the first legal acknowledgement of a child's existence. It is a child's first right to a name and identity, enabling them to equitably access health, education and other services, and protects them from abuse and exploitation. On a national level, data on birth rates supports government policy planning and implementation. Internationally, country data supports efforts to develop and work towards meeting global goals such as the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), and additional global goals post-2015.

In 2008, a baseline study by UNICEF found that only 26 per cent of children living in Vanuatu were registered. This was largely attributable to three key barriers: the difficulty of capturing births in communities outside of hospitals and health centres (including kastom villages), a high reliance on family to transfer data between departments, and the need to improve coverage and accessibility to registration. Adding to this is the cost involved in travelling to a registration centre and the cost of registration. Birth registration in Vanuatu is free within 21 days of a child's birth, but there is a charge for extracts and copies. There is a small fee for late registration of between 200-500 vatu (USD\$2-5).

Since the baseline study was conducted, the Government of Vanuatu, UNICEF and key partners have embarked on a number of national and community-focussed initiatives to double the birth registration rate to 56 per cent in 2014. Increasing this number in a relatively short period of time is a result of a number of innovative initiatives designed to address the socio-cultural, economic and geographical barriers to birth registration in Vanuatu. This includes the development of a national database tailored to suit the needs of the users to capture critical information, decentralizing the national collection of data to Vanuatu's provinces, and innovative community-based outreach campaigns focussed on capturing the backlog of unregistered births across the country.

ACHIEVEMENTS/ SUCCESS FACTORS

UNICEF continues to work closely with the Government of Vanuatu and key partners to strengthen systems, processes, capacity and awareness in order to increase birth registration

rates. The following elements are considered achievements in increasing birth registration figures in Vanuatu.

Establishing multi-sectoral partnership mechanisms

Integral to the increase in the birth registration rate in Vanuatu is the establishment of partnerships between key agencies. In 2008, a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) was signed between the Ministry of Internal Affairs, Department of Civil Status (Civil Registry), the Ministry of Education, and the Ministry of Health to facilitate birth registration in Vanuatu. This formal agreement sought to address many of the barriers to birth registration and to facilitate opportunistic registration, i.e. providing registration services to support, rather than inhibit, efforts to register children. The partnership focussed on clearing the substantial backlog of unregistered children.

The main Civil Registry Office is in Port Vila with six provincial sub-registration offices. There are also a number of sub-registrars in rural areas who assist the provincial registrars in carrying registration efforts. The multi-departmental partnership sought to provide additional services to people wanting to register their children, whilst also attempting to capitalize on 'opportunistic registration, i.e. providing services at key points of contact in the community such as education and health facilities.

One of the most notable achievements of this cross-agency collaboration is the permanent placing of a civil registry office at the central hospital in the capital, Port Vila. Mothers who give birth in hospitals can now register their baby's birth and receive a birth certificate and photo while still in hospital. This service is considered a critical contribution to the existing health services provided within the hospital. As noted by the obstetrician in charge, "UNICEF-Ministry of Health support for that clerk post is critical, my nurses do not have a minute to spare, we have so many deliveries here every day, and ante-natal and post-natal work to do, too."

The MOU between the Civil Registry Office and the Ministry of Education ensures that any children enrolling in school has to be registered. Through this agreement, approved head teachers and principals were given the authority to sign completed registration forms through the schools. This has made significant headway in clearing the backlog of children not registered, and provided an invaluable opportunity to promote the importance of birth registration at birth.

Supporting these national partnerships is the Civil Registration and Vital Statistics (CRVS) Taskforce, a partnership mechanism comprised of representatives from agencies working in birth registration. This Taskforce is facilitated and supported by the Brisbane Accord Group (BAG), a regional initiative supported by bodies such as UNICEF and the Secretariat of the Pacific Community (SPC) which aim to support the improvement of collection and sharing of vital statistics such as birth registration. The Taskforce is the key agency responsible for developing and implementing a national action plan to improve CRVS, including the coordination, implementation and evaluation of activities to improve CRVS data collection and analysis.

The Brisbane Accord Group

The Brisbane Accord Group (BAG) is a collaboration between development agencies focussed on strengthening Civil Registration and Vital Statistics (CRVS) in the Pacific region. Working through 20 Pacific island countries and territories, BAG facilitates the establishment of national CRVS committees in order to:

- Progress civil registration across the region
- Improve the quality and use of vital statistics
- Coordinate partnerships to harmonize technical assistance
- Maximize investment and prevent duplication

BAG's work is underpinned by the Pacific Vital Statistics Action Plan, an inter-agency regional strategy promoting and supporting evidence-based decision making across the region.

Decentralizing birth registration to provinces

As is the way in most countries, the birth of a child is more likely to be registered if the child is born in an urban hospital or health facility. In Vanuatu, a large percentage of births occur outside of Port Vila. Through government and agency efforts, provincial hubs have been established in all six provinces to provide adequate services and support to enable and encourage people to register the births of their children. Each province has a Civil Registry Office (CRO) that reports to the national Civil Registry Office in Port Vila.

Efforts are currently underway to further expand this provincial network to provincial health facilities. There are currently 14 civil registration points set up at hospitals and health centres and plans are underway to expand this to 17 points in the near future.

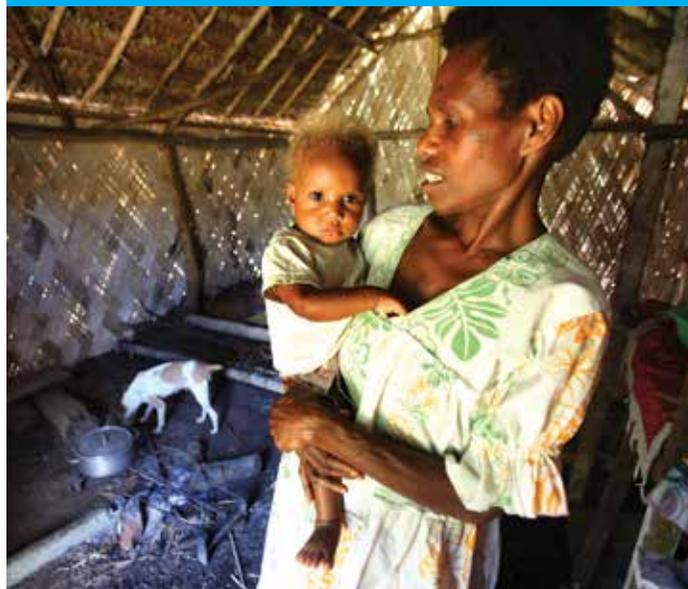
Database

One of the most successful initiatives supporting the collection of birth registration in Vanuatu is the development and roll-out of an innovative database. Through the commitment of an Australian Business Volunteer over the past decade, the Government of Vanuatu with UNICEF support have developed an e-database specifically tailored to suit the information needs of the government and key agencies. The database, and the nature in which it was developed, demonstrates the importance of tailoring a resource to suit a specific purpose and skills set. As open-source software, the owner, the Government of Vanuatu, is not tied to software changes, does not require additional training as new software is introduced, and does not have incremental costs. Since the software was introduced, training has been conducted and continues to be a priority area for the Government of Vanuatu. Whilst not all provincial hubs are linked up to the central database, it is acknowledged that this initiative is a marked improvement to decentralization efforts. Agencies through the CRVS Taskforce have earmarked connection to a central database as a key priority for the future.

Addressing socio-cultural attitudes and beliefs through advocacy and communications

Communications and advocacy have been critical in creating a demand for birth registration services in Port Vila and the provinces. Since 2009, the Department of Civil Status (Civil Registry) has conducted a series of awareness campaigns throughout the six provinces as part of the mass campaign on birth registration. The campaign sought to address long-

In the most isolated parts of Vanuatu, the photo on the back of a child's birth certificate is almost the only photo that a mother will have of her and her child together. This is considered a drawcard in some areas. As highlighted by UNICEF Pacific Resident Representative, Karen Allen, "The birth registration clerk at Port Vila hospital tells me, "The photo of mother and baby on the back of the certificate is a real bonus, too, lots of mothers come to my desk just because they want that!"



held attitudes about the benefits of birth registration. Low birth registration rates have been attributed to a number of reasons, one being the beliefs and attitudes of parents in terms of the benefits of registering their children. It is widely believed that low birth registration rates are directly linked to the parents' awareness levels about the range of benefits. In some remote areas (such as the kastom villages) that are removed from more modernized regions of Vanuatu, parents may not see the benefits of their own citizenship, let alone their children's. It is estimated that between 15-20 per cent of births in Vanuatu occur at home or in communities (outside of formal health clinics). In many cases, parents did not attach importance to registration until they are required to produce evidence of date of birth, and it is suggested that even those who do register tend not to appreciate the importance of registration as a rights issue.



The organizations involved in this campaign included the Ministry of Education, Ministry of Health and UNICEF. With a national focus on reaching remote areas of the country, all provincial councils were involved and engaged in this campaign. During the campaign, brochures on birth registration were printed and distributed. Radio spots were produced by a local drama group, Wan Smol Bag, and aired on national radio. Public events were organized in the provinces, where possible, coinciding with provincial and national events such as independence celebrations, National Children's Day and sporting events. During this campaign, the registration fee for birth registration was waived (between 1,500 to 2,500 vatu or an estimated 10 per cent of a monthly household minimum wage). In the provinces, a key promotional message employed focussed on birth registration providing the right to identity and the connection to land. The campaign identified the target audience's connection to family and highlighted the links between registration and a person's family tree, and therefore, a person's right to customary land in Vanuatu. A key strategy in this campaign was to waive all fees across the country in order to address the backlog of unregistered children.

CHALLENGES, LESSONS AND SUGGESTIONS

Outdated and discriminatory legislation

The Civil Status (Registration) Act (Cap. 61, 1971, Revised Edition 1988) provides the statutory basis for births in Vanuatu. It is widely agreed that this law does not reflect the current administration, is outdated and requires an urgent review.

Within the current legislation, there are a number of areas highlighted as inhibiting birth registration in Vanuatu. The law states that all registrations need to be handwritten, multiple paper copies are to be produced and kept on file. This has resulted in cumbersome, largely paper-based system, prone to human error and unsuited to the geographical and technical barriers in Vanuatu. Presently, the law does not include adequate provision to allow for different stakeholders outside of the Civil Registry Office to facilitate birth registration. The wording of the law relating to birth registration is considered ambiguous, and it is believed that the law needs to reflect public policy sentiment that birth registration for every child should be stated as mandatory. There are gaps in the legal requirements for reporting a birth, i.e. traditional birth

attendants are not required to keep a record of birth-related information. In terms of confidentiality, the law is currently unclear on who can access birth records for another person. From a systems perspective, the law needs to be reviewed to ensure it clearly outlines (and advocates for) procedures and processes for information sharing and data reconciliation between agencies. The law also prohibits mothers from registering their children if they do not wish to have the child's father's name included in the records. Furthermore, the use of the term 'illegitimate child' within the law is considered outdated and discriminatory by a number of concerned agencies working in the area of birth registration in Vanuatu.

The legislative review has long been acknowledged as a key priority to support birth registration initiatives and the Government of Vanuatu, through the CRVS Taskforce and support from BAG, is currently working towards implementing this review in the near future.

Registration system

The Registration Act (as discussed in the previous section), and the geographical and technical reality of Vanuatu have contributed to a largely paper-based system that relies on the physical movement of forms across provinces and around the nation. Reducing the potential human error in misplacing or not submitting these forms is considered a key challenge by the CRVS Taskforce. Apart from the case of Central Hospital in Port Vila, where a Civil Registry Officer is permanently located, there is a large reliance on the parents/family of a child to physically transfer forms between departments in order to complete the registration. The system is largely dependent on the will and ability of families to take birth notifications from the Ministry of Health to the Civil Registry Office to complete a formal birth registration. There is potential for increased sharing and reconciliation of data between departments. It is believed that cost is also an influencing factor in the collection of the data. There is a cost of moving paper forms between levels of the system. There are also costs involved in sending hard copy forms from area health services to the provincial health office. Forms could be lost due to human error. There is a large dependence on people outside of the CRVS system who are travelling to/from a major centre. Incomplete birth registrations can be entered in the CRVS database but won't be issued a certificate. This record could potentially be completed at a follow up medical visit, but there are no clear procedures if mother does not return.

Capacity and resources

While the structural challenges to birth registration outside of Port Vila continues to be addressed through efforts to decentralize, it is acknowledged that capacity in the provinces to support this initiative requires support. It is generally agreed that within the existing hospitals and health centres, nurses and health workers (including those working in Health Information Services) are too busy to facilitate and support birth registration initiatives and need external assistance in order to promote or to even assist in the process of birth registration. A civil registry officer is now based at the main hospital in Port Vila, however, it recognized that there is a need for more resources to promote birth registration, and for the staff at the health posts to receive more training regarding data collection. There is a concern that more resources are required to facilitate greater sharing between agencies. This requires substantial resources, and it is acknowledged that there is an opportunity through the CRVS Taskforce and BAG to maximize existing (and leverage potential) funds to support ongoing initiatives in this area.

Addressing socio-cultural attitudes and beliefs

Social, cultural and geographical factors to promote the importance of birth registration will continue to be central to efforts by CRVS Taskforce and the Government of Vanuatu. It is challenging to work closely with remote communities such as kastom villages, which traditionally do not have formal relationships with health facilities and services that would require them to report a birth. Home births have no formal system for collecting information or registering events, traditional birth attendants do not keep records of the birth they attend. Registration through school aims to target these children, but can only address late registration when the children are school-ready and attending formal education. There is a need to continue to increase awareness about the importance of birth registration (particularly in remote villages) and make available appropriate and accessible information outlining the birth registration process.

NEXT STEPS

A meeting held in Vanuatu in September 2014 provided a comprehensive assessment of birth registration needs and outlined a draft vision for next steps. The CRVS Taskforce with key agencies such as UNICEF and other members of BAG are working together to identify key activities to reach an agreed birth registration target. Whilst exact activities are currently in discussion, the following focus areas have been highlighted as priorities for the near future:

Strengthen the National and Provincial CRVS Task Forces

It is acknowledged that further support is required to strengthen capacity at the provincial levels. This would include tapping into health and education networks to further explore and capitalize on opportunities to support efforts to decentralize birth registration. Another initiative is to explore opportunities to enable Area Secretaries at the community level to fill in registration forms for further processing at Civil Registration Service Points.

Legislative review

The legislative review is considered a key priority for 2015 and beyond. This includes organizing consultations with parliamentarians on the revised draft of the legislation before a final draft is tabled in Parliament.

Strengthening the registration system

Another focus area is working towards ensuring that the processes and procedures are understandable and simple, with strong linkages between all agencies. It is acknowledged that it is easier to tap into existing infrastructure and systems (which would also be a lower cost to government). Work at the provincial level also includes ensuring databases are fully functional in all areas – provinces not linked to the central

database may lead to a risk of data loss or duplication in data transfer.

Continuing efforts to decentralize system

Whilst a civil registry officer is permanently located at the main hospital in Port Vila, it is noted that there is a need to duplicate this initiative within the Luganville Hospital. Currently, birth registration details are completed by the Health Information Services officer at Luganville Hospital. In addition targeted training for education, health sectors and municipalities on use of database, data entry, data transfer and overall data management will build capacity for decentralization.

Advocacy and education efforts

Awareness-raising has proven successful and campaigns and production of IEC materials will continue so that people have a better understanding of the benefits and purposes of birth registration. Within communities that have little contact with government (such as kastom villages), there is a need to increase awareness about the importance of registering children and offering incentives to do so. Increased awareness and education to remote locations will continue to build awareness of the importance of birth registration for births occurring outside medical facilities.

UNICEF Pacific Child Protection Programme

UNICEF's Child Protection programme sets out to achieve the following outcomes:

1. Child Protection Systems (including Justice and Police, child and family social services, health and education and communities) provide improved quality of and access to services for the prevention of and response to violence, abuse and exploitation of children at all times.
2. Parents, caregivers, and children demonstrate skills, knowledge and behaviour enabling children to grow up in caring homes and communities, including schools that are free from violence, abuse and exploitation.

This fits within the global framework for child protection, the Convention of the Rights of the Child (CRC) that outlines world benchmarks for children's protection and standards. Countries who ratify the CRC commit to implementing a number of economic, administrative and social measures to ensure an appropriate protective environment for children. Fiji ratified the CRC in 1993.

Child Protection

UNICEF Office for Pacific Island Countries
3rd Floor, FDB Building, 360 Victoria Parade, Suva, FIJI

Email: suva@unicef.org, www.unicefpacific.org

Photo credit: UNICEF Pacific/2014/Alcock

