

Child protection case study

# PARTNERSHIPS PROMOTING HIGH BIRTH REGISTRATION IN KIRIBATI



Australian Government

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unite for children



*Kiribati has one of the highest birth registration rates in the Pacific with the Civil Registrar reporting 87 per cent coverage rate for children under five years of age in 2014. This achievement is largely attributed to three key factors: an increase in awareness of the importance of registering births, strengthened capacity of people working in health and civil registration, and improved systems to capture this information. This case study will examine how cross-sectoral collaboration and national commitment to improving the collection of civil registration data and vital statistics has supported the rapid increase in the birth registration rate since 2008.*

Kiribati is comprised of 33 mostly low-lying atolls with a population of just over 100,000 half of which is clustered around its capital, South Tarawa. Also considered the country's administrative, education and health services hub, government ministries and community services are struggling to meet the needs of rapid urbanization. It is recognized that sustainable development across this geographically dispersed nation is largely dependent on cross-sectoral cooperation and collaboration across government, community and development partners.

Birth registration, or the official recording of a person's birth, is critical on two fronts: on an individual level, it provides people with their first human right – the right to a name and identity – that marks their place within their community and society as a whole. This formal recognition allows them to equitably access services and opportunities available to them as part of their society, such as health, education and labour. Importantly, birth registration helps to safeguard the rights of children against serious issues such as abuse, exploitation and trafficking. From a national planning perspective, official birth registration numbers provide information to the institutions charged with the responsibility of developing policies and allocating resources to support critical social services such as health, education and labour.

Increasing the birth registration rate is a key component of the programme of work between UNICEF and the Government of Kiribati. Jointly developed and implemented, the programme of work outlines key activities to be undertaken within a certain period and budget. This builds on a long-standing commitment between UNICEF and the Government of Kiribati to build a framework for children's protection to improve the welfare of children and young people living in Kiribati.

## UNICEF Pacific's Child Protection Programme

Birth registration is considered a key component of UNICEF Pacific's Child Protection Programme. With funding from the Australian Government, UNICEF's Child Protection Programme sets out the following outcomes:

1. Children are increasingly protected by legislation and are better served by justice systems that protect them as victims, offenders and witnesses.
2. Children are better served by well-informed and coordinated child protection social services which ensure greater protection against and response to violence, abuse and exploitation.
3. Families and communities establish home and community environments for children that are increasingly free from violence, abuse and exploitation.

This fits within the global framework for child protection, the Convention of the Rights of the Child (CRC), an international treaty that sets benchmarks for children's protection and standards. Countries that ratify (or formally agree to) the CRC commit to implementing a number of legislative, economic and social measures to provide and promote an appropriate protective environment for children.



In 2009, UNICEF and the Australian Government released a baseline report that outlined the gaps in child protection legislation and services and proposed key actions to provide a strengthened child protection framework. “Protect Me with Love and Care” indicated that the birth registration rate in Kiribati was one of the lowest in the Pacific. Since that time, UNICEF has worked closely with the Government of Kiribati and key partners to increase awareness of the need for improved awareness and services to promote birth registration. This includes working with the Brisbane Accord Group (BAG) to establish the Civil Registration and Vital Statistics (CRVS) Committee comprised of the Ministry of Health and Medical Services (MHMS), the Ministry of Women, Youth and Social Affairs (MWYSA), the Ministry of Education (MOE), UNICEF and a number of key stakeholders. This multi-sectoral partnership aims to improve Kiribati’s data collection systems in order to support national policy decision-making processes.

### The process of birth registration in Kiribati

As is the case across the world, the likelihood of a parent or family member registering a baby at birth increases the closer

they are to an urban centre. The capital of Kiribati, South Tarawa is the country’s administrative hub, containing half the population and most of the country’s services, including health facilities and educational institutions.

People living in South Tarawa have access to two hospitals, Tungaru Central Hospital in Nawerewere and Betio Hospital. Since mid-2014, a Civil Registry Officer has been stationed permanently at the maternity ward of the Central Hospital. The first Civil Registry Officer based at the hospital, their sole responsibility is to capture information about all the births at the hospital (estimated 15 babies per day), and distribute birth certificates to the parents of the new babies. When a baby is born, the Officer enters the data manually into a logbook, then into an Access database on a computer within the office in the maternity ward. As this database is not yet centralized, the data is then transferred onto a memory stick to the main computer in the Civil Registry Office in Bairiki. The Health Information Services (HIS) division of MHMS located within the hospital also captures information on births. As yet, Betio Hospital does not have a Civil Registry Officer located within the hospital.

## 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; and
- 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.

The process for registering births on the outer islands is largely manual. The Island Council Clerk is responsible (under legislation) for registering births on each island. Once a child is born, the health clinics on the islands provide a Birth Notification Form which the parents or other family members (and sometimes even nurses or birth attendants) take to the Island Council Clerk. The Clerk is responsible for entering the birth details into a larger logbook. Every quarter, the information is then re-entered onto separate forms which are then sent to the Civil Registry Office in Bairiki for inputting into the main database. MHMS estimates that there are health clinics available for every 300 people and are staffed by qualified nursing staff.

Birth registration is free in Kiribati up until the child's first birthday. After that there is a late registration fee of \$9.

## ACHIEVEMENTS/SUCCESS FACTORS

A number of success factors has supported the increase in the birth registration rate. These include:

### Cross-sectoral cooperation and collaboration

Formal partnerships have been the key contributor to substantial improvements in the birth registration rate in Kiribati. This includes formal agreements between line ministries. Most notably, a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) signed between the MWYSA (Civil Registry Office) and the MHMS allows registry staff to be stationed at the central hospital. The idea is to capture the births within the hospital before the mothers and babies leave, acknowledging the difficulties in registering births in the communities. "Allowing registry staff to be stationed here [at the hospital] ensures that mothers do not have to line up with small children in order to register the birth of their child," according to the Director of Public Health of MHMS, Dr Teatao Tiira. Supplying additional resources also addresses capacity restraints within the hospitals in which the nursing staff are understaffed and simply do not have the time to support the registration of babies. Another key partnership is the MOU between the MWYSA and the MOE. Under this agreement, parents are now requested to provide formal registration of their children's birth when enrolling their children into school (whereas in the past they could simply fill out birth dates on the enrolment forms). "In the past, parents would fill out forms with their children's birth dates, now they require a birth certificate,"

says the Vital Statistician of the Civil Registry Office, Mantarae Iltienang. This agreement ensures that children entering schools are registered and was a key strategy for clearing the immense backlog prior to the commencement of the birth registration campaign in 2009.

### Increased demand for evidence-based decision making

The activities to improve vital statistics in Kiribati are influenced by an increasing national demand for statistics to support policy and programme development. HIS at the Central Hospital produces health information for line ministries and donors to support evidence-based decision making. "More people are requesting data so they know how important the data is," according to HIS Senior Health Information Officer, Teanibuaka Tabunga. He notes that a large percentage of his time is spent responding to health information requests from MHMS, other ministries, donor bodies and partners. He has indicated that a gap in the current system is the need for more staff to collect, analyse and disseminate the data captured across HIS and the Civil Registry Office.

In the Pacific, there is a growing acknowledgement of the importance of CRVS systems to provide reliable data to support policy planning initiatives. In 2011 and 2013, Pacific Ministers of Health formally identified the need to improve national CRVS systems, also identified as a key priority under the Pacific Statistics Strategy. The BAG is working with Pacific governments and key agencies to leverage financial and technical advice in order to strengthen systems and capacity.

### Improved community awareness and attitudes towards birth registration

Since the baseline report in 2009, UNICEF along with key partners have continued to strengthen collaboration and cooperation across agencies to support birth registration within South Tarawa and the outer islands. The Civil Registry Office is the key government department focussing on the management of vital statistics such as birth registration. Through support from UNICEF and key agencies, the Civil Registry Office has created a structure for ongoing cooperation and mobilized resources and technical support to create community understanding and demand for more tailored and targeted opportunities to register births. These resources have been used for training initiatives for the staff of the Civil Registry Office, training health nurses from MHMS in birth

## STORY FROM THE FIELD: Birth certificates required for school enrolment

Previous years we teachers have problems with birth certificates when enrolling the class one, most parents come without a birth certificate and sometimes the parents have to be sent away to look for their children's birth certificate.

After the birth certificate campaign in 2009 it makes a big difference. Beginning of year 2010 parents were flooding in to enrol their children and handing in the birth certificates, at the same time others who forgot we staff listed down their names and the Senior Grade One follow up or list at the council registry office.

We are very thankful to UNICEF for the birth certificate campaign that has made our enrolment registration more accurate recording in our birth certificates rather than made up ones.

It is significant to us because we used to have problems with verified certificates, maybe made up dates were recorded at the enrolment, now we are sure with the verified certificates provided.

Mary Taaia Worru, Teacher



## STORY FROM THE FIELD: Young mother registered at last

Akoia, with her partner Timi, and their five month old daughter Teite, is clutching a birth certificate obtained through the mobile birth registration campaign. The birth certificate belongs to Akoia, who at 17 years old had never been registered. Her daughter Teite was born at the Central Hospital on South Tarawa and was automatically registered upon her birth as a result of the collaboration between the Civil Registry office of the Ministry of Internal and Social Affairs (MISA) and the Ministry of Health and Medical Services (MHMS). The mobile campaign conducted throughout Kiribati was instrumental in providing an opportunity for many in Kiribati to receive a birth certificate.

notification, and supporting coordination mechanisms such as the CRVS Committee.

At a community level, a high value is placed on the importance of birth registration in Kiribati. As indicated by the Director of the MHMS, "People feel like it is their right to register." Mantarae from the Civil Registry Office believes that the increase in birth registration numbers can be attributed to joint ministerial and agency efforts to capture the backlog of unregistered births. Since 2009, there have been a series of mobile campaigns to the outer islands to clear the backlog of unregistered children. These mobile campaigns helped to reach the most marginalized villages in the outer islands. "People know the importance of birth registration now," says Mantarae. It is believed that this increase of awareness about the importance of birth registration at birth also reflects a growing sentiment in Kiribati for the importance of child protection.

At a national level, there is an increasing value placed on birth certificates as an official document. A number of activities now require proof of identity, such as applying for a passport or education overseas, opening a bank account, or withdrawing from the Kiribati Providence Fund. At a household level, this is placing an increased value on obtaining a birth certificate for children when they are born.

## CHALLENGES, LESSONS AND SUGGESTIONS

Kiribati is comprised of 33 islands spread over a vast distance. Transport systems are limited and expensive, Internet connection is unreliable, and it is often difficult to transmit information electronically to a central database. This is placing a huge dependence on the manual transfer of forms, resulting in forms being misplaced and never reaching the Civil Registry Office in South Tarawa. There are reports of lost forms never reaching the main database. Many people working in this area state that the system has improved considerably in the past five years due to ongoing support from UNICEF. As stated by Mantarae, "The system is getting better."

Following are issues raised as key priorities for ongoing work in this area:

### The need for a more centralized system

There is a need for clarity and agreement around the primary roles and responsibilities of the sectors involved in CRVS to further define cooperative mechanisms for moving forward with assessment and planning work. HIS is currently developing the HIS reporting policy which will support this initiative.

A key focus of the CRVS Committee in Kiribati is to develop a centralized database to manage the data. This has been flagged as a future priority for the group. At present, there are two databases operating at the Central Hospital, both capturing birth registration information – one maintained by the Civil Registry Officer based at the hospital, the other managed by HIS. In the short term there is a need to merge the data from the two databases. In the medium to long term, there is a need to ensure a coordinated system to collect and compare data collected through the two agencies.

### Addressing the paper-based system

Paper forms capturing the data is sent from health clinics to the Senior Health Information Officer at HIS on a monthly basis. It is estimated that up to 20 per cent of information regarding births is not captured within the HIS database due to the forms not arriving from the outer islands. The paper-based system employed by the Island Clerks on the outer islands is described as "repetitive" and leaves room for human error. Paper-based documentation is required under the current legislation and ongoing legislative reform efforts are working to address this constraint. National Statistics estimates that a large percentage of the forms from the outer islands are either not correctly filled in or not received by the Civil Registry Office in South Tarawa. This issue has been highlighted as a priority by the Civil Registry Office which is working closely with the CRVS Committee, with support from the BAG group to identify and implement a more streamlined system. This includes changes to the legislation that would allow health workers in the clinics to register the births. At present, they are not formally allowed to register the births, but to encourage parents and family members to take Birth Notification Forms to the Island Clerks to officially fill in the logbooks.

### Need to capture children born outside the system/clinics

The MHMS estimates that (with the exception of South Tarawa) each health clinic services 300 people. Whilst actual numbers are unknown, HIS states they are aware that not

all births are captured, particularly in the outer islands. This is recognized by the Director of MHMS, Dr Teatao Tiira, "There is a need to capture children born outside the clinics". He suggests that this could include incorporating birth registration into existing health systems such as the immunization schedule.

### Strengthened capacity

Support for strengthened capacity is required at the health clinics, Island Clerks and within the Civil Registry Office in Bairiki to support improved data collection. There is also a need to build the capacity of nurses to be able to access and interpret the data to support their work. As previously indicated, it is also suggested that there is a need for more resources to analyse the data in order to support evidence-based decision-making.

It is well documented that nurses don't have the time to register births at the two key hospitals in South Tarawa. This is managed at the Central Hospital through the deployment of the Civil Registry Officer in the maternity ward. However, it is suggested that the health clinics do have the time and capacity to register births while the babies are still in their care. It is reported that most mothers and babies stay in hospitals for 24 hours (until at least after the baby's first immunization dose). It is suggested that birth registration could occur as an additional task when nurses are administering the baby's first immunization. This option would have to be further explored in terms of timing and capacity.

The system employed by the Civil Registry Office may also need to be reviewed to be streamlined to iron out ambiguities. For example, the Civil Registry Officer at the Central Hospital only inputs information into the system "once both parents sign". The Officer works full time at the hospital Monday to Friday only, and it is unclear what safeguards are in place to capture births occurring over the weekend when the Officer is not at the hospital, as well as the fate of the birth registration forms that aren't signed by both parents.

### Unreliable Internet

Limited Internet connection (especially in the outer islands) detracts from ongoing efforts to establish a centralized system. Most of the outer islands don't have access to Internet. Kiribati is currently planning for future upgrades of their IT systems related to CRVS, primarily through the HIS at the MHMS and Civil Registry Office. The CRVS Committee with support from BAG and UNICEF has flagged the importance of improved IT to centralize the CRVS system and promote good reporting and sharing practices.

### Cost of registering births

While it is free to register a birth within the first 12 months of a child's life, it is noted that the late fee structure does deter people from undertaking late registration. There also seems to be confusion about the cost of late registration, as well as a discussion that the fee needs to increase from relatively affordable to potentially restrictive.

## NEXT STEPS

### Strengthening CRVS Committee

There is potential to support the ongoing work of the CRVS Committee to implement highlighted priority areas. This includes undertaking a legislative review and addressing key priorities such as gaps in how to monitor how people can access records (identity theft).

### Opportunistic registration

The CRVS Committee recognizes the importance of tapping into existing community structures and systems in order to capture information on birth registration. This is indicated by the Director of the MHMS, "We don't need to create extra systems" and echoed by the Senior Health Information Officer of HIS at the Central Hospital, "Data might be picked up in other ways". An example of this is the first immunization dose within the first 24 hours, or at subsequent immunization appointments. Mothers have a strong awareness of the need to immunize babies, there is an opportunity when mothers take their babies in for immunization to ensure babies are registered.

The other example of "opportunistic registration" highlighted by the National Statistics office is through the National Census. Conducted every five years, this is an opportunity to capture the number of people registered within the household. At present the census records the number of children living within a household. The National Statistician signalled that there is an opportunity to include a question about whether the children living in that household are registered, or to capture information about parent's intentions to have their children registered, including any barriers restricting registration. This information could support further national efforts to design programmes and interventions within existing systems to support universal registration efforts within Kiribati.

### More outreach/mobile campaigns to the outer islands

There are plans to implement a number of information campaigns on the outer islands. The purpose is twofold: firstly, representatives from the Civil Registry Office visiting the villages as part of the campaigns work with local contacts to ensure that all children are registered; and secondly, the officers have the opportunity to work with Island Clerks and nurses from the health clinics to raise awareness about changes in the birth registration systems, and larger policy issues (particularly as part of information campaigns around the new legislation supporting child protection in Kiribati).

It is estimated that parents and other family members often travel by motorbike or car usually within the first 2-3 months of a child's birth to register them with the Island Council. This hints at a finite time that the parents or other family members would register the child. This information may signal the best times to conduct outreach/mobile campaigns.

## Child Protection

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