die in childbirth than women in their twenties. Their children are also less likely to survive. If a mother is under 18, her baby’s chances of surviving the first year of life are about 20 per cent more likely to survive compared to a child born to a mother with no education; the odds increase to 80 per cent when the mother has obtained a secondary education. Empowering women socially and economically can establish another path towards improving child survival. In many countries, women are deprived of basic decision-making responsibilities, even concerning their own health or that of their children.

Promote social equity

Because they are poor and disenfranchised, millions of women and children have been excluded from social services. Thus, particularly in remote areas, parents often do not see the benefits of their own citizenship, let alone the benefits that birth registration would confer on their children. Furthermore, even when parents do plan to register a birth, the high cost of registration and long distances to registration centres often act as powerful deterrents. High cost in particular was revealed by a recent UNICEF analysis to be the primary reason for the lack of birth registration in no fewer than 20 developing countries, resulting in large disparity disparities between rich and poor children. In the United Republic of Tanzania, where overall birth registration is very low, there is a strong disparity between rich and poor, with only 2 per cent of the poorest fifth of children being registered compared to 25 per cent of the richest fifth.

Achieving universal birth registration requires governments, parents and communities to work together to make birth registration a priority, and an integrated approach – such as combining national immunization campaigns with birth registration campaigns – often provides the best strategy. Where such cooperation has been achieved, it has led to remarkable results even in the most trying circumstances. In Afghanistan, in 2003, a nationwide campaign to register all children under the age of one was combined with the country’s National Polio Immunization Days. The campaign was expanded in 2004 and had reached 2 million children under five by mid-October of that year. See References, page 105.

The right to a name and a nationality is well established by the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which explicitly calls in article 7 for the registration of a child immediately after birth. Yet every year the births of around 51 million children go unregistered. These children are almost always from poor, marginalized or displaced families or from countries where systems of registration are not functional, and the consequences for their health and well-being are often severe and long-lasting.

Although sub-Saharan Africa has the highest proportion (16 per cent) of children not registered at birth, South Asia, with a corresponding ratio of 64 per cent, has the highest number. The challenges are particularly daunting in some countries, such as Afghanistan, Bangladesh, the United Republic of Tanzania and Zambia, where birth registration rates are very low due to the absence of effective and functioning birth registration systems. In Bangladesh and Zambia, UNICEF estimates that only 10 per cent of births are registered, while in the United Republic of Tanzania the registration rate is just 8 per cent.

Birth registration and access to health care in particular are closely linked, especially for children under five. For instance, data from several African countries suggest a close correlation between the presence of a skilled attendant at birth and child registration. In Benin, for example, 74 per cent of children who were delivered by a skilled attendant were registered, as compared to 28 per cent of those who were not. Furthermore, the data also suggest that birth registration levels are associated with the number of vaccinations received and with the provision of vitamin A supplementation, as well as with the level of medical care available. For example, in Chad, 38 per cent of children receiving vitamin A supplementation have been registered, compared to 15 per cent of those not receiving supplementation. Conversely, in the absence of birth registration, in many countries children are denied access to vital interventions or programmes.

The challenges encountered by parents in registering the birth of their children often signal and overlap with broader patterns of social exclusion and lack of access to social services. Thus, particularly in remote areas, parents often do not see the benefits of their own citizenship, let alone the benefits that birth registration would confer on their children. Furthermore, even when parents do plan to register a birth, the high cost of registration and long distances to registration centres often act as powerful deterrents. High cost in particular was revealed by a recent UNICEF analysis to be the primary reason for the lack of birth registration in no fewer than 20 developing countries, resulting in large disparities between rich and poor children. In the United Republic of Tanzania, where overall birth registration is very low, there is a strong disparity between rich and poor, with only 2 per cent of the poorest fifth of children being registered compared to 25 per cent of the richest fifth.

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Birth registration: An important step towards accessing essential services

The latest estimates indicate that, on average, almost 1 out of every 4 adults (defined here as those age 15 and over) is illiterate. Almost two thirds are women, according to the most recent data from the UNESCO Institute for Statistics. Research shows that less-educated caregivers generally have poorer access to information on basic health care than their better-educated peers. Thus, in turn, can lead to ill-informed decisions about when and how to seek care for sick children. In contrast, evidence from Bangladesh shows that a child born to a mother with primary education is about 20 per cent more likely to survive compared to a child born to a mother with no education; the odds increase to 80 per cent when the mother has obtained a secondary education.

Promote social equity

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