



PROOF OF BIRTH

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CHAPTER 9

Plan International's birth registration program in Nepal

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A name and nationality is every child's right, enshrined in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and other international treaties.¹ Birth registration and birth certificates are a stand-alone right, as well as an enabler for accessing other basic rights and benefits, such as education, protection and health care. While the right to birth registration is rarely contested by governments, prioritising implementation of this right in developing countries — which often face conflict, disasters, severe food shortages, and high rates of infant mortality — can be challenging. Civil society therefore has an important role to play in facilitating birth registration so that children can enjoy all the benefits that flow from the realisation of this right.

While existing research and literature on birth registration explains the many barriers to implementing effective birth registration systems, there has been less empirical research into the practical benefits of birth registration at both the individual (micro) and government (macro) level. Responding to this gap in research, Plan International undertook research into how birth registration directly benefits individual children and the extent to which birth registration is used by governments for planning and policy purposes. Based on this research, it produced the report *Birth Registration and Children's Rights: A Complex Story* in order to strengthen its birth registration programming and guide its international advocacy on this issue.²

In conducting this research, Plan undertook case studies in India, Kenya, Sierra Leone and Vietnam. These countries were selected because they are representative of global variations in geography, levels of birth registration, and economic and international development — all factors considered likely to impact on the benefits thought to be associated with birth registration.³ Data was collected through a mixture of interviews, focus group discussions and statistical analyses.

The key recommendations formulated from the research, include:

- birth registration programs should be implemented through a holistic and integrated approach, not in isolation;

- organisations involved in birth registration programs need to be aware of potential unintended consequences that may flow from offering incentives and initiatives to promote universal birth registration;
- there needs to be a contextual approach to birth registration, with efforts concentrated on increasing birth registration rates among the most vulnerable, excluded and severely impacted girls and boys; and
- birth registration should be seen as a planning and policy issue, with a focus on advocacy for effective, comprehensive, and rights-based civil registration and vital statistics systems.⁴

What do these findings have to do with Australia? Well, Australia has not yet achieved universal birth registration. Although there is limited data available, it is clear that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, and those from culturally and linguistically diverse communities, are over-represented within the number of unregistered births and/or those who do not have a birth certificate. There is also an over-representation of unregistered births in rural and remote locations. Barriers to birth registration experienced by these communities in Australia mirror those experienced by minority groups in Nepal. While Nepal is a developing country and is economically, politically and socially vastly different to Australia, the experiences and barriers that Indigenous and culturally diverse groups face when accessing birth

registration are similar. Therefore, achievements and lessons learnt in Nepal can usefully inform efforts to strengthen the Australian birth registration system.

Case study: increasing birth registration in Nepal

Plan International works alongside the Government of Nepal to increase the rate of birth registration across the country. Through this joint program, the rate of birth registration, in districts where Plan operates, has risen from 42% to 70%. Like Australia, Nepal struggles to ensure equal access to government services due to cultural diversity, geographical constraints and centralised governance. Rural and remote culturally diverse communities have greater difficulty accessing basic rights like birth registration due to limited availability and access to quality government services. There is also an increased cost to registration due to the need to travel to district offices to obtain the required documentation, a cost that those living in rural and remote communities struggle to meet. Even if parents do make the trip, the district offices are often understaffed, unattended, or unwilling to assist.

Plan International partnered with UNICEF and the Government of Nepal to increase birth registration, targeting vulnerable populations in rural and remote districts. The program aims to strengthen birth registration systems by promoting individual, community, and government action. Success within the Nepal program is due to its holistic, integrated, and community-based approach.

Increasing community awareness

Educating individuals about their right to registration is vital to achieving universal birth registration. If communities are unaware of their basic rights, then how can they access and put pressure on the government, as the duty bearer, to fulfil these rights? Individuals need to be educated on both their right to birth registration and how it can directly benefit them, their children, and their community.

Plan's experience suggests that when conducting awareness-raising activities, it is essential that information is equally accessible to all community members, particularly those most vulnerable to exclusion. There needs to be diverse messaging tailored to particular audiences, using a variety of communication methods to suit all ages and abilities. Awareness activities used in the Nepal program include:

- media campaigns in various local dialects;
- peer-to-peer education;
- door-to-door visits; and
- street dramas (a traditional method of community messaging).

Activities were conducted by community representatives that reflected the community demographics (that is, age, gender and diversity). For example, Plan International trained local child and youth club members on their right to registration. These club members then conducted peer-to-peer awareness raising exercises to ensure all children in

their community were aware of their rights and understood the processes associated with accessing registration. Not only did this increase community awareness, but it empowered children, as rights holders, to play an active role in accessing their right. Children were then able to advocate and educate their peers, parents, community and government on the importance of registration and what registration means to them. Educating and empowering children (as rights holders and potential parents) to conduct birth registration awareness helps to break the cycle of intergenerational poverty seen in Nepal.

Turning to Australia, lack of knowledge about children's right to birth registration and its practical benefits has been expressed by parents as one of the reasons why they don't register their children. Many parents see birth registration as a burden on them, that benefits the government, rather than as a right that can have a long-term positive impact on their child's life. They do not see any immediate benefit of birth registration, and only see the negative consequences of non-registration many years later when that child wants to obtain documentation like a tax file number, driver's licence or passport. Therefore, increasing community awareness about the importance and benefits of birth registration is essential to achieving universal birth registration in Australia. Handing out generic pamphlets in hospitals to new mothers at a time when they are sleep deprived and adjusting to their new role may not be an effective approach to increasing awareness and encouraging behavioural change.

Learning from Plan International's successes in Nepal, it is vital that the Australian governments take a community-focused approach when conducting awareness raising activities to strengthen birth registration systems. Activities need to be tailored to meet the needs of individual communities, particularly focusing on Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander, and culturally and linguistically diverse groups. These activities must be developed and delivered by community members themselves in order to be effective and achieve the desired outcome of increasing birth registration.

An integrated approach

Setting up the program in remote locations requires high levels of contextualisation in order to be effective. What works in one program location might not be as effective in different locations, populations or languages. Rural and remote communities often have low literacy rates, poor health indicators and economic insecurity. In these communities, the decision whether or not to register a child might be made following a cost benefit analysis informed by the local context. Is lining up for a vaccination worth the lost income? Or, more specifically, is lining up or travelling for a day(s) to obtain a birth certificate worth a week's income? Communities and individuals should not be put in such a position where they are forced to choose between family income and realising their child's right to birth registration and a birth certificate.

The Australian birth registration system puts some families in a similar situation. As birth registration is not

linked to any other maternal and child health services, parents may be put in a position where they have to pick and choose between these essential services. This is particularly the case if parents have to travel long distances or require someone to accompany them for translation and literacy support. However, if health and social services were integrated, then these parents would not have to pick and choose. Integrating services means combining all required maternal and child health services in the one location at the one time, thus making them more accessible. Integrating services not only improves accessibility, it is also more resource efficient and effective for those delivering the services.

The birth registration program in Nepal is delivered through integrated mobile health clinics. These clinics provide vaccinations, birth registration, and early childhood care and development awareness. Parents access all these services at the one time, in one convenient location. In addition, clinic workers can provide a birth certificate on the spot with no further action required, unlike Australia where registration is a three-phased process: (1) birth notification, (2) birth registration, and (3) applying for a birth certificate (including paying the necessary fee). Linking birth registration with services like vaccinations also increases the rate of registration because parents — usually well informed of the importance of vaccinations — are more likely to use the health clinic when this service is available. Mainstreaming birth registration within food relief and child protection systems has also been found to have the same positive impact.

In Australia, birth registration is not integrated. Registering a child is a stand-alone process, not linked to any of the other maternal or child health services provided by the government. Thus, birth registration becomes an additional process for parents, with a cost and an apparent 60-day time limit. If Australia adopted the integrated model as seen in Nepal, birth registration could be linked to the maternal health nurse's free and compulsory home visits, with registry staff either accompanying the health nurse or health nurses being empowered to register the birth and provide the birth certificate.

Conclusion

Every child has the right to an identity. Plan International's work on birth registration highlights the importance of community awareness and integrated services when seeking to implement an effective and efficient birth registration system. The birth registration program in Nepal has resulted in a significant increase in the number of births registered across the country. The holistic, integrated and community-based approach to birth registration adopted in Nepal has been highly successful. If Australia is to increase birth registration rates within Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander and CALD communities, we must acknowledge the shortcomings in our current system and be open to providing a more integrated and community-based birth registration system.

Like Nepal, access to quality government services in rural and remote Australian communities is difficult, but does not excuse failure to register the birth of every child.

As the key duty bearer, the Australian government must ensure all children can equally access this right regardless of whether they live in an urban or remote location. Nepal has proven that effective and inclusive birth registration systems are possible in remote and culturally diverse contexts, a lesson Australia needs to learn.

Endnotes

- 1 Articles 7 and 8 of the *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, and Article 24 of the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights*.
- 2 Plan International, Surrey, UK, 2014, retrieved from <https://plan-international.org/aboutplan/resources/publications/campaigns/birth-registration-research/>.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Ibid.