EXPERIENCES IN REDUCING INEQUALITIES IN BIRTH REGISTRATION: CASE STUDIES FROM THE PACIFIC

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1

BACKGROUND

A well-functioning civil registration and vital statistics (CRVS) system helps ensure that every person has a legal identity, facilitating access to the benefits and protections of the State. CRVS systems are also the preferred data source for many demographic statistics. The need for strong CRVS systems is well-recognized in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development with the aim of providing legal identity for all, including birth registration, a target in and of itself (16.9).[1] CRVS is critical for both achieving and monitoring the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)–102 SDG indicators are dependent upon people's access to birth, death and marriage certificates; a service only CRVS systems can provide. To truly ensure no one is left behind, disaggregated population data will be needed to monitor progress on the most marginalized groups. Data from CRVS systems will be critical to fulfill this need and monitor 106 of the 231 SDG indicators.[2]

However, there are often disparities in completeness of birth and death registration among certain populations. The magnitude of disparity is often unknown, with little or no data to inform who is being left behind and to what extent. Until we have better disaggregated data to understand who is being left behind, these populations will continue to remain largely invisible, and they will not benefit from the rights and protections civil registration provides. Assessing inequalities in the registration of births and deaths among marginalized populations is therefore critical to ensure full inclusion so that disparities among different populations can be addressed.

To ensure progress in registration is truly universal and fully inclusive, the Ministerial declaration to '*Get Every One in The Picture*' in Asia and the Pacific recognized the need to address disparities in civil registration completeness and coverage of marginalized populations. Hence, the Regional Action Framework (RAF) for CRVS in Asia and the Pacific and the Asia-Pacific CRVS Decade 2015–2024 (ESCAP resolution 71/14)[3] calls upon countries to assess any CRVS-related inequalities experienced by population subgroups. Inequality assessments are also key to the realization of the 2030 Agenda for sustainable development in terms of both data and social protection.

Given the importance of inequality assessments and the demand from countries for support (see ESCAP resolution 71/14 and report of 72nd Commission for example),[4] ESCAP initiated a project to develop guidelines and technical support for inequality assessments. The information garnered from inequality assessments should be used to inform future research and policy interventions to bridge gaps in registration between different populations. However, once inequalities have been pinpointed, countries have also identified the need for understanding how best to address them. Information and best practices on how to address inequalities in registration of births and deaths is lacking. Thus, this summary of case studies encompassing good practices to address inequalities in birth registration in Pacific Island countries is meant to serves as a practical resource for countries to ensure all births and deaths are registered so that no one is left behind.

1 https://sdgs.un.org/goals#goals

2 WHO civil registration and vital statistics strategic implementation plan 2021–2025. Geneva: World Health Organization; 2021. Licence: CC BY-NC-SA 3.0 IGO.

3 https://getinthepicture.org/resource/escap-resolution-71-14-asian-and-pacific-civil-registration-and-vital-statistics-decade

4 https://getinthepicture.org/resource/escap-resolution-71-14-asian-and-pacific-civil-registration-and-vital-statistics-decade

2

SAMOA – TAKING REGISTRATION TO DISTRICT HOSPITALS TO REACH REMOTE POPULATIONS

Samoa improved birth registration among hard-to-reach populations through remote registration at district hospitals where staff leveraged the hospital's internet, local birth notification records, and advocacy efforts for the registration campaign.

Delayed birth registration is a sizable problem in Samoa with just 41 per cent of children having their births registered by their first birthday.[5] There are just two registration offices in Samoa, one in the capital of Apia on the island of Upolu, and the other in the village of Salelologa on the island of Savai'i. Families living in the more remote island of Savai'i or who live a greater distance from the registration office in Upolu have lower rates of registration.[6]

In 2021, the United Nations Development Programme Accelerator Lab (UNDP AccLab) formed a partnership with the Samoa Bureau of Statistics Births, Deaths, and Marriages division (SBS) in order to strengthen the birth registration system, which has since expanded to strengthen the CRVS system in Samoa. To kick start the process, UNDP AccLab and SBS embarked on what they termed a 'sensemaking and exploration phase' which allowed the team to identify areas in the birth registration process that could be strengthened to improve registration.[7]

As part of the sensemaking and exploration, the team undertook a detailed analysis of the system, including stakeholder consultations with mothers and pregnant women, men and community leaders, women's village representatives (*Sui Tamaitai o Nuu*), Church Ministers, and health workers to name a few. This helped broaden engagement of government officials and community leaders and informed a better understanding of the problem of delayed registration. The team also conducted field research including focus groups, and observed the birth notification process in hospital, as well as the registration process at civil registration office. These discussions with individuals and communities, and firsthand observation of the process, elucidated the challenges faced in registering births. The team also conducted telephone interviews of 400 individuals to unpack the lack of awareness around the need for timely birth registration, and identify the heart of the problem. These steps, also allowed for community-generated solutions tailored to the needs of community members. The team understood that by partnering with the community, resulting interventions were more likely to be successful, culturally appropriate, socially acceptable, politically feasible, and sustainable.[8]

Community members identified the requirement to present in person at the registration office as one of the primary barriers to birth registration. There is both a travel and opportunity cost for families to register their

5 https://mics-surveys-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/MICS6/East%20Asia%20and%20the%20Pacific/Samoa/2019-2020/Survey%20findings/Samoa%202019-20%20DHS-MICS%20Survey%20Findings%20Report_English.pdf

6 Inequality Assessment Report forthcoming

7 https://www.undp.org/samoa/blog/samoa-acclab-and-sbs-bdm-enhances-access-communities-birth-registration-remote-access

8 https://www.undp.org/samoa/blog/samoa-acclab-and-sbs-bdm-enhances-access-communities-birth-registration-remote-access

children's births at a centralized location. Further, families identified late registration fees, as well as the need to bring the paper birth notification form and the bureaucratic process as additional barriers. Communities requested that the registration process be more accessible to the community both by lowering the cost of registration and by taking registration to the communities themselves.[9]

Knowing that remote registration was a key intervention to improve birth registration, the team began to assess how this could be done. By reviewing the registration data at hand and comparing it with the census data, the team was able to identify which populations were most likely to have delayed registration and identified those in more rural areas as having lower rates of registration. This helped the team to narrow down the areas that would be suitable for remote birth registration.

Previously, the software that was used for registration could only be accessed in the two central registration offices. With funding from UNDP AccLab, and through use of a VPN and firewall for security, backend changes to incumbent software were made to accommodate for remote registration in the field, as well as the printing of birth certificates. With this barrier overcome, the team decided to pilot several modalities for remote registration.

Two rounds of pilot testing were undertaken before the remote registration drive began. The team tested remote registrations using local cell phone networks as well as internet and ICT infrastructure within government-owned facilities. The first pilot test was performed in September 2022 in schools, district development centers, and district hospitals. Through these pilots, the team found several limitations. Families who came to register at the schools or government development centers often did not have birth notifications with them, which resulted in unsuccessful registration. Further, the internet in schools and district development centers was not robust enough to support the registration process. Therefore, it was decided to move registration to district hospitals which have stronger infrastructure. The second round of pilot testing was completed in November 2022 at district hospitals, to iron out all technical and logistical issues before a mass registration event was organized.

Locating remote registration to district hospitals had the important added benefit that most birth notifications for local children in the community already existed at these district hospitals. For families that did not have a birth notification, nurses were able to retrieve them at no additional cost, so as not to delay the registration process. Further, the hospitals were able to increase awareness among the local community about the dates families could come to the hospital for birth registration. The hospitals also had essential services which were required on the registration days, such as toilets, running water and tents to provide shade to those waiting in line.

Many parents register their children's births at the time of school admission in January as a birth certificate is required for school enrollment. As such, the team strategically timed the remote registration process to occur in January, 2023. Given that school-age children are beyond the legal timeframe for registration, there is usually a fee associated with registration. However, the remote registration drive waived the late fee to encourage increased participation.

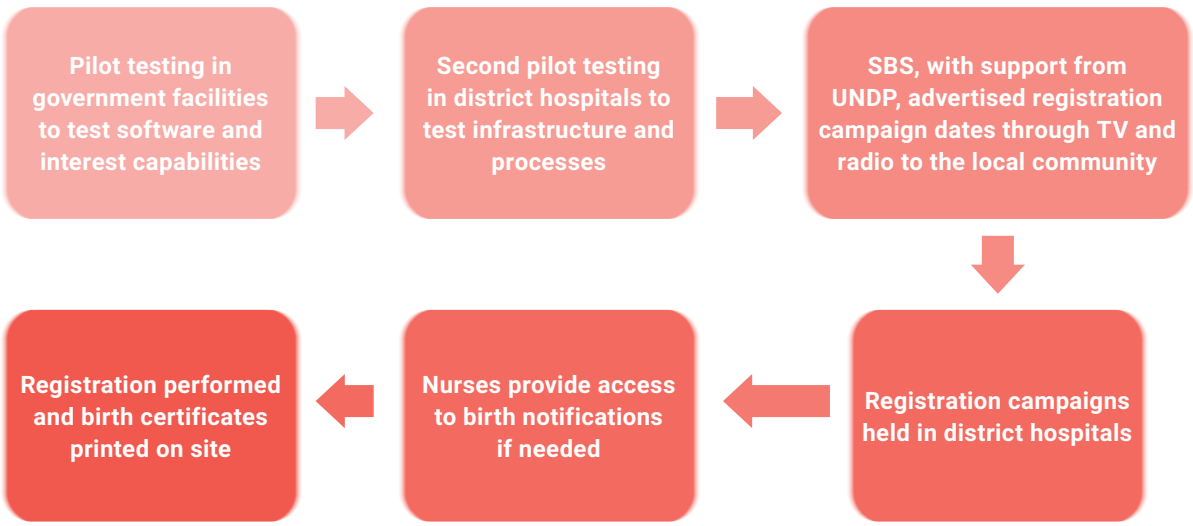
The team spread awareness about the initiative through both mass media such as radio and TV campaigns, as well as local word of mouth using the district hospitals' community networks and contact with the public. The team undertook a mass registration campaign from January 11-27, 2023, visiting all district

9 https://www.undp.org/samoa/blog/samoa-acclab-and-sbs-bdm-enhances-access-communities-birth-registration-remote-access

hospitals in Samoa. The number of days in each hospital was planned according to the population enumerated in the census of that district. All registration office staff travelled to the field to support the campaign, as well as local Women Village Representatives, who provided information to parents and helped ensure that they had the necessary documentation for registration. Locating registration services in district hospitals had an additional benefit of connecting parents with healthcare providers, allowing them to access information on immunizations and regular check-ups for their children. This campaign resulted in double the number of daily registrations, when compared to the same month in the year prior (2022).

Whilst this intervention was very successful and is expected to be undertaken again in the future, regular decentralization of birth registration in Samoa will require a legislative change because the law requires the presence of the Registrar or Deputy Registrar for all registrations. Further investigation into amending legislation to better support remote registration, along with increased partnership with district hospitals for outreach into the community, are primary considerations for future remote registrations.

Figure 1: Remote registration process supported by UNDP AccLab in Samoa



3

FIJI – SOLUTIONS THROUGH ECONOMIC INCENTIVES

Economic incentives resulted in increases in birth registration of over 600% among children born to single mothers and among iTaukei children.

Fiji is comprised of more than 300 islands and more than 500 islets.[10] Approximately 42 per cent of Fiji's population lives in rural areas, including remote outer islands, which can make registering births in a timely manner challenging. Due to the challenges in accessing civil registration offices, many parents in Fiji delay the registration of their child's birth until they reach school age. iTaukei children are least likely to have their births registered within the legal timeframe, as are children of poorer mothers, single mothers, and teenage mothers.[11]

In an effort to improve birth registration, the Fiji Government introduced the Parental Assistance Payment Programme (PAPP) from August 1, 2018 to July 31, 2020. Under this program, parents received two cash payments – $500 Fijian dollars at the time of registration, and an additional $500 Fijian dollars when the child attends preschool (around age 5) to support with school supplies, or other needs.

The Parental Assistance Payment Programme was successful in increasing birth registrations within the legally specified timeframe (by the child's first birthday) by 77%. It was particularly effective among the iTaukei population, for whom registrations more than doubled (see **Figure 1** and **Figure 2**). The impact of the PAPP was also seen both among married and single mothers. While the number of registrations among married mothers increased more than 50 per cent on average, there was a 232 per cent increase among single mothers. Further, there was more than a 500 per cent increase among single mothers in July, 2020 compared to the period before the programme (**Figure 3**).

10 https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/fiji/

11 Findings from the recent report: Assessing inequalities in registration of births and deaths in Fiji. https://getinthepicture.org/sites/default/files/resources/Fiji%20CRVS%20Inequality%20Assessment%20Report_1.pdf

Figure 2: **Percentage increase in registered births during the Fiji Parental Payment Assistance Programme (PAPP), compared to the 19 months prior**

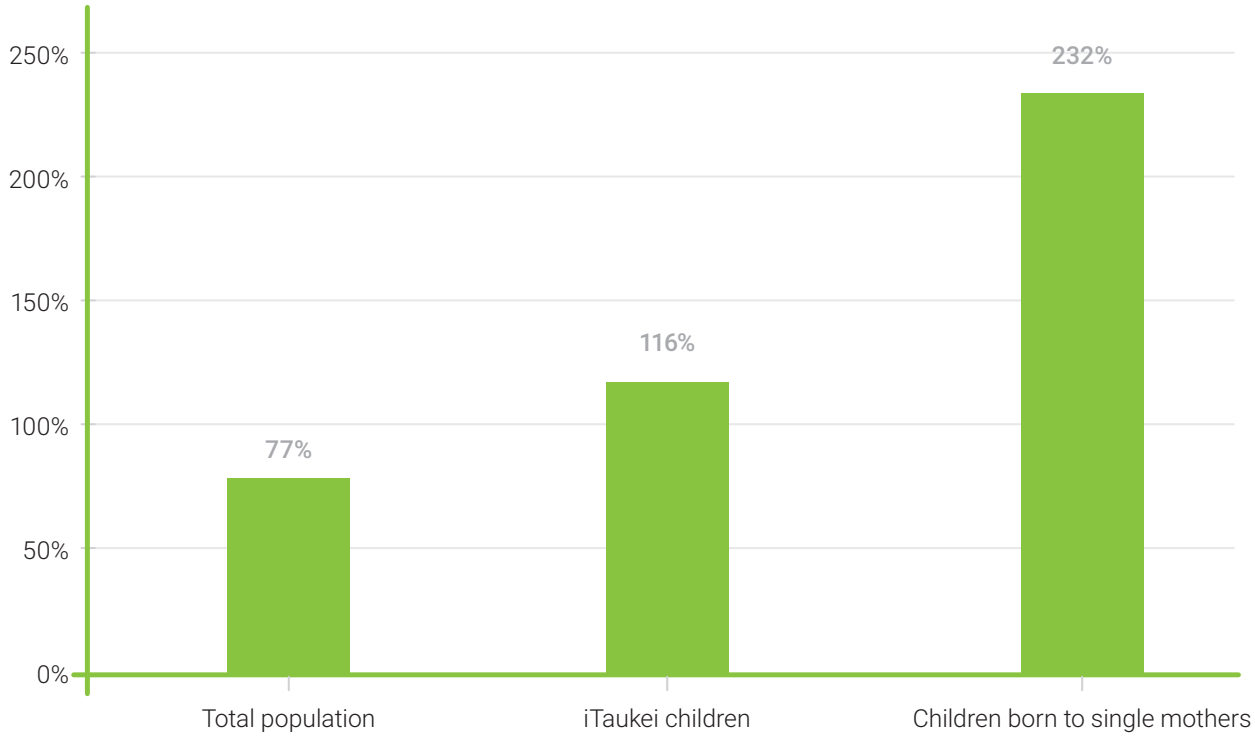


Figure 2 illustrates that timely registrations were averaging around 900 a month prior to the PAPP. This increased to an average of 1600 a month during the programme, peaking in the last month at nearly 2,500 in July 2020 (a 170% increase compared to before the PAPP). Perhaps what is most notable about the effect of the economic incentive is that it had a greater impact among the iTaukei population compared to the non-iTaukei population. **Figure 2** below shows that the uptick in registration seen in the general population is primarily due to increases in birth registration among iTaukeis. While there was a slight increase among the non-iTaukei population (14%) – particularly at the end of the incentive period – iTaukei birth registration increased by 116 per cent on average, and at its peak saw an increase of 246 per cent in July 2020, compared to the month prior to the initiative. Registrations for iTaukei children under age 1 in the month prior to PAPP were averaging around 550 a month, but more than doubled to approximately 1,200 a month, peaking at 1,922 registrations in July 2020.

Figure 3: **Birth registrations by age 1 by month of registration and ethnicity, before, during, and after the Parental Assistance Payment Programme (PAPP), 2017-2020**

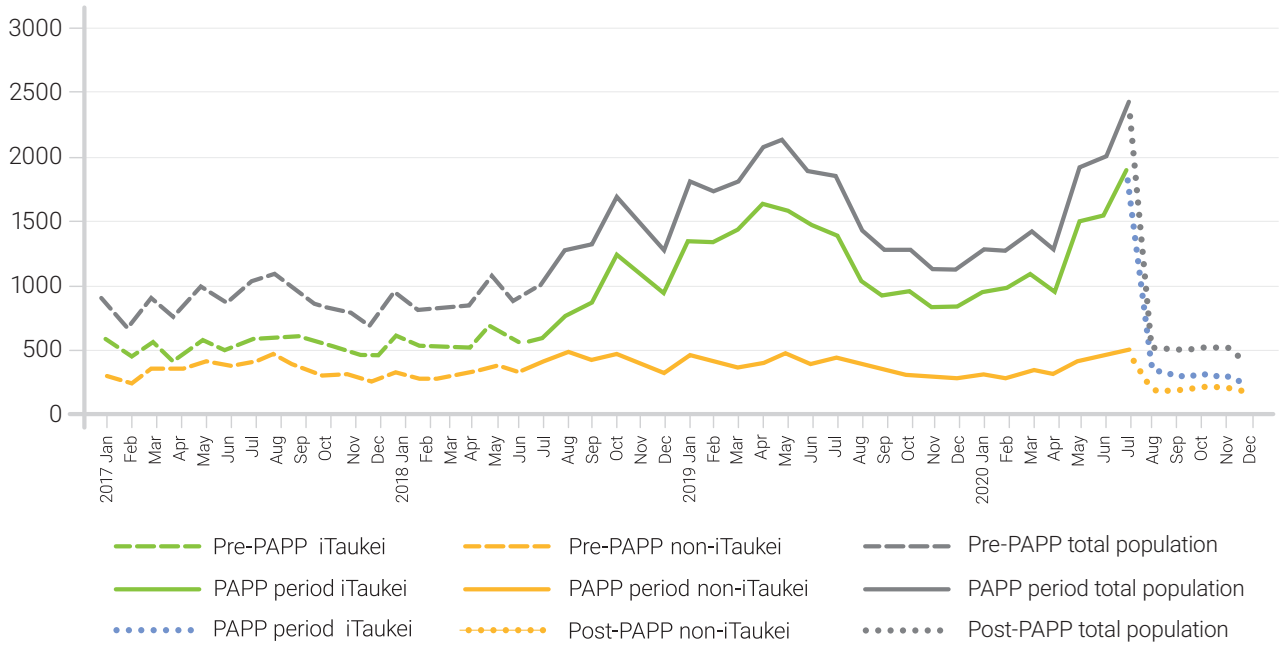
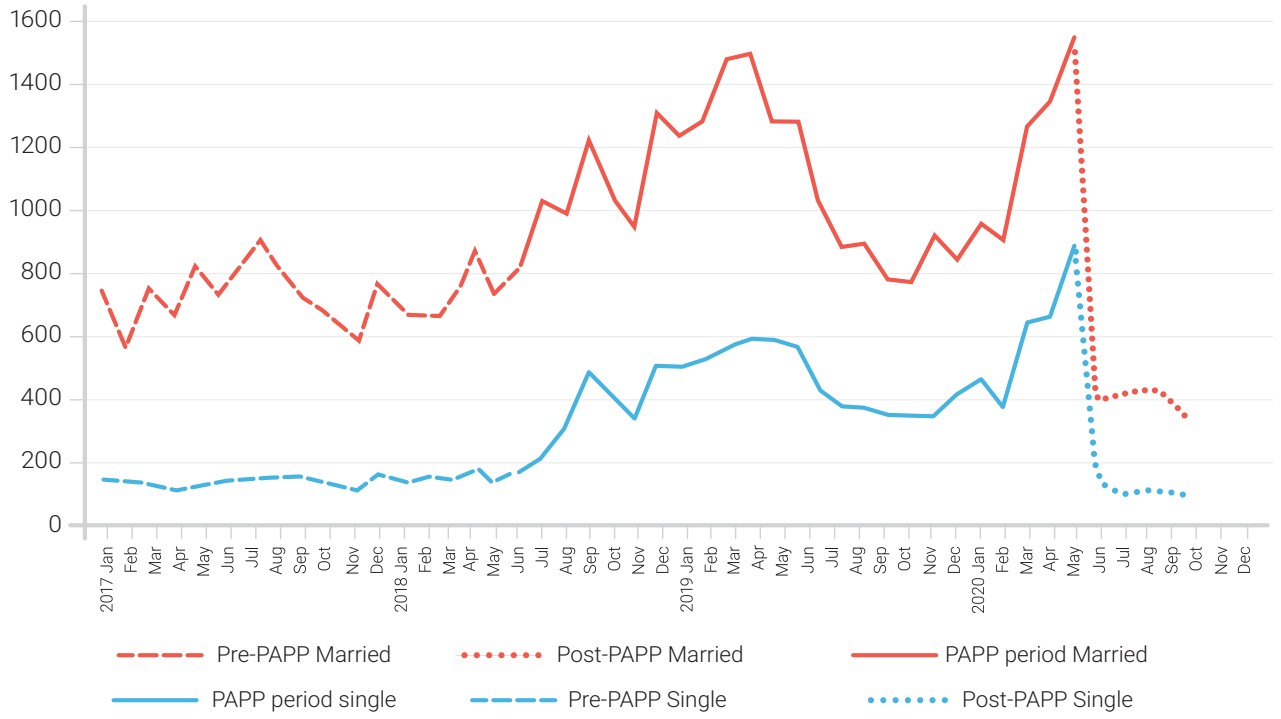


Figure 4: **Birth registrations by age 1 by month of registration and mother's marital status, before, during, and after the Parental Assistance Payment Programme (PAPP), 2017–2020**

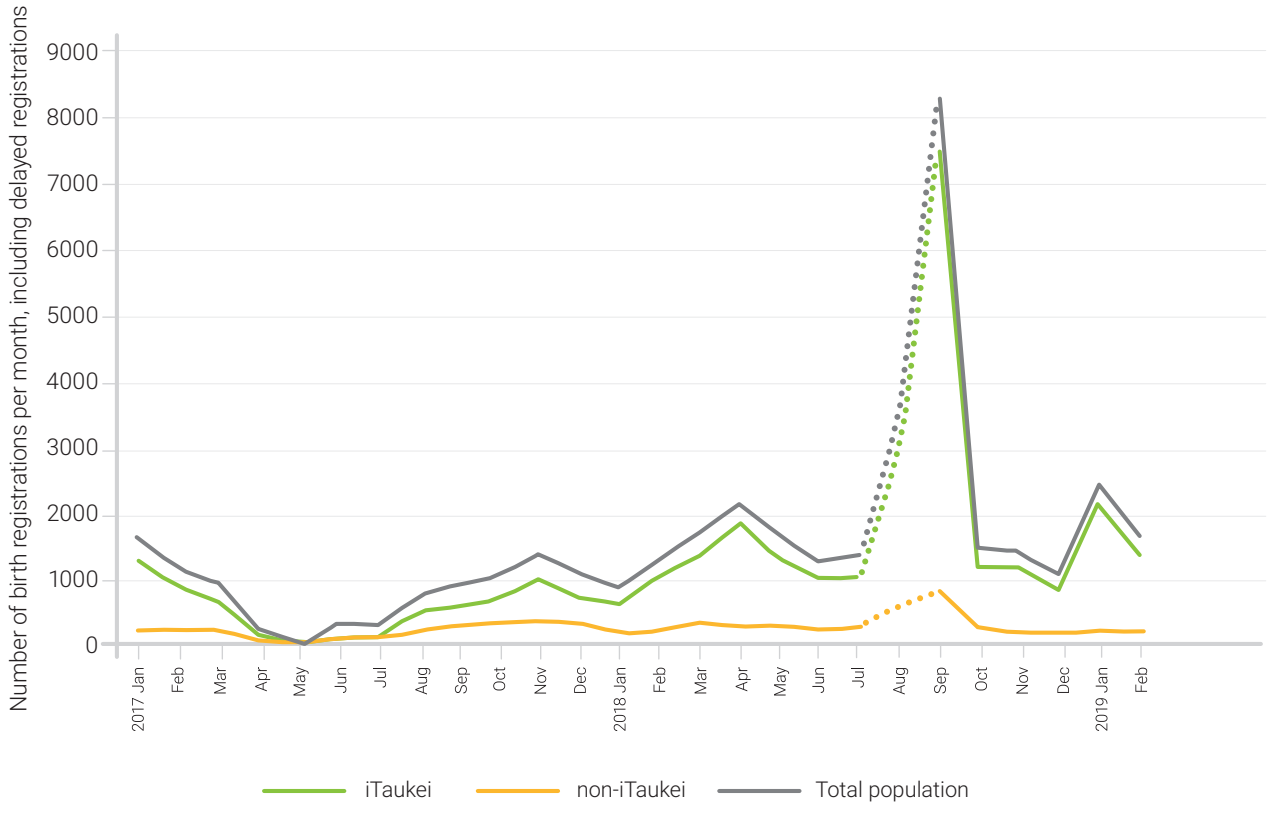


Unfortunately, the trend in increased registrations did not continue once the Parental Assistance Payment Programme expired. Registrations to children under age 1 dropped to 731 in August 2020, and remained around the 800 mark through to the end of 2020.

The end of the Parental Assistance Payment Programme coincided with the COVID-19 pandemic. COVID-19 brought many challenges for countries around the world, including increasing rates of inflation. Fiji was especially hard hit by the increasing inflation rates given that its economy relied heavily on tourism and as a small island nation, needed to import many goods and services.

In order to help families weather the inflation storm, the Government of Fiji introduced the Inflation Mitigation Assistance Programme (IMAP) in 2022. This programme provided families stipends based on family size – $30 FJ per child for 6 months ($180 FJ total). However, a birth certificate was required for proof of each child to receive the stipend. While not the primary intent, the Inflation Mitigation Assistance Programme also provided an economic incentive to register births.

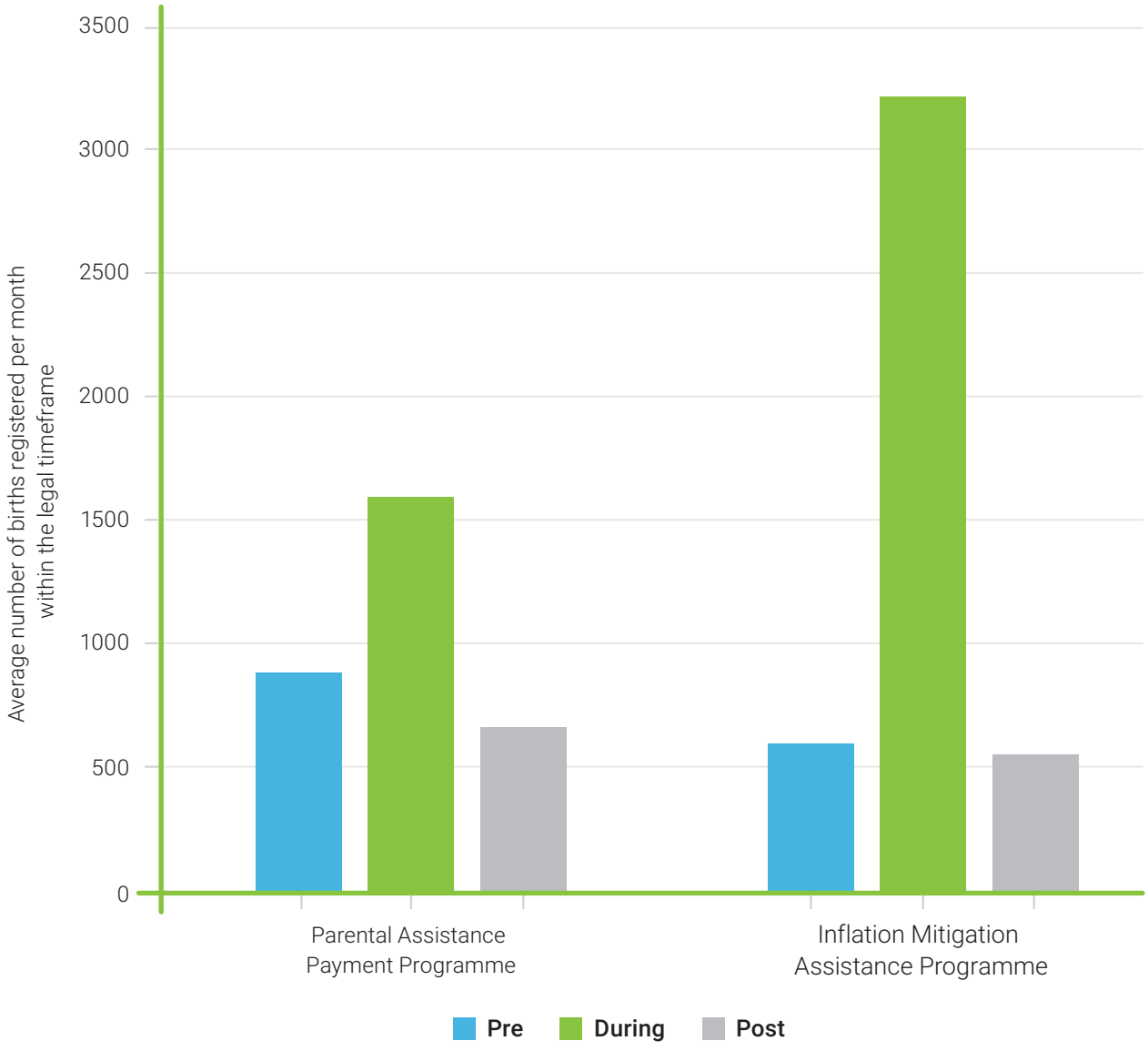
Figure 5: Number of birth registrations per month by ethnicity during the Inflation Mitigation Assistance Programme



The Registrar General's Office registered 11,648 births over the 51-day period the programme was operated (15 August 2022 to 4 October 2022), resulting in an increase of birth registrations by more than 500%, compared to the previous year. (It should be noted that 53% of these registrations were delayed registrations occurring beyond the legally specified time period of one year after birth.) The surge in registrations were particularly significant among iTaukei children and children born to single mothers, where registration increased by more than 600% among these populations. However, as seen after the conclusion of the Parental Assistance Payment Programme, birth registrations declined to their pre-programme era levels upon completion of the Inflation Mitigation Assistance Programme.

Both the Parental Assistance Payment Program and the Inflation Mitigation Assistance Programme provided economic incentives that greatly increased the percentage of births registered within the legally specified timeframe (**Figure 5**). Due to the success of these programmes, the Fiji Government is currently discussing ways to permanently continue economic incentives to ensure that all births are registered.

Figure 6: Number of births registered within the legally specified timeframe prior, during and post economic incentive programmes



4

KIRIBATI LEVERAGES TECHNOLOGY AND LOCAL EXPERTISE TO ENSURE NO CHILD IS LEFT BEHIND

Kiribati has one of the most geographically dispersed populations in the world, thus remote registration campaigns that partner with the local Island Councils, who can identify the most marginalized populations, are critical to ensure children's births are registered in a timely manner.

A Kiribati family in their home. © UNICEFUNI427910Lehn

Kiribati is a pacific island nation made up of 33 islands straddling the equator, spanning about 3,900 km from east to west and 2,100 km from north to south.[12] Kiribati is one of the most geographically dispersed nations in the world,[13] which poses challenges in providing services to the remote populations on outer islands. Roughly 50 per cent of the population lives in the capital of South Tarawa, and the other half of the population is dispersed across the outer islands,[14] many of whom live in villages in small islets off the main island. The Civil Registry in Kiribati developed online registration, as well as a decentralized system to provide greater access to populations living in outer islands. There are registration focal points sitting in Island Councils on each island. However, for populations that live in more remote villages or islets off the main islands, there are additional challenges to register a birth. There are no regular transportation options between the islets and main islands and access to the main islands is generally only possible by chartering a boat. Normally, when several families have business to do on the main island, they will collectively hire a boat to take them back and forth to reduce costs. Due to the cost and additional barrier associated with organizing transportation, many families in Kiribati experience challenges in accessing registration facilities.

Each outer island has an Assistant Social Welfare Officer who also acts as a local registration officer, but this position is shared between various government ministries and is not specific to the Ministry of Justice which houses the Civil Registry Office. There is also an Island Council Clerk who is trained on civil registration and acts as a reliever in the absence of the Assistant Social Welfare Office and provides support with the administrative processes. However, other responsibilities do not allow for these staff to regularly go out into the community to register births.

12 https://www.kiribatitourism.gov.ki/kiribati-pacific-ocean-location/
13 https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/pacificislands/overview
14 https://www.kiribatitourism.gov.ki/islands-to-explore/tarawa-island/

To overcome some of these barriers, UNICEF supported the Civil Registry Office to undertake a mobile registration campaign in 2023, visiting five islands and their islets for two weeks at a time. The team registered 606 births during the campaign, focusing on communities outside of the village where the island council is located. Mobile registration campaigns were done collaboratively with approval from the Island Council Mayor, who informed the local community about the upcoming registration event. The Island Council Mayor was also able to advise the registry team where services were most needed on their island.

To undertake remote registration, the central registration office in Tarawa sent 2-3 staff to the outer islands. Registry staff established mobile registration headquarters in the island Maneabas or community halls. The Maneaba is a culturally significant gathering point in Kiribati culture and is present in every community. The teams established mobile registration sites in community Maneabas for one day and UNICEF supported registration by providing laptops, stationary, a generator and a PA system in communities where awareness raising was also conducted. A local staff member from the Island Council often joined the remote registration team to support registration activities. There was no cost for families to register births during the registration campaign.

Registry staff would enter information onto the laptop along with photographs of supporting documents. This information was sent to the central registration office in Tarawa for review and verification before final registration was completed in the central office. If the family was missing any documentation at the time of registration, the local social work officer provided support in retrieving the missing documents, working closely with the local health worker and health facility which could provide birth notifications, so that the family would be prepared to register during the next registration campaign or present in-person at the island council. If the mobile signal was not robust enough to send information digitally to the central office, registration was done by hand and entered and sent when access to the internet was regained.

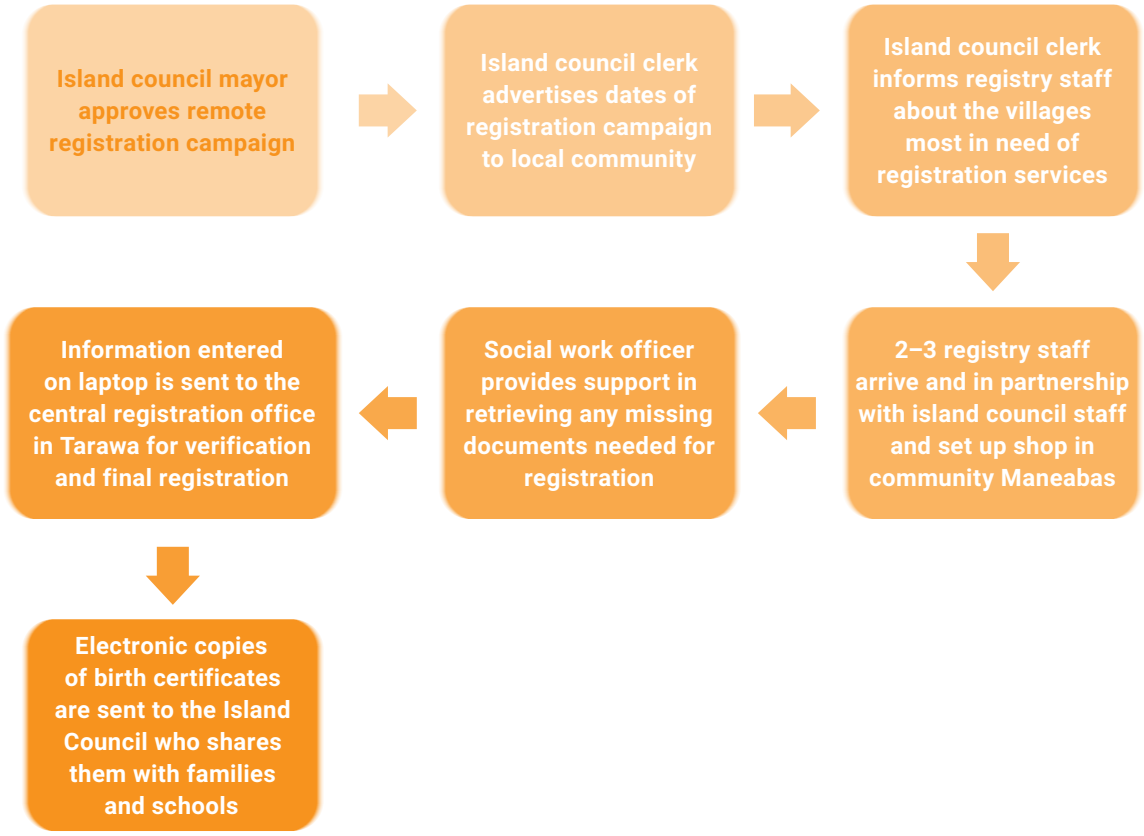
While the remote registration campaigns enabled preliminary registration of births on site, due to the need for verification from the central office, digital copies of birth certificates were sent at a later date to the local island council. This is beneficial for families as birth certificates are required for children to enroll in school. If the school does not have a copy of a birth certificate on file, they can contact the local island registration clerk who can send electronic copies of birth certificates to the school, the copies of which can also be shared with the families of enrolled children.

Civil registration officer registers births during UNICEF-supported mobile registration campaign in Tab North in 2023.
Photo courtesy of UNICEF Kiribati Field Office

Civil registration officers register births during UNICEF-supported mobile registration campaign in a local Maneaba, 2023.
Photo courtesy of UNICEF Kiribati Field Office

The Kiribati government understands the importance of bringing birth registration services to those living on remote islands and hard-to-reach communities. As a result of the success of remote registration campaigns, UNICEF has supported the purchase of tablets which will allow the team to go door-to-door in remote communities and is also exploring offline modalities to ensure that every child's birth is registered in a timely manner.

Figure 7: Remote registration process supported by UNICEF in Kiribati



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