

NIGERIA

Impact Evaluation of the UNICEF Supported Birth Registration Programme in Nigeria 2012–2016

What was the impact of the Birth Registration Programme in Nigeria?

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EDITORIAL INSIGHT

This evaluation was commended for achieving far-reaching influence both at the national level and within UNICEF, successfully leveraging: increased political commitment to support more birth registration centres in Nigeria; an increase in demand for birth registration; adoption in 17 Nigerian states of procedures on birth registration for officials and community leaders; and a redesign of UNICEF programming to encompass a more integrated approach with multisectoral partnerships.

The panel commended the evaluation's theory-based, hybrid design, driven by the motivation not only to understand the 'quantum' of observed changes, but also to develop insights into how the changes have occurred. The evaluation process entailed substantial engagement with community and government stakeholders.

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A birth registration session in a camp for internally displaced people in Damaturu, Yobe State, Nigeria.



“Every child has the right to be somebody.” This simple campaign message speaks volumes about the challenges faced by one in three children across the world whose births are not officially registered. Deprived of the fundamental right to an identity, name and nationality, these children may find it difficult to access protection, education, social services and the benefits of development interventions. Unregistered children may also be more vulnerable to trafficking, child labour and, especially in the case of girls, forced marriage.

Birth registration has risen dramatically in Nigeria over the years. Even so, only 41.5 per cent of children under 5 years of age were registered in 2011, with almost twice as many rural children remaining unregistered as those living in urban areas. Consequently, Nigeria’s National Population Commission (NPopC) implemented the Birth Registration Programme (BRP) from 2012 to 2016, with the support of UNICEF Nigeria.

The BRP aimed to boost birth registration rates across the country through legal and policy reform, partnerships and innovations in technology as well as improved behavioural change communication. An evaluation carried out in 2019 found that, while the programme had accelerated birth registration rates and strengthened service delivery, it had fallen short of immediate impact-related targets and had failed to exert a broader social influence. It had also been unable to establish a usable birth registration database.

PURPOSE

This first independent impact evaluation of the BRP aimed to establish evidence of its success and offer recommendations for future initiatives in this area. The timing of the evaluation coincided with the approval of Nigeria’s National Strategic Action Plan on Civil Registration and Vital Statistics (CRVS) Systems 2018–2022. The findings support the need for a functional database for birth registration in Nigeria.

The evaluation also posed two hypotheses:

- An increase in understanding regarding the advantages of birth registration leads to an increase in birth registration rates.
- An increase in birth registration rates leads to increased immunization and school enrolment, and to decreases in female (child) genital mutilation, child trafficking and child marriage.

APPROACH

The evaluation used a mixed methods approach. Primary qualitative data collection took place through key informant interviews (61 individuals), focus group discussions (40 groups), unstructured field observations and informal discussions with stakeholders. Further evidence was collected through a workshop and field photographs. Data collection took place both in Nigerian states where media promotion of birth registration had taken place and in others where it had not.

Quantitative data were gathered by surveying 2,700 households from 80 local government areas across 10 states, and these were supplemented with existing data from multiple sources, including the Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS) programme.

BOX 1 WHAT IS BIRTH REGISTRATION?

Birth registration is the continuous, permanent and universal recording within the civil registry of the occurrence and characteristics of births in accordance with the legal requirements of a country. Article 7 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child defines birth registration as a fundamental right, and Sustainable Development Goal Target 16.9 aims to provide legal identity for all, including birth registration, by 2030.

Most respondents referred to putting food on the table, shelter, health care and education as priority needs for their children. Birth registration did not feature amongst the top five priorities of parents.

– Evaluation report



Limitations

The BRP evolved over its duration, and had neither a formal budget nor set targets in place at the outset. Additionally, programme documentation and monitoring were poor. As such, a comprehensive evaluation of programme efficiency was not possible.

KEY FINDINGS

The evaluation found that the BRP had, overall, been successful. The programme was highly relevant to the needs of children in Nigeria, and aligned with government priorities – for example, birth registration was one of the six commitments of the National Priority Agenda for Vulnerable Children in Nigeria. Shortcomings in the design and delivery of the BRP, however, point to the need for NPopC and UNICEF Nigeria to better plan and budget for future programmes from inception.

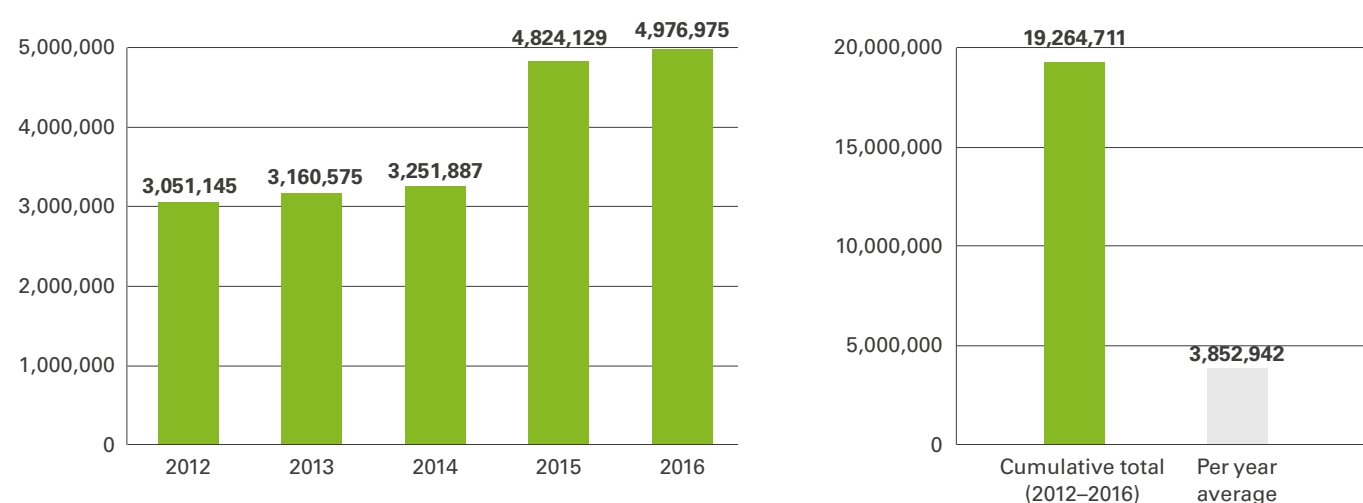
Many more children registered, but still not enough

The number of children under 5 years of age registered annually in Nigeria rose from 3 million in 2012 to an impressive 5 million by 2016, bringing the total number of registered children to 19.2 million. This represents an increase of over 100 per cent in the number of births registered.

However, the BRP fell short of its target: a 20 percentage point increase in birth registration rate. MICS 2011 and 2016 data showed an increase of only 5.3 percentage points: from 41.5 per cent in 2011 to 46.8 in 2016. In addition, the gap in registration rates between the highest and lowest income groups increased from 41.9 per cent in 2007 to 64.9 per cent in 2016. The BRP failed to achieve its immediate impact-related targets for the following reasons: (i) ambitious targets; (ii) insufficient engagement of traditional and religious leaders; iii) limited scale-up of integrated birth registration with health services owing to a lack of funding; iii) low harmonization of birth registration processes across local governments; and iv) limited scale of media campaigns.

FIGURE 1

Birth registration numbers for children under 5, 2012–2016



Source: Calculations from Household Survey Data Household survey.



Poor data management impeded the civil registration and vital statistics system

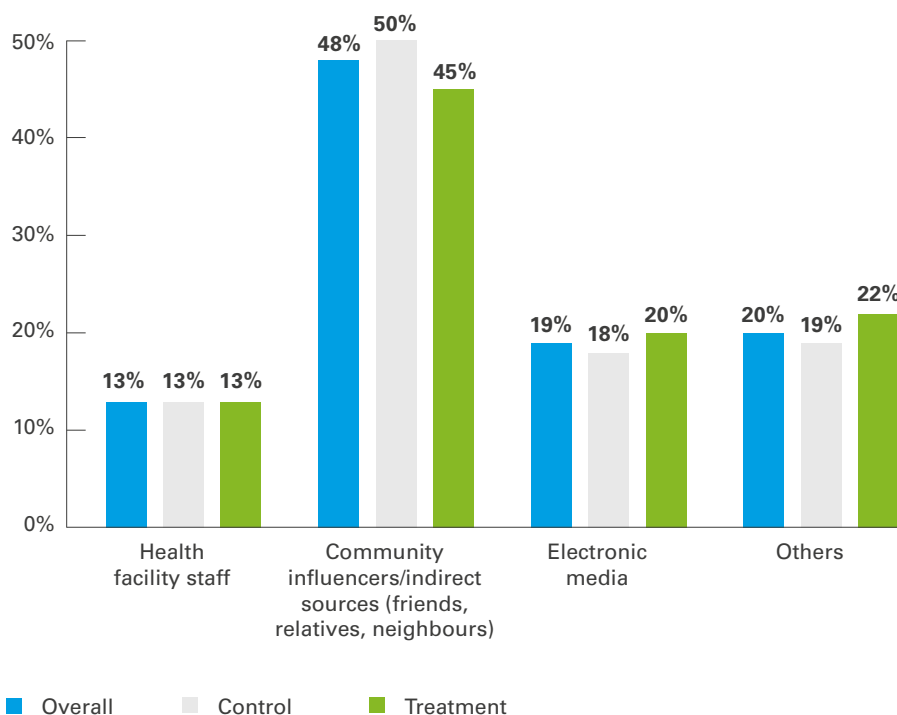
The BRP was intended to provide a complete birth registration database that would harmonize with a fully functioning CRVS system accessible to all stakeholders, enabling them to plan and implement social services effectively. The inability of NPopC to collect and upload birth registration forms (from 2007 onwards) and its failure to produce CRVS reports (from 2008 onwards) undermined this goal, however.

Promotion works, but birth registration remains a low priority

The evaluation found evidence of a strong positive correlation between media campaigns on the benefits of birth registration and birth registration numbers surging by 100 to 250 per cent. Despite BRP efforts, parents continue to prioritize health, education and providing food for the family over birth registration, which is perceived as a secondary priority, useful to secure services such as education. There is a lack of awareness among parents about the significance of and the processes involved in birth registration. Travel distances and costs are additional obstacles to the registration of children living in poorer rural households.

FIGURE 2

Five key reasons why parents do not register the birth of their children



Source: Calculations from Household Survey Data (HHS).

Note: The sample size was 2,700 households.



Inability to leverage community leaders' influence

Respondents to the evaluation survey reported relying on community influencers and other social networks (48 per cent) rather than electronic media (19 per cent) for information. The BRP media campaigns, however successful they had been, had neither paid sufficient attention to harnessing the influence of traditional and religious leaders, nor engaged with community associations. The programme thus failed to embed within the community the wider significance of birth registration. While a clear association was observed between birth registration awareness and registration rates, the evaluation found no links between increased birth registration rates and either an increase in immunization or school enrolment, or a decrease in female genital mutilation, child trafficking or child marriage.

A pilot to place traditional community influencers at the core of public awareness campaigns had been implemented in 2013 in Nigeria's capital city, Abuja, with promising results. It was not subsequently scaled up, however.

An evolving and imbalanced approach

The evaluation describes the BRP as an "evolving" programme; it lacked a proposal – including a logical framework analysis, and budget – at the outset. Instead, the BRP relied on a stakeholder exercise conducted in 2012 to develop interventions that were incorporated into rolling work plans, with new components added along the way. As a result, inconsistencies in budgets and stated expenditures arose, and a disproportionate emphasis was placed on supply-side components such as reform, partnerships and technological innovations. Only 4 per cent of programme resources were allocated to creating demand for birth registration, and no resources were earmarked for processing the data required to update the CRVS system.

INFLUENCE ON POLICY AND PROGRAMMING

This independent evaluation of the BRP managed to represent the interests of both NPopC and UNICEF Nigeria at a crucial time, as the National Strategic Action Plan on CRVS Systems had just been approved.

Disseminating evidence to shape policy

A dissemination forum in May 2019 allowed UNICEF Nigeria to use the evaluation evidence to advocate for the importance of birth registration to the highest level of government, to development partners and to representatives of all 36 states of Nigeria. Findings were also disseminated to policymakers and have proved valuable in securing policymaker support for implementation of the National Strategic Action Plan on CRVS Systems. The NPopC management team was able to push for an expansion in the number of birth registration centres based on the evidence.

Implementing guidelines for registration

Following the evaluation, UNICEF Nigeria and NPopC developed guidelines for the benefit of officials and community leaders in 17 Nigerian states. These set out the minimum procedures required for birth registration. The evaluation has also had far-reaching effects on integrated programming for birth registration across multiple sectors, particularly around barriers to registration. Almost all of the evaluation's recommendations are being implemented, and technical meetings have been held with government stakeholders to drive this process forward.



Every child has the right to be SOMEBODY.

– Campaign message used on information, education and communication materials





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A statistician registers a child at the National Population Commission office in Makurdi, Benue State, Nigeria.

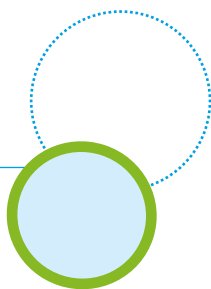
Generating demand for registration

In line with the need to create demand for birth registration among civil society and among parents – who are ultimately responsible for making the decision to register their children – UNICEF Nigeria developed advocacy briefs and shared these with 100 media executives across Nigeria.

Operationalizing the database

The evaluation report stresses the importance of operationalizing the CRVS database, with a focus on strengthening monitoring, documentation and knowledge management systems over the long term. This is to take place within the framework of the National Strategic Action Plan on CRVS Systems, which is being rolled out according to priorities set by NPopC and UNICEF Nigeria. The evaluation also recommends that consultations establish the capacity of these two organizations to achieve realistic impact and outcome targets, and determine what technical assistance and capacity development are required in this regard.





UNICEF Nigeria must take a considered view of the implementation approaches applied in the case of the BRP. Future assistance must strike the balance between 'supply' and 'demand'.

– Evaluation report

BOX 2

EMBEDDING EVIDENCE INTO NATIONAL POLICY, GUIDELINES AND MEDIA ADVOCACY FOR BIRTH REGISTRATION

This independent evaluation was well timed and its findings were disseminated widely for uptake and embedment into:

- implementation of the newly approved National Strategic Action Plan on CRVS Systems, resulting in an increase in the number of birth registration centres in Nigeria
- guidelines on birth registration developed by UNICEF Nigeria and NPopC for 17 Nigerian states
- advocacy briefs shared with the media to generate demand for birth registration
- UNICEF's Child Protection workplan for 2019–2020.

LOOKING AHEAD

A more proactive role for NPopC

As the primary service provider for birth registration in Nigeria, NPopC may have to be more engaged in registration to meet the needs of both newborns and older unregistered children. It can do so by adopting a multipronged approach, through partnerships at all levels – from local and regional government to civil society organizations and bilateral/multilateral donors. The organization must also lead the way in populating the CRVS database, not least by securing the funds it needs to upload its huge backlog of NPopC data on registrations.

A systems strengthening strategy, rather than an evolving approach

An evolving approach that adds components along the way according to donor-led priorities is inappropriate for a programme of this complexity and scale. Targets, approaches, activities and budgets for future birth registration programmes should be identified at the outset, with periodic reviews included so that timely adjustments can be made as required. Ultimately, it is as important to generate demand for birth registration as it is to strengthen the systems necessary to supply this service.



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