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The Positive Impact of Financial Incentives on Birth Registration Completeness in Fiji

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Introduction/Motivation

The Fiji Government through its budget announcements had put in place two separate assistance programmes to assist the poor, needy and underprivileged and these schemes were for children and individuals. These programmes were initiated in 2018 and 2022 respectively. Since Fiji does not have a national ID, the birth registration number was used to identify children who qualified for this assistance. Therefore, the birth certificate was one of the key requirements to roll out such initiatives. These initiatives weren't necessarily designed for improving registration rates but this was one of the unintended impact. The birth registration rate consequently reached approximately 99% in 2019.

Methods/Work performed

The Fijian Government introduced two separate assistance programmes to support families and children from low-income households. The first of these initiatives was the 'Parenthood Assistance Payment Programme' which gave \$1000 to families of newborn children between 2018 and 2019, conditional on a bank account being opened in the child's name (which requires a birth certificate). The second initiative - 'The Inflation Mitigation Assistance' – which was rolled out in 2022 to assist low-income families pay for food and other essential items, also required a birth registration number for each application lodged. Both of these schemes are described in more detail below.

Parenthood Assistance Payment Programme

The Fijian Government through the 2018-2019 National Budget announced the \$1,000 Parenthood Assistance Payment Programme¹ ('**Programme**') for new born children effective from 1 August 2018.

The purpose of the programme was to ensure that no Fijian child starts life without a financial foundation. For eligible children, a bank account was opened in the child's name at a commercial bank and the Government deposited \$1,000 into the bank account. Birth certificate was required to open a bank account in the child's name.

For the majority of applications, the mother was to apply for the programme.

The applicant is the signatory to the bank account and the first \$500 was available immediately to the applicant, and those funds can go towards the purchase of whatever is required for the rearing of the child. The other \$500 stays in the bank account, where it will earn interest, and can be accessed when

¹ Hon. Aiyaz Sayed-Khaiyum. Attorney-General and Minister for Economy. 2018-2019 National Budget Address. www.economy.gov.fj. Updated 4 August 2022. Accessed 19 February 2023. https://www.economy.gov.fj/images/Budget/budgetdocuments/address/2018-2019_National_Budget_Address_-_clean.pdf

Asia-Pacific CRVS Research Forum

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the child is enrolled in year 1 of school. Accordingly, a minimum operating balance of \$500 needs to be maintained in the bank account until the child is enrolled in year 1 of school.

Parents were encouraged to deposit money for the rearing of the child into the bank account, which would drive home the importance of saving, and of financial planning, for more Fijian families.

No fees was charged for maintaining the bank account until the child is enrolled in year 1 of school. Commercial banks were offering interest on the deposits but the interest rates may not be the same for all banks.

Given the incentive from the Government, Fiji had anticipated approximately 99% of on time registration. That is within 12 months of the date of birth of the child. The birth registration increased since the implementation of this program and the full positive impact was seen in 2019.

Inflation Mitigation Assistance

The Fijian government had rolled out to the people of Fiji an Inflation Mitigation Assistance² ('IMA') programme on the 15th of August 2022. The initiative was to assist vulnerable families, children, elderly, and underprivileged from the rapid price increase in basic food and other essentials due to imported inflationary pressures.

IMA also showed the importance of Birth registration as for every application lodged, the Birth Registration Number ('BRN') was compulsory since it one of the unique identifier. The initiative was for 6 weeks.

Given the positive initiative by the Government, Fiji has anticipated an increase in birth registrations and reprints of birth certificates. Approximately 11,000 birth were registered with 6 weeks. This included the on time birth registration as well as late birth registration.

Findings

The likely impact of these financial support programmes were highlighted during the ESCAP-supported Inequality Assessment Project in collaboration with Fiji Bureau of Statistics, involving all key CRVS stakeholders in Fiji. This Project aimed to conduct an in-depth inequality assessment of civil registration using available quantitative data in Fiji. Although different administrative data sources were analysed and presented during this project, the data from the Ministry of Justice is presented here.

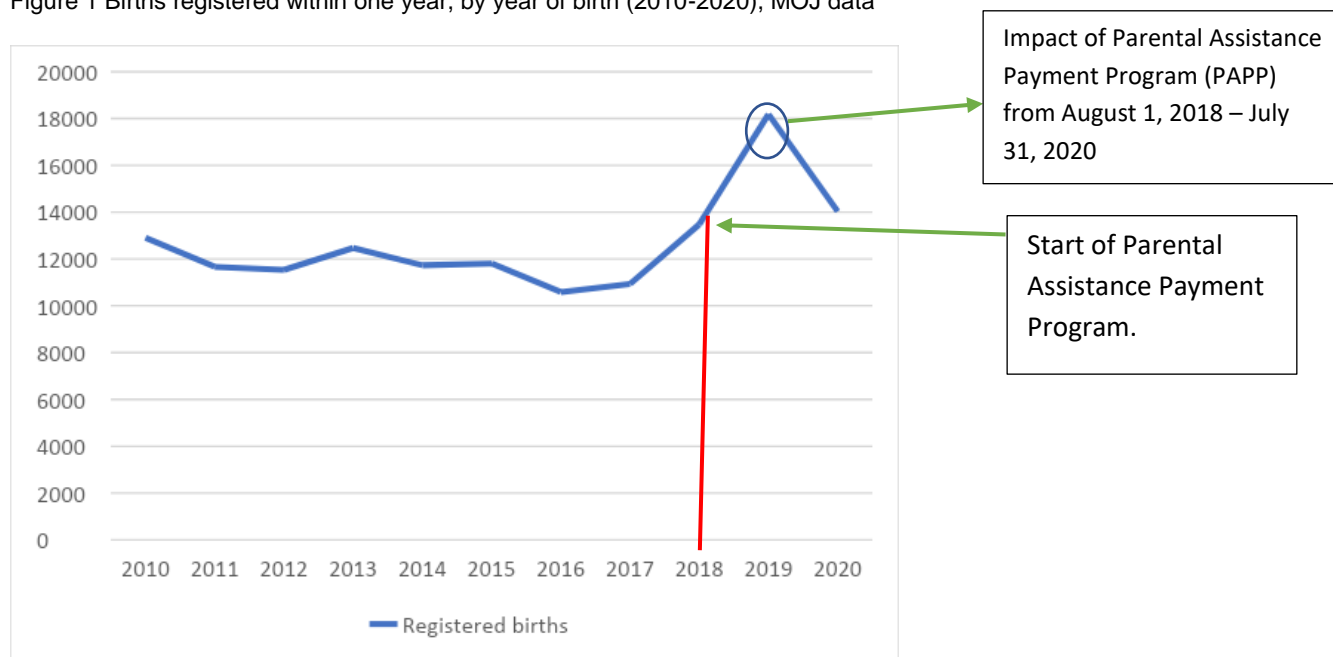
² Shiri Goundar. Permanent Secretary for Economy. Supplement to the 2022-2023 National Budget. www.economy.gov.fj. Updated 4 August 2022. Accessed 19 February 2023. https://www.economy.gov.fj/images/Budget/budgetdocuments/supplements/2022-2023_Budget_Supplement_final.pdf

Asia-Pacific CRVS Research Forum

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During the capacity building workshops as part of this project, CRVS stakeholders analysed trend data from the Ministry of Justice on the number of births registered within one year (Figure 1). A visible increase in the number of births registered was observed in 2018 and 2019 which is hypothesised to be partly due to the 'Parenthood Assistance Payment Programme' initiated in 2018.

Figure 1 Births registered within one year, by year of birth (2010-2020), MOJ data



Although data is not yet available from 2021 onwards to determine the impact of the second financial support programme – 'Inflation Mitigation Assistance' – Ministry of Justice reports that approximately 11,000 births were registered within 6 weeks of the initiative being implemented, due to the increased demand for birth certificates needed to apply for this assistance compared to past 12 weeks (23 May 2022 to 14 August 2023) where only 3,827 births were registered as there was no economic incentive

Discussion

Generally we have observed an increase in birth registrations (including timely registration) when financial incentives are implemented by the government. The results so far show a positive impact of these incentives and can provide the necessary evidence to advocate for continued incentives by the government to bridge the gap in civil registration completeness.

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