



Factor Contributing to Low Uptake of Birth Certificates: An Investigative Study at Mangochi District Hospital, Malawi.

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ABSTRACT

This research project investigated the factors contributing to the low uptake of birth certificates in Mangochi District, Malawi. Birth certificates are essential legal documents that establish a person's identity, age, and nationality. They play a crucial role in accessing various social services, such as education, healthcare, and legal protection. Despite their importance, birth certificate uptake rates remain low in many developing countries, including Malawi. This study aimed at identifying the key factors influencing the low uptake of birth certificates in Mangochi District and propose potential strategies to address this issue. To achieve this objective, a mixed-methods approach were employed, including quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews. A purposive sampling was used to select participants to gather primary data. The quantitative surveys aimed to quantify the level of birth certificate registration and assess demographic variables that might influence uptake. The qualitative interviews provided in-depth insights into the social, cultural, and administrative barriers that hinder birth certificate uptake. These factors include, limited awareness and knowledge about the importance of birth certificates, among the population were identified as significant barriers. Many individuals do not fully understand the benefits and legal requirements associated with birth registration. Secondly, cultural beliefs and practices. The other identified barrier was administrative challenges and associated costs. Based on the research findings, several recommendations were proposed to increase birth certificate uptake in Mangochi District. Firstly, launch awareness campaigns targeting communities, schools, and healthcare facilities has to educate the population on the importance of birth certificates. Secondly, collaborations between government agencies, civil society organizations, and traditional leaders has to be fostered to address cultural barriers and promote birth registration practices. Simplifying administrative processes, establishing mobile registration units, and reducing associated costs can also facilitate the registration process.

Key words: *Birth certificate, Birth registration, collaborations, healthcare, uptake of birth certificate,*

1.0. Background of the Study

Birth registration is a fundamental human right that is critical for the recognition and protection of children's identities and citizenship. It provides evidence of the child's existence, age, and parentage, and is crucial in accessing essential services such as health and education. Despite the importance of birth registration, Malawi has one of the lowest registration rates in sub-Saharan Africa, with only 15% of children below 5 years of age having birth certificates (UNICEF, 2021). This study aims to explore the factors contributing to the low uptake of birth certificates in Mangochi district, Malawi.

Mangochi district is a predominantly rural area located in the southern part of Malawi, with a population of approximately 1.3 million people (National Statistical Office, 2019). The district has high poverty rates, with over 50% of the population living below the poverty line (World Bank, 2021). The low uptake of birth certificates in the district has implications for children's identity, citizenship, and access to essential services such as health and education. Moreover, the lack of access to birth certificates further exacerbates social inequalities in Malawi.

A birth certificate is proof of identity, age, and family relationships, and confirms that a child's birth has been registered. Provided to a child by a civil registry, it allows an individual to make claims of nationality, benefit from government schemes, and open a bank account, travel, and vote. Although a birth certificate does not guarantee protection, it can help protect children from abuse and exploitation, reduce child marriage, allow inheritance to be claimed, and prevent statelessness.

1.2. Main Objective.

The study is conducted to investigate factors that are contributing to low uptake of birth certificate for the newly born babies by the caregivers.

1.3. Specific Objective

1. To ascertain the barriers to acquiring a birth certificate in rural areas

2. To uncover the socio-economic status of parents, affect the uptake of birth certificates in rural areas
3. To suggest policies and strategies can be implemented to increase the uptake of birth certificates in rural areas

2.1. Review of related literature

A preliminary literature review on factors associated with low uptake of birth certificates suggests that this issue is a complex and multifaceted problem. Many studies have identified various factors that contribute to the uptake of birth certificates, including lack of awareness and understanding of the importance of birth certificate, high costs, cultural and religious beliefs, and lack of legal frameworks and policies. For example, a study by UNICEF found that in some countries, particularly in rural and marginalized communities, lack of awareness and understanding of the importance of birth certificate was a key factor in the low uptake of birth certificates. Similarly, a study by World Bank found that difficulties in accessing birth certificate collection centers particularly for those living in remote areas or in communities with poor infrastructure were a major barrier to collect the birth certificate.

Notable supply-side barriers to birth registration are legal barriers, systems issues, poor infrastructure, limited capacity, and limited funding. Poor political commitment, inadequate policies, and a historical lack of investment in CRVS systems have resulted in gaps, laborious processes, duplication, and errors. Integrating the different components of CRVS systems is challenging and often requires coordination across many government departments that may have different and sometimes conflicting policies and procedures. Databases and information systems for managing information often vary across sectors, such as health, education, and social protection, and these databases are often not interoperable, leading to fragmented and inefficient processes.

Furthermore, a lack of resources for training staff contributes to low birth registration coverage rates or inadequate capturing and processing of birth registration data. Outdated paper-based systems for recording birth registration can be inefficient, time-consuming, and difficult to back up, and they pose the risk of being damaged or lost. Registration forms may be difficult to complete and even require translation, depending on the local languages and languages of non-nationals such as migrants. Some countries have few registration centres or insufficient mobile registration services or lack the infrastructure that would enable the use of information communication technology (ICT) and mobile registration. Discriminatory laws and policies (direct or indirect) that prevent women, ethnic or religious minorities, and non-nationals or children of non-nationals from being registered negatively impact registration rates (UNICEF 2013).

Demand-side barriers for birth registration often overlap and include cultural and behavioral factors, costs, distance to registration office, registration process issues, education, gender, statelessness, migrant or refugee status, and newborns (table 4). Those least likely to have their births registered include internally displaced people, refugees, marginalized and hard-to-reach populations, stateless persons, certain ethnic groups, people living in rural areas, and children whose mothers has a lower educational level (UNICEF 2013b). Arduous, time-consuming procedures and unstandardized systems can lead to confusion regarding what individuals need to do or present to get a birth registered or obtain a birth certificate. Many people are not aware of the importance of birth registration as a right and its implications for access to essential services. Cultural practices, such as not naming children for a specified period after birth, can delay birth registration. Some countries charge fees for birth registration or impose fines for delayed and late registration, which compounds barriers for families who must travel long distances or whose religious or cultural practices for naming a child are not in line with the registration laws (UNICEF 2013).

2.2. Conceptual Framework

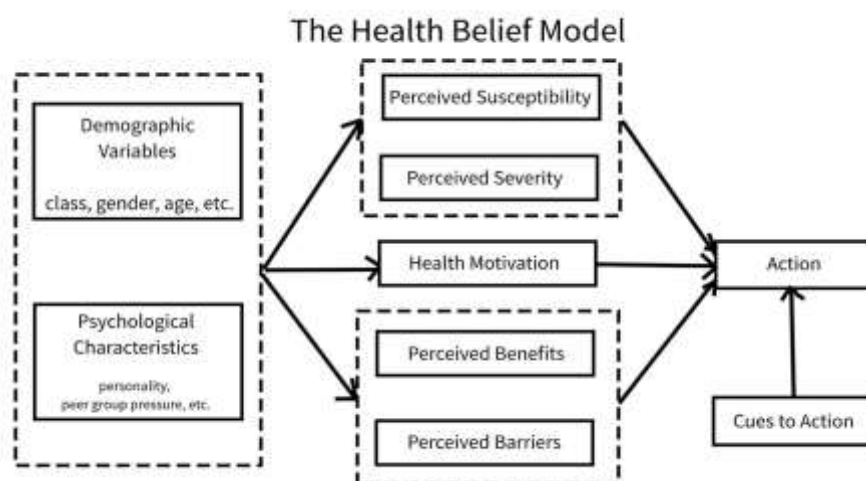


Figure 1: Showing flow diagram of Health Belief Model

3. Research Methodology

3.1. Research Design

The study investigated and engaged both quantitative and qualitative research methodologies. The combination of both qualitative as well as quantitative methods was for the principle of obtaining and analyzing data comprehensively.

3.2. Research approach

The researcher used mixed methods research approach, which combines both quantitative and qualitative approaches in a single study. It involves collecting and analyzing both numerical and non-numerical data to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the research questions. Mixed methods research allows for triangulation, complementarity, and convergence of different types of data.

3.3. Area of Study

The research was conducted in Traditional Authority Mapira in Mangochi district which is located in the eastern region of Malawi. Mangochi district covers an area of approximately 6,273 square kilometers and is situated at coordinates 14.476°S latitude and 35.267°E longitude.

According to the latest available data, the estimated population of Mangochi district is around 1,712,315 people (as of 2021). The district has a diverse population comprising various ethnic groups, including the Yao, Lomwe, Chewa, and Ngoni.

3.4. Research Population

The guardians that gave birth to newly born babies at Mangochi District Hospital and their babies were recorded with a birth certificate and in turn the guardian never return to collect the birth certificate. These constituted the target population of the study which comprises all parents or guardians with children under the age of 7 years living in Mangochi district in Malawi.

3.5. Data Collection and Tools

The following tools were used for data collection:

1. Questionnaire: A structured questionnaire was used to collect data on the socio-demographic characteristics of the parents or guardians, their knowledge and awareness of birth certificates, and their attitudes towards acquiring birth certificates for their children.
2. Interviews: In-depth interviews was conducted with key informants such as health workers and community leaders to get their perspectives on the factors contributing to the low uptake of birth certificates in the district.
3. Focus Group Discussions (FGDs): FGDs was conducted to gain insights from groups of parents or guardians on the reasons why they have not acquired birth certificates for their children.
4. Observation: Observations was conducted in health facilities and community settings to assess the availability and accessibility of birth certificate services.

3.8. Data validity and reliability

3.8.1 Data Validity:

1. Measurement Tools: The researcher utilized reliable measurement tools, such as structured questionnaires or interview protocols, specifically designed to capture relevant information related to birth certificate uptake.
2. Sampling Techniques: The selection of participants or cases were done purposively carefully conducted to select respondents that were most likely to yield appropriate information and useful information.
3. Data Collection Procedures: Researcher employed standardized data collection procedures to minimize errors and biases. This included providing clear instructions to data collectors, conducting quality assurance checks, and employing appropriate data validation techniques.

3.8.2 Data Reliability

1. Data Collection Consistency: Researchers ensured that data collectors are well-trained and followed standardized protocols consistently.

2. Data Analysis Techniques: Employing appropriate statistical analysis techniques can contribute to data reliability.
3. Triangulation: Utilizing multiple data sources and methods, such as interviews, observations, and document reviews, enhanced the reliability of the findings. Triangulation helped validate the results by comparing and corroborating information from different sources.

4.1 DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

4.1.1 REASONS FOR LOW UPTAKE OF BIRTH CERTIFICATES

The findings of the research on the reasons for the low uptake of birth certificates in Mangochi district

Lack of Awareness: Many individuals are not aware of the importance of having a birth certificate or the process involved in obtaining one.

Accessibility Challenges: Limited or inadequate birth registration centers, long distances to these centers, or transportation difficulties can make it challenging for individuals to access the necessary facilities to apply for and collect their birth certificates. These accessibility challenges can discourage or hinder individuals from pursuing the process.

Cultural Beliefs and Practices: Some individuals perceive birth registration as unnecessary or have traditional practices that are prioritized over obtaining a birth certificate.

Administrative and Documentation Issues: Complex or cumbersome procedures, lack of required documentation, or confusion regarding the application process can deter individuals from pursuing birth certificates. Simplifying administrative processes and providing clear guidelines and support can help overcome these barriers.

Transport costs: Many individuals and families do not have the financial means to cover the expenses of traveling to the offices where birth certificates are issued. This is a barrier, especially for those living in rural or remote areas with limited access to transportation options.

5.1. Findings

- i. Lack of awareness: A significant barrier to birth certificate uptake is the lack of awareness among parents and guardians about the importance of birth registration and the process involved.
- ii. Inadequate birth registration infrastructure: The study revealed that the hospital faces challenges in terms of infrastructure, such as limited registration facilities, insufficient staff, and inadequate resources, which hinder the efficient provision of birth certificates.
- iii. Cultural beliefs and practices: Certain cultural beliefs and practices within the community may discourage birth registration, considering it unnecessary or in conflict with traditional customs.
- iv. Administrative barriers: Cumbersome administrative procedures, including complex documentation requirements, lengthy processing times, and bureaucratic inefficiencies, can deter parents from registering their child's birth.

5.2. Recommendations to Stakeholders

5.2.1. Government:

- i. Allocate resources: Increase funding and resources to improve birth registration infrastructure, including expanding facilities, recruiting additional staff, and providing necessary equipment and supplies.
- ii. Simplify procedures: Streamline administrative processes, simplify documentation requirements, reduce processing times, and enhance bureaucratic efficiency to make birth registration more accessible and efficient.
- iii. Promote collaboration: Work with community leaders, religious institutions, and local organizations to conduct awareness campaigns, address cultural barriers, and foster community engagement in birth registration initiatives.

5.2.2 Healthcare Workers

- a) Training and capacity building: Provide comprehensive training to healthcare workers on birth registration procedures, emphasizing its importance and relevance. Enhance their knowledge and skills to effectively communicate with parents and facilitate the registration process.
- b) Sensitization programs: Conduct sensitization programs within the hospital to create awareness among healthcare workers about the significance of birth registration and their role in promoting it.
- c) Streamline processes: Collaborate with hospital administration to streamline birth registration processes within the healthcare system, reducing delays and ensuring efficient service delivery.

5.2.3 Community

- a) Awareness campaigns: Conduct targeted awareness campaigns to educate parents and community members about the importance of birth registration, the benefits of birth certificates, and the process involved. Utilize various communication channels, including community meetings, radio programs, and informational materials in local languages.
- b) Engage community leaders: Collaborate with community leaders, traditional authorities, and local influencers to address cultural beliefs and practices that may discourage birth registration. Highlight the compatibility of birth registration with cultural traditions and emphasize the benefits it brings to children and the community.
- c) Simplify documentation: Assist parents in understanding and fulfilling the documentation requirements for birth registration, providing them with necessary support and guidance.

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