Integrating data and information management for social protection: social registries and integrated beneficiary registries

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Developing a social protection information system—one that enables the flow and management of information within the social protection sector and sometimes beyond—can ensure a more equitable, responsive and inclusive distribution of resources while also increasing efficiency and effectiveness of delivery and, most importantly, better serving citizens.

However, several trade-offs, challenges and risks can emerge when embarking on such a process, which need to be carefully managed and addressed from the outset. These can include increasing costs and complexity, risks to data privacy and security, and risks of multiple exclusions from social sector schemes. Moreover, the extent to which the benefits of information integration are felt greatly depends on the practical set-up for integration and on the ultimate use and quality of the integrated system.

Two main approaches to data integration

The word 'Single Registry', sometimes used to describe approaches to integration in the social protection sector (including in the author's previous work), is misleading. It has been used to refer to very different approaches in different countries. What matters is not the name that a country gives its system, but what the system is set up to do: most importantly, where the data are flowing from (e.g. where they are originally being collected and what other data sources they are drawing from) and to (e.g. who has access to the data and how).

There are two—ideally co-existing and complementary—approaches to setting up an integrated 'data repository' for the social protection sector: (1) integrated beneficiary registries integrate information from existing programme management information systems to house comprehensive information on beneficiaries (e.g. to give an overview of who receives what); and (2) social registries centralise the collection and housing of data on potential beneficiaries to integrate the approach to registration and determining eligibility across programmes. Each comes with specific risks and limitations, which the other helps to overcome (see Barca 2017 and Leite et al. 2017).

Regardless of which approach is used to set up the 'data repository', its full potential as an information system is only unleashed when it is used together with a software application that links it dynamically to other government databases, systematically transforms data into information, and analyses and uses the information. What matters is not the creation of a super-sized database, but enabling interoperability, data-sharing and useful reporting.

What to keep in mind as a policymaker

The opportunities and challenges set out above are determined by country-specific objectives (is integration being pursued to provide coordination and oversight, to consolidate processes for determining potential eligibility, and/or to integrate operations and services?), as well as institutional, operational and technological considerations, which in turn determine the

specific approach to integration (see Barca 2017). Depending on these, international best practice may not be appropriate in every instance. In fact, integrating data and information may not always be a priority of social protection policy.

There are also a wide variety of practical considerations in terms of setting up an integrated system: the percentage of the population and whose data is in the registry (e.g. beneficiary vs. potentially eligible); which data are being collected and stored (e.g. which variables); how data are being collected (e.g. census survey vs. on-demand vs. drawn from existing databases); how data are being updated; which data sources are being used and how; whether data exchange takes place in real time; opportunities for data access at a decentralised level and for external stakeholders; and level of security/data privacy guaranteed. These choices affect what a system can achieve: its potential for targeting and shock-responsiveness; use-cases for other sectors; exclusion and inclusion errors; ease of access for potential beneficiaries; age, accuracy and usability of data; cost/time of data collection; type of data available; accountability; and data quality more widely.

More generally, our research has shown that integration is mainly a policy issue requiring political and institutional arrangements rather than technical 'fixes'. Successfully implementing such systems requires strong political commitment to integration within the social protection sector and beyond, as well as careful assessment of the country context and possible costs and trade-offs of centralising data and information management—primarily privacy concerns.

Moreover, the policy drive towards data and information integration in the social protection sector has very often been dominated by a focus on consolidating targeting (registration and determining eligibility) across several programmes. While pursuing these objectives has been effective in many countries, it is important to recognise the potential downsides of this approach and shift the main focus of integration towards better serving a country's poorest and most vulnerable citizens throughout their life cycle.

References:

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