Helpdesk Research Report

National databases of the poor for social protection

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Question

Identify literature on creating or unifying registries to make up a national database of poor households or individuals to be used for social protection programmes. Where possible, identify the background to setting them up, the challenges involved, the lessons learned and any social protection benefits identified.

Contents

1. Overview

There is very scant literature on creating or unifying registries to make up a national database of poor households or individuals to be used for social protection programmes (expert comments). Literature on registries tends to relate to the benefits of civil registration (i.e. the registering of births and deaths), or how better to target and register the poor. This report identifies some literature on the issue of creating national databases, outlines the purported benefits of national databases and then explores the background, lessons learned and guidelines from cases studies on Brazil and Kenya.

A national database can either involve bringing different Management Information Systems (MIS) together or leaving the different MIS separate but with mechanisms in place to communicate with each other. When putting in place sharing mechanisms it can help if the different systems have commonalities

such as the same software, a common set of fields and a common identifier for individuals (or households) such as a national identity number.

Potential benefits of a unified national database are identified in the literature as:

- Reduced costs and improved efficiency and sustainability.
- Strengthened registration, monitoring and evaluation, and oversight.
- Reduction of benefit fraud and incorrect payments.
- Providing benefits in accordance with need.
- Monitoring time frames, and moving beneficiaries between schemes or withdrawing beneficiaries from schemes when appropriate.
- More effective emergency responses.

A notable case of transitioning to a unified registry is in Brazil, which integrated existing national social protection programmes into one. Kenya undertook a recent review of social protection programmes which concluded that a unified registry is desirable.

In Brazil, suggested measures to improve the Brazilian national registry – and which should be considered in developing a national database generally – include:

- Regular audits, cross-checks and quality control.
- Universal and on-going access to the registry (and consequently to the social protection programme).
- Clarifying institutional responsibilities.
- Minimising costs.

There may be a need to balance rapid implementation, to create and use the database, with gradual reform that ensures the database is comprehensive and effective. In Brazil, the key problems faced included a lack of clear objectives, problems with the identification of households, the static nature of the database, a lack of auditing and quality control and software and implementation problems.

The Kenya social protection review promotes a unified registry based on MIS integration. Specific recommendations are:

- An open-source ownership arrangement so the national government has full authority and ownership.
- Establish a standard to allow MIS to communicate with each other and to a central reporting system.

Prior to implementing such a system it is important to establish information needs, legislative and regulatory requirements and how each MIS will link with each other and the broader sector. There are also minimum infrastructure and security requirements.

2. Models of integration

There are two approaches to creating an integrated database (Chirchir & Kidd, 2011):

- Bringing different Management Information Systems (MIS) together under one database.

- Each scheme has its own MIS but with mechanisms in place to enable these MIS to communicate with each other.

Examples of the latter can be found in Mauritius and South Africa (Chirchir & Kidd 2011). Chirchir & Kidd (2011) outline a potential model for such integration in Figure 1. In countries with a clear institutional lead on social protection – such as a 'Secretariat' – it would be possible for each scheme to deliver common information, for instance on the number of recipients or size of payments, to the Secretariat which would maintain its own database. The authors argue that integration needs to take place at more than just national level. Instead of each scheme maintaining separate staff at local level, countries should look to have single social protection teams who work across a range of schemes. They could be responsible for taking forward key processes for all social protection schemes – such as targeting and registration – by entering information from each programme into the MIS.

Figure 1. Social protection MIS model enabling both integration and centralisation
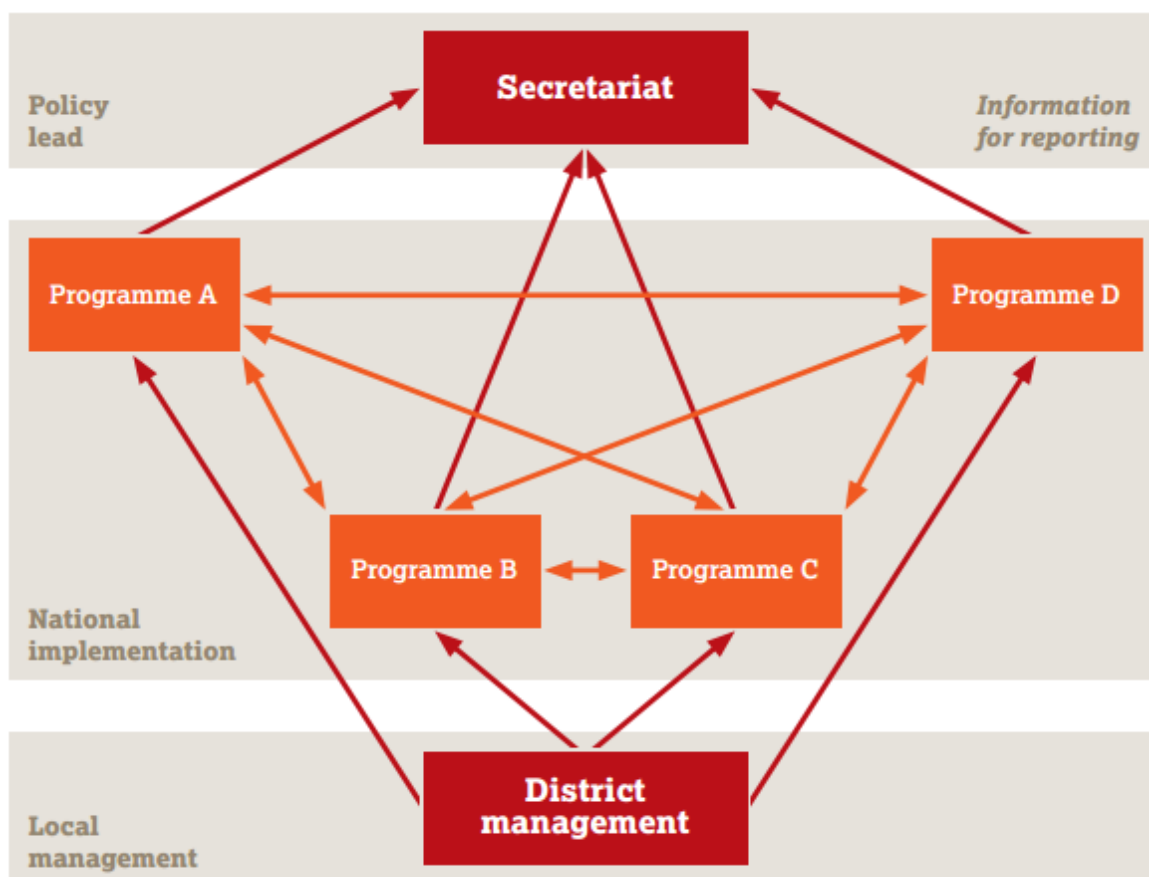
Source: Chirchir & Kidd (2011, p.13)

To facilitate integration between MIS, Chirchir & Kidd (2011) argue it would be helpful for each scheme to use the same application software and share a common set of fields that could be used for reporting to the secretariat. It is also important that each recipient has a unique identifier, which is used across all social protection schemes. Mauritius, for example, uses national identity numbers as identifiers.

3. Benefits

There are a number of advantages of moving to a single national Management Information System (MIS), or at least strengthening integration between MIS (Chirchir & Kidd, 2011; De la Brière & Lindert, 2005; Kenya MSP, 2012):

- **Reduce administrative and component costs:** Unified or better integrated MIS across different programmes can reduce or prevent duplication of general administrative costs. Sharing the technology for widely used components (e.g. registration data, payment records, beneficiary feedback or Citizen's Report Cards) would also reduce costs across the sector.

- **Improve efficiency and exploit economies of scale:** Harmonising core operational systems, including MIS, can increase programme efficiency and can allow the expansion of existing programmes (as opposed to setting up new programmes) to address gaps in coverage.

- **Help create a common payment system:** An integrated MIS could enable government to use a common payment system across all schemes, increasing efficiencies and saving costs.

- **Improve sustainability:** Some social safety nets are supported by development partners with the intention of eventually handing them over to the government. In the absence of proper MIS systems, they are liable to fail, thus putting their long-term sustainability in doubt. Any suspicion or reports of inefficient use of resources could negatively affect the implementation of the programmes and their sustainability.

- **Strengthen the registration process:** Systems for data collection, processing, and reporting can be patchy and inefficient. A single registry can strengthen registration systems across the board and reduce scope for fraud and corruption for existing and future programmes.

- **Strengthen programme monitoring and evaluation (M&E):** There can be time lags between the collection of evaluation data and the publication of a report. Creating a unified, automated (rather than paper-based) system can expedite processes and strengthen programme M&E. These insights can be used to input into programme design at an earlier stage.

- **Unify oversight of schemes:** Social protection schemes are often managed by different ministries, though countries may have one body with oversight of both policy and implementation. An integrated MIS would enable such a secretariat to monitor the progress and performance of various schemes.

- **Report to policy-makers:** A secretariat could use information from an integrated MIS to more easily report progress to policy-makers, parliament and other relevant bodies.

- **Avoid benefit fraud:** Isolated MIS increase the chances that individuals can illegitimately benefit from more than one scheme, when countries have multiple social protection schemes. A unified MIS or MIS which communicate with each other would increase the chances of identifying such benefit fraud.

- **Prevent or reduce duplication of benefits:** In addition to benefit fraud, unified MIS can prevent people inadvertently receiving benefits from more than one social protection programme or from different municipalities.

- **Provide benefits to those who need it:** In situations where individuals legitimately receive more than one benefit, countries can track who is receiving what. This may also reduce the incidence of unclaimed benefits.

- **Monitor time limits and graduation criteria:** A unified MIS can help determine and enforce any time limit criteria.

- **Enable the movement of beneficiaries between schemes:** An integrated MIS will enable people to transition from one scheme to another as their circumstances change. For example, in South Africa, those on the disability benefit can be automatically transferred to the old age grant at the age of 60.

- **More effective emergency responses:** A common database with a common payment system could help countries deliver an improved humanitarian response during emergencies.

- **Single registry for single national targeting:** A single registry can help support the development of a single national targeting mechanism for all social protection programmes. Ghana, for example, is designing a common targeting mechanism to be used by the Social Welfare, Education, Health and Agriculture Ministries.

4. Background to setting up national databases

4.1 Brazil

Mostafa and Silva (2007) trace the background of Brazil's single registry, called Cadastro Único de Programas Sociais (or Cadastro Único in this report) to the 1990s, when the regulatory stance and the political agenda progressively magnified the role of non-contributory cash transfers. These cash transfers were targeted at specific vulnerable sectors of society, and implemented by central government as well as by local authorities. At central level, conditional cash transfers included the 1996 Child Labour Eradication Programme (PETI).

In 2001, following a presidential decree, the federal government of Brazil launched an initiative to construct a single beneficiary registry database to serve its many social assistance programmes (De la Brière & Lindert 2005). The registry, Cadastro Único was aimed at identifying the socio-economic profile of the entire poor population of Brazil to inform central government on the effective demand for pro-poor policies (Mostafa and Silva, 2007). In 2003, the Bolsa Família Programme (BFP) was launched to integrate four different central government initiatives relating to schooling, food and cooking gas: Bolsa Escola, Bolsa Alimentação, Cartão Alimentação and Auxílio Gás. In 2005, the cash transfer component of PETI was also integrated to Bolsa Família.

Brazil's Cadastro Único is now considered a good example by proponents of a single database for holding data on the poor (Chirchir & Kidd, 2011). Cadastro Único holds data on the declared incomes of 16 million households and uses an unverified means test for targeting poor households. Chirchir and Kidd (2011) argue that currently its main use is for identifying poor households for the conditional cash transfer programme Bolsa Família, though they also note it is used for nine other social protection programmes. Some social programmes have their own databases into which the recipients identified by the Cadastro Único are incorporated. Some programmes such as the Rural Pension and the Continuous Cash Benefit programme, which is essentially a universal pension scheme, use different targeting criteria and consequently have their own separate databases.

4.2 Kenya

In 2011 a review was undertaken to provide a detailed view of the Kenyan social protection sector (Kenya MSP, 2012). The report provides some findings and recommendations specific to Kenya, in relation to its databases on those eligible for social protection programmes. In particular the report notes that Kenya's safety net programmes have standalone management information systems (MIS) which function individually with no capacity to interact with each other.

The report concludes that a common registry is desirable. A common registry would not necessarily involve a single database but could be achieved by devising a set of data-sharing protocols that would make it possible to compare different databases. These common registration systems could be supported by shared equipment such as programme identification cards. In the case of Kenya, linking a common registry with the Integrated Population Registration System (IPRS) would create additional scope for verifying the eligibility of programme beneficiaries. It is not clear how far Kenya has progressed towards the creation of a common registry.

5. Lessons learned and guidelines

5.1 Brazil

De la Brière and Lindert (2005) outline reforms to improve systems for registering families and determining eligibility for Brazil's Cadastro Único. The authors emphasise that these are not intended to provide a blueprint for reforms, but rather to highlight key features and considerations. The reforms emphasise how to improve targeting as well as how to create and maintain a single registry. The suggested reforms are (De la Brière & Lindert, 2005):

- **Combined geographic and individual assessment for registry entry:** Families are interviewed and registered either as part of a demand-driven application system in most areas, or as part of a survey-outreach effort in some very poor areas, depending on the poverty characteristics of the area in which they reside.

- **Eligibility determined by proxy-means points scoring methodologies:** Once families are interviewed and registered, programme eligibility should be determined by applying proxy-means points scoring methodologies to the data collected. Programme financing quotas should be used carefully and in a limited way.

- **Regular quality control:** Undertake a system of regular audits, cross-checks and quality control as part of a performance-based management system for the new family registry itself, and for the overall programme.

- **Clarify institutional responsibilities:** Both for levels of government and for the specific agencies involved.

De la Brière and Lindert (2005) identify four features that should be considered in developing a national registry with an improved targeting system:

- **Universal and on-going access to the registry for a dynamic safety net**. The reformed system should also allow for on-going updates (demographic, locational) for those who do benefit. There can be significant errors in poverty targeting. Chirchir and Kidd (2011) argue that a one-off

process is likely to mean that the majority of the poor will be permanently excluded from all poverty-targeted programmes.

- **Cost efficiency.** Efforts should be made to minimise the cost of interviewing families, while underlining the integrity of registration efforts. Certain tools, such as self-selection mechanisms and geographic targeting, can help minimise the cost of interviewing large numbers of ineligible families.

- **Outreach to the poor.** Specific efforts should also be made to ensure that the poor know of their potential eligibility for the programme and can access the application and interview process.

- **Transparency.** Procedures for both (a) entry into the registry (interviewing, registering); and (b) entry into the social protection scheme (eligibility criteria applied to data collected) should be fully transparent and based on objective, consistent criteria.

De la Brière and Lindert (2005) note that many of these reforms could take time, and there may need to be **a balance between rapid implementation and gradual reform**. There may be a need to move fast to launch a social protection programme, while taking the time needed to overhaul the family registry and eligibility process. The authors highlight a number of challenges which Cadastro Único faced:

- Clarifying its objectives.
- Distortions due to the use of *a priori* registry quotas.
- Distortions due to the use of self-reported income for determining eligibility.
- Problems with the identification of households.
- The static nature of the database.
- The lack of a system for auditing and quality control.
- A lack of data access by key potential users (programmes, municipalities).
- Software and implementation problems.

5.2 Kenya

Following an assessment of existing MIS in Kenya, a set of recommendations were developed for strengthening and harmonising existing programme MIS, as well as guidelines for developing a single registry (Kenya SPS, 2012). The document outlines the following principles to develop MIS for social protection (Kenya SPS, 2012):

- **Open-source ownership arrangement:** Except for any proprietary databases that might be used, the design schemas, operational and technical documentation, and source code will all be copyrighted to the national government, in this case the Government of Kenya.

- **Communication capacity of MIS with each other and central reporting system**: A standard will be established where each social protection MIS will store a set of essential information that can be communicated to a central reporting system or to a single registry for sector-wide reporting and monitoring.

In relation to policy the document emphasises that clear decisions should be made at the outset regarding the following (Kenya SPS, 2012):

- **Information needs:** Social protection programmes should collect and store on their MIS the essential information set out in these guidelines.

- **Legislation and other regulatory requirements:** The collection, transfer, and storage of the information should adhere to the country's constitutional, international data transfer, and information privacy protocols and regulation.

- **Capacity to link with broader social sector MIS:** Each social protection MIS should be compatible with and capable of being linked to other MIS in the sector to ensure that there is a coherent and integrated database supporting all social protection programmes, especially social assistance programmes.

The guidelines argue that the recommended minimum needs for MIS are (Kenya SPS, 2012):

- Centralised hosting and distributed access.

- Durable hardware.

- Reliable connectivity.

- Adequate information security measures.

- Rapid application development.

6. References

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