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Single and ready to mingle: Single registries in social protection

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Single registries in social protection

The COVID-19 pandemic has put many latent issues under sharp relief. One of those issues is the fact that a lot of people worldwide are only one crisis away from poverty or destitution. Social protection is one of the ways to prevent this or at least cushion the blow. [INCLUDE's COVID-19 research](#) taught us that data and information for speedy and successful scaling of social protection are currently missing or outdated in many African countries. One solution to this problem is to develop single registries. This two-pager therefore dives into this and offers insights as to how countries could make use of single registries in the context of social protection.

Difference between single and social registry

In the wake of the first lockdown measures, several countries scrambled to use existing databases, census information and other sources of citizens' information to patch together a map of those in need of cash transfers, social insurance, or other social measures. This scramble highlighted the need for a comprehensive system that holds all necessary information for social protection. Countries that had such system in place, such as Kenya, Senegal, and Mauritius, were quick to put it to use. Other countries, such as Togo, used voter registration information and other means to reach a broader population. Single and social registries played a role in the rapid scale-ups. They sound similar but are very different.

A social registry is essentially a targeting mechanism for a social scheme. It performs the main task of targeting specific social assistance for the poor by periodically conducting surveys with poverty tests for households (Chirchir and Farooq, 2016). These tests are usually not very accurate and apply to a single programme. Furthermore, data entry errors and changes in status quo over time further flaw the system (Kidd, 2017). In practice, a single registry could be made up of multiple harmonised social registries.

Single registries are management information systems that ideally cover all government programmes in a country, making it possible to coordinate between social policies, and work as a referral mechanism for a more integrated approach to social protection. This means that social protection could be linked to agricultural livelihoods programmes, legal protection, skills, shelter, health care, or other programmes. The single registry is in fact a harmonised set of multiple data sources under a single umbrella. Several countries in Africa have implemented single registries in the past, some implemented them during COVID-19 in 2020 and 2021, while a few are presently in the process of implementing them. While social registries were leveraged to reach households that needed assistance during the COVID-19 lockdown, a working single registry could provide comprehensive allocation of social protection in the long term. However, the data quality and coverage requirements make a single registry very costly, while poor data quality and coverage severely limit its usefulness.

Examples of single registries in African countries

Kenya introduced its Enhanced Single Registry (ESR) in 2020 and went live in July 2021. This system is based on web and mobile modules. The programme itself is a multi-agency effort, including Development Pathways, WFP, and several Ministry departments. It connects data from the cash-transfer for orphans and vulnerable children (CT-OVC), the hunger safety net programme (HSNP) for emergencies and regular assistance, the old persons cash transfer (OPCT), and the persons with severe disability cash transfers (PwSD-CT). In 2021, it held data of over 1 million beneficiaries and over 100,000 households from 2 counties. However, registration of citizens was difficult and the system was not yet used by many other organisations (Wamicha and Ndoka, 2021). The initially limited awareness between government agencies and non-governmental organizations of the ESR called out for decentralised communication and involvement of actors, especially on a county level (Gardner et al., 2020). As a data system, it relies on the quality and coverage of its data, drawn from census information combined with the data of beneficiaries from multiple SP programmes, including the social registry.

Senegal started rolling out its *Registre National Unique* (RNU) in 2015 in a response to the need for coordination among social protection programmes in terms of targeting and streamlining strategies and interventions. In 2018 it held data from 10 different SP programmes that worked with cash transfers, health, food security, and productive social protection instruments (e.g., public works, job security, or contributory social insurance). To maintain data quality and adequacy, ongoing and cyclical updates are done, involving communities down to the village level in the validation of household data. Complaints and grievance redressal mechanisms are also included in this process (Ndiaye et al., 2019). Strong political will to reduce poverty is said to be the main factor of success of the RNU so far for the programme's rapid expansion to 20% of the population in 6 years up to 2020. As with other single registries, however, the costs are found to be substantial, and the ongoing updating and maintenance of data quality hinge on limited capacities of government, as well as limited budgets. Definition questions of poverty and of households also play a role in the targeting and the quality of the data (Dickinson, 2020).

Both **Mauritius** and **Togo** have focused their efforts on digital technologies to cut out middlemen and rapidly and cheaply expand their social assistance. Mauritius leveraged its Social Register (SRM) of various programmes to scale up social assistance during COVID-19 lockdown (Barca and Beazley, 2020). This expanding social register is part of a process towards a national single registry – together with the digitalisation of government services. [Togo](#) leveraged other information systems and sources to scale up social assistance rapidly during COVID-19 lockdown measures, such as voter registries and telecom records. Other countries used mobile money customer data, or telephone numbers for their outreach. The question is how to create long-term and sustainable comprehensive systems for social protection from this emergency effort.

Recommendations

As mentioned above, single registries require a great deal of capacity, effort, budget and political will to be established successfully. They can retain many of the flaws in targeting strategies of the individual SP programmes; think of geographical exclusion, flawed criteria, and implementation obstacles (Chirchir and Farooq, 2016; Kidd, 2017). Single registries are not one single system per se. They are typically composed of cross-cutting information flows between different SP programmes. This connection of information should advance coordination and coverage of social protection schemes within a country, without posing threats to the people enrolled in them. The following lessons and recommendations can be taken on in order to implement single registries.

- Involvement of decentral actors in the decision making and implementation is key for generating awareness, validating information, and raising and solving issues and grievances.
- A good single registry should be based on frequent and accurate surveys
- Information requirements should be kept to the minimum. Good practice aims to achieve good integration and sharing of information between all social protection programmes, requiring harmonization of data format and quality, storage and sharing (Barca and Beazley, 2019; Chirchir, 2011).
- Gaps in coverage due to infrastructural inequality within countries are exacerbated by lack of awareness and penetration of information about the SP programmes. Communication through popular outlets like radio or mobile phones can help to reach remote areas, or in-person outreach.
- It is important to ensure that single registries do not harm those they are supposed to protect, in terms of privacy and dignity of beneficiaries. Think of the scandal with fraud detection methods in the social protection system of the Netherlands.
- Since setting up and maintaining single registries is costly, a global fund or bilateral funding for social protection that can finance these initiatives is an important contribution, in cases governments have limited fiscal space (this also depends on political will)

For more direct feedback, questions or suggestions please leave your comment on our website beneath the post, or reach out to caspar@includeplatform.net.

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