

Single Registries and Social Registries: clarifying the terminological confusion

Richard Chirchir & Shez Farooq

Introduction

Across developing countries, there is a growing recognition that building linkages between the Management Information Systems (MISs) of individual social protection programmes can bring about significant efficiency gains while also enabling governments to monitor national social protection systems more effectively. Information collected on applicants and beneficiaries that is shared between programmes and governments can build a comprehensive picture of the national profile of beneficiaries (and those denied access) as well as the performance of schemes and the national social protection system.

However, at the same time, there has also been a growing terminological confusion and, in particular, significant misunderstandings about two very different types of registries: **Single Registries** and what are increasingly becoming known as **Social Registries**. This paper attempts to clarify the confusion between the two terms and describes the characteristics and functions of each.

An overview of how Single and Social Registries fit into the broader system of national social protection information management

Figure 1 provides a depiction of how Single and Social Registries could fit into the broader system of national information management of the broader social protection system if countries decided to introduce them. In essence, it shows that there are three types of information management systems that can comprise the broader social protection system of information management:

- The **individual programme MISs** underpin effective social protection schemes, ensuring the high-quality delivery of the key operational processes, such as registration, enrolment, payments and grievances. The programme MISs are depicted in the middle tier of the diagram and are divided into the main types of social protection programmes found in developing countries: 1) household cash or in-kind transfer schemes targeted at those living in poverty, commonly known as social assistance; 2) lifecycle

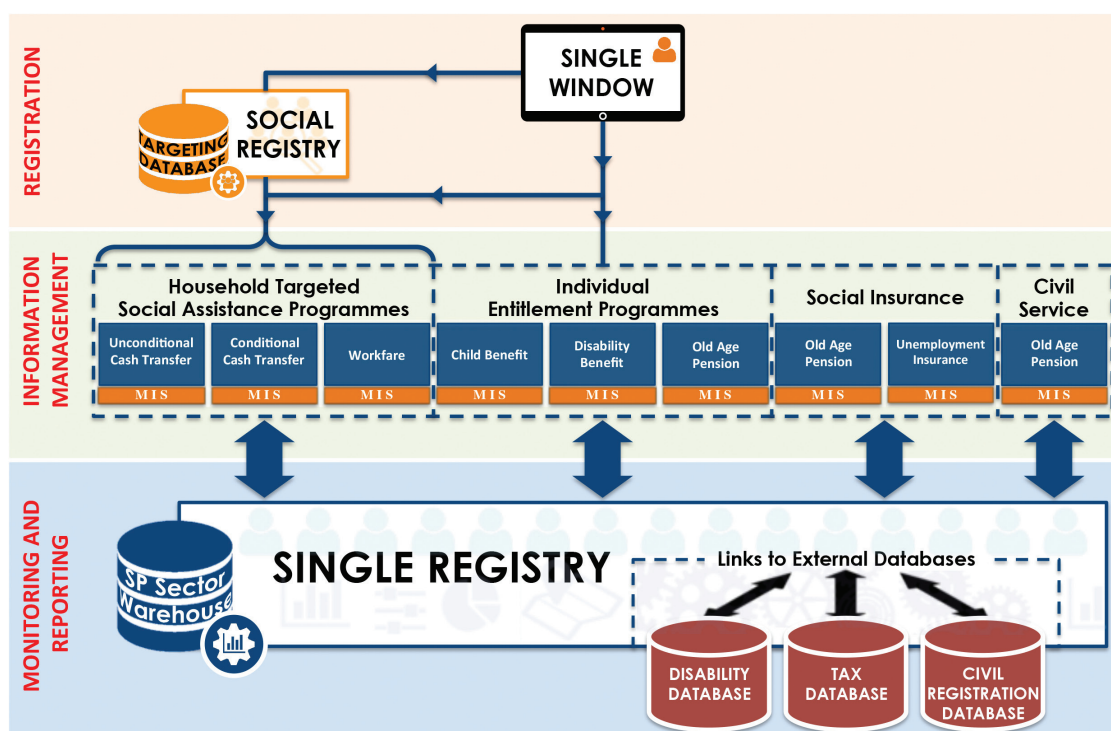
tax-financed entitlement programmes for individuals (such as social pensions, disability benefits and child benefits); 3) social insurance programmes, such as old age and disability pensions and unemployment insurance; and, 4) pensions for public servants.

- The **Single Registry** – which is shown in the bottom blue tier of the diagram – is, effectively, a warehouse collecting information from all types of social protection programmes and can be used as a monitoring tool by governments. It also acts as a nexus of information, providing interlinkages between individual programme MISs and other external databases that can be used during targeting and registration, such as the income tax, civil registration and, if applicable, disability databases (as well as to the Social Registry, if it exists).

- The **Social Registry** is also commonly known as a unified targeting database. It provides information on households that can be used to select the beneficiaries of poverty-targeted social assistance schemes. In effect, it ranks households from poorest to richest and poverty-targeted programmes can use the ranking to target their beneficiaries. However, the Social Registry does

not have a role to play in selecting beneficiaries for individual entitlement schemes or other social protection programmes such as social insurance schemes and civil service pensions. In many developing countries, such as Indonesia, Pakistan and Colombia, information is collected to support the poverty assessment using a proxy means test targeting approach.

Figure 1: A potential integrated system of information management for social protection. Incorporating a Single Registry, Social Registry and Single Window



Another commonly used term – which can add to the confusion – is a Single Window. This is, effectively, a government office at the local level where people can apply to multiple social protection programmes, submit complaints and obtain information, as well as, potentially, register births, pay taxes, etc. It is an alternative to each social protection programme having separate infrastructure at the local level and should, if established, enhance efficiencies. Within a Single Window, there could be a single MIS access point to the range of social protection schemes on offer, as well as to the Single Registry and Social Registry (if it exists).

Much of the confusion on Single and Social Registries arises from misunderstandings surrounding Brazil's *Cadastro Unico*, which is often promoted as an example of good practice in establishing integrated MISs. However, as Box 1 explains, the *Cadastro Unico* offers only a limited function within Brazil's broader system of information management on social protection, acting as a Social Registry but not a Single Registry. The latter role is taken by the *Cadastro Nacional de Informações Sociais* database.

Box 1: Brazil's Cadastro Unico and Cadastro Nacional de Informações Sociais databases

Brazil's *Cadastro Unico* database is, essentially, a targeting mechanism and, therefore, a Social Registry. Information is collected on the incomes of households in Brazil and is used to select beneficiaries for the *Bolsa Familia* programme and a number of other small programmes targeted at those living in poverty. However, it is not used for Brazil's main social protection programmes, such as the *Previdencia Social* (which is a social insurance scheme, although it incorporates the tax-financed Rural Pension), unemployment insurance, *Benefício de Prestação Continuada* programme and civil service pension. As Kidd and Huda (2013) explain, *Bolsa Familia* is only a very small programme in Brazil's broader national social protection system.

Brazil, however, has a much larger database than the *Cadastro Unico*, known as the *Cadastro Nacional de Informações Sociais* (CNIS)¹, the national database of social information². CNIS contains 230 million citizens and cross-references data against other government databases to improve its data quality. In many ways, CNIS is similar to a Single Registry and holds information on a wide range of social programmes, as well as on civil service salaries. It can be accessed at <http://portal.dataprev.gov.br>. An interesting characteristic of the CNIS is that it discloses private information to the public on social protection programmes that are not rights-based – such as *Bolsa Familia* – as well as on the salaries of civil servants. However, private data on entitlement-based schemes – such as the *Previdencia Social* – is not disclosed, in line with the right to privacy of information.

The following sections describe Single Registries and Social Registries in more detail.

Single Registries

As indicated earlier, Single Registries are warehouses of information on multiple social protection programmes and nexuses of information between the MISs of social protection schemes and other databases that can support the registration process when people apply for entry to programmes.

The core purpose underpinning the setup of single registries is to provide a tool for monitoring the social protection sector. As **warehouses of information**, Single Registries can bring together a wide range of data that can be used by governments for monitoring their national social protection systems, although the breadth of information will depend on the maturity and level of sophistication of the Single Registry. The type of information to be accessed could include:

- The number and characteristics of beneficiaries – both individuals and households – across each programme, as well as the total number nationally, disaggregated by age, gender, disability, region, etc.
- The value and frequency of transfers sent to beneficiaries, again disaggregated by relevant categories.
- Expenditure on social protection programmes and the aggregated expenditure nationally.
- The performance of programmes, such as the frequency of payments and the speed by which key processes are undertaken, for example the resolution of grievances within established time frames.
- The number of complaints registered and resolved.

Furthermore, by linking together a range of national databases, the Single Registry can act as a **nexus and pathway of information** that facilitates processes such as the application and registration process for social protection programmes. So, for example, if people apply to a scheme, the Single Registry could facilitate a link to the income tax database to determine whether applicants are telling the truth on their income. Or, if a disability database exists, if someone applies for a disability benefit, the programme could access information on the disability classification of the applicant to verify whether they qualify for the programme.

¹ For more information, see: http://www.worldbank.org/content/dam/Worldbank/Event/ECA/Turkey/Presentations_Istanbul_May%202014/National%20Database%20of%20Social%20Information_Brazil.pdf.

² CNIS is administered by DataPrev, Social Security Information Technology Company.

Well-designed Single Registries offer both public and official access. Members of the public – or, indeed, anyone in the world – could access the public information portal on the Single Registry and see aggregated information that governments are willing to make public (although, as Box 1 notes, Brazil's CNIS allows public access to private information on beneficiaries of non-rights-based programmes, such as *Bolsa Familia*). However, access rights are required for those entering information into the Single Registry, which, in effect, is undertaken through the MISs of individual programmes: as soon as data is entered into a programme MIS, it is uploaded to the Single Registry. Access rights are also required for those viewing private data or reports on issues that are not made public by the government.

Single Registry information can be disaggregated by geographic area. So, for example the general public could access information on a particular district or sub-district in a country, potentially by clicking on a map on the Single Registry interface. Similarly, monitoring reports could be provided for any region, aggregating the information for all programmes operating in the area.

Single Registries should be established as web-based systems so that they can be accessed from

anywhere. Local district offices should be able to access information on the beneficiaries in their region, but would most likely only be given access rights to those citizens living in their area.

A number of countries have established Single Registries. Indeed, many countries that operate a number of social protection schemes through integrated social protection MISs effectively run a simple form of Single Registry. For example, Mauritius's inclusive social security system – consisting of a tax-financed and social insurance scheme – is operated by a twin-database information management system. The database can be accessed across 34 Ministry of Social Security and National Solidarity centres across the island using a high-speed telecommunication system. Similarly, South Africa's social security grants to children, persons with disabilities, older people and foster carers are administered using SOCPEN, an old yet effective information system that processes 16,900,000 grants as at January 2016³. Kenya's Single Registry – launched in September 2016 – is particularly interesting because it has been established in a lower middle-income country (see Box 2 for further information).

Box 2: Kenya's Single Registry for Social Protection Programmes

Kenya's Single Registry for social protection programmes is an electronic platform that enables the automated flow and management of key processes and data within social protection schemes, informing Kenya's policy makers about who is receiving what type of assistance, where it is being received and when it was transferred.

The Registry links together the MISs of five social security schemes (the Old Age Grant, Disability Benefit, Orphans and Vulnerable Children's Cash Transfer, Hunger Safety Net programme and World Food Programme's Cash for Assets scheme). Furthermore, the Single Registry is linked to the National Registration database, so that programme beneficiaries can be clearly identified by their national ID number.

The Single Registry enables the National Social Protection Secretariat – based in the Ministry of East African Community, Labour and Social Protection – to access information on all households receiving social security. As a result, it enables them to monitor beneficiaries enrolled in the government's expansion plan for the national social security system; the number and type of programme benefiting each household; the accuracy of beneficiary details; timelines of payments; complaints resolved within established time frames; and, consolidated programme costs. Importantly, the Single Registry can capture information on schemes that are designed very differently, including the use of distinct targeting mechanisms.

Kenya's Single Registry can be accessed on the following public link:
www.socialprotection.or.ke/single-registry

³ <http://www.sassa.gov.za/index.php/statistical-reports?start=6>

Social Registries

Social Registries are very different to Single Registries, performing a much more limited function. They essentially generate lists of households ranked according to their well-being, and their sole purpose is for targeting. Some countries – such as Pakistan – have attempted to include all households on their Social Registry, and, indeed, they managed to reach 85% of households nationally. Other countries have restricted their Social Registries to a proportion of households nationally: for example, Indonesia holds information on around 40% of households in its Unified Database. While these are supposed to be the poorest households nationally, of course, it is not possible to know a priori which are the poorest households, so many are excluded. For example, Bah et al. (2015) suggest that around half of the poorest 30% of households are not on Indonesia's Unified Database.

The main purpose of Social Registries is to target social assistance schemes for the 'poor.' They commonly assess the well-being of households by using a proxy means test, with households given a score that is meant to estimate their income⁴. However, as is well known, proxy means tests have high errors: for example, the design errors in a proxy means test when targeting the poorest 10% are usually over 50% (see [Kidd and Wylde 2011](#) for further information). Further errors are usually introduced during the Social Registry survey: for example, in Indonesia around 15% of cells were inaccurately entered into the database (SMERU 2011). As a result of the multiple errors associated with proxy means tests, Social Registries tend systematically to exclude a high proportion of the poorest households from a range of social protection programmes.

A further challenge with Social Registries is that data are often collected nationwide at one particular point in time and not repeated for many years. In Pakistan, for example the initial data

collection was undertaken in 2009 and, by 2016, had not been repeated. As a result, the quality of the information on the Social Registry degrades quite rapidly, because household composition, assets and incomes change over time, further integrating errors into the system.

One proposed solution is to introduce an on-demand registration process into Social Registries. However, this means that households applying through the on-demand process are likely to be assessed against households that may have been registered a number of years earlier. Again, this will lead to inaccuracies in the ranking of households. This may be partially overcome by ensuring that households have to re-register on an annual basis, but this significantly increases the costs of a Social Registry, which few governments are willing to pay. Furthermore, it does not rectify the in-built design errors generated by the proxy means test.

As discussed earlier, Social Registries are only used for the targeting of household-based social assistance programmes. They are not used for inclusive entitlement programmes that offer access on the basis of citizenship or residency, rather than poverty, such as the many universal pensions found across developing countries. Nor should Social Registries be used for programmes for individuals, even when they are poverty targeted, because individuals should be assessed against their own well-being and not that of their household.

Ideally, Social Registries should be linked electronically to Single Registries and the MISs of individual programmes, but this does not always happen. For example, Indonesia's Unified Database provides information on beneficiaries to programmes and districts via CDs, which are sent by post. They could also be linked to national identification systems, although this is best done through a Single Registry.

⁴ Brazil's *Cadastro Unico* uses an unverified means test.

Conclusion

Single Registries and Social Registries are, therefore, very different types of databases. Single Registries are much more complex, holding a vast range of information on programmes while offering a nexus between different government databases. They play a key role in monitoring national social protection systems and can be linked to a wide range of types of social protection programmes, not only household-based social assistance. They can also hold information from Social Registries and link Social Registries to information held on other programmes and databases.

In contrast, Social Registries have the limited purpose of simplifying the targeting of household-

based social assistance programmes. However, this comes at the price of high exclusion errors for those living in poverty, with many likely to be excluded from all programmes using the Social Registry. Governments could decide to invest in the higher quality targeting of individual programmes, which is likely to be more accurate, but would come at a higher cost. If saving money rather than effectiveness is the priority, then a Social Registry may be an option. In addition, Social and Single Registries are not mutually exclusive because, as Figure 1 indicated, integrated social protection MISs could incorporate both.

Bibliography

Bah, A. et al. (2015) *Finding the Poor Vs. Measuring their Poverty: Exploring the Drivers of Targeting Effectiveness in Indonesia*. TNP2K, Jakarta, Indonesia.

Kidd, S. and Wylde, E. (2011) *Targeting the Poorest: An Assessment of the Proxy Means Test Methodology*. (AusAid): Canberra, Australia.

Kidd, S. and Huda, K. (2013) *BOLSA unFAMILIAr*. Pathways' Perspectives, Issue No 9, March 2013, Development Pathways, London, UK.

SMERU (2011) *Rapid Appraisal of the 2011 Data Collection of Social Protection Programs (PPLS 2011)*. Research report, SMERU Institute: Jakarta, Indonesia.

Pathways' Perspectives

This series of papers provides people with the opportunity to comment on key issues in international development with the aim of stimulating debate. While Development Pathways may not necessarily agree with the opinions of the authors, we believe it is important to give people space to express their views.

About Development Pathways

We are a group of international development practitioners who specialise in the fields of social protection and social development and work with a range of development organisations and country governments across the developing world. We are committed to bold and innovative thinking and our aim is to provide creative and context-specific solutions to the social and economic policy challenges facing developing countries.

We believe that policy and programming needs to be evidence-based and uniquely appropriate for the political realities of the countries in which we work, which may mean challenging prevailing orthodoxy to deliver the best policy and programme solutions. All of our work is grounded in social and political analysis, ensuring that policies and programmes promote gender equity and women's empowerment, and benefit the most vulnerable.

About The Authors

Richard Chirchir

Richard Chirchir is the Senior MIS Specialist with Development Pathways. He is recognised as a leading social protection MIS expert with over 14 years of relevant professional experience. Richard has designed and provided advice on MIS development for social protection schemes across Africa and Asia.

Shez Farooq

Shez Farooq is a Senior MIS Specialist at Development Pathways with over 16 years of experience. Most recently, Shez has been supporting the Governments of Malawi, Rwanda and Laos by applying innovative and best practice design to transform the user interface and experience for their MIS solutions.

For more information please feel free to get in touch, our contact details are below:

DEVELOPMENT PATHWAYS

Development Pathways Limited
2nd Floor Downe House
303 High Street
Orpington, Kent, BR6 0NJ
United Kingdom

T +44 (0)1689 874764
E admin@developmentpathways.co.uk
W www.developmentpathways.co.uk