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Anti-Social Registries: How have they become so popular?

(Health warning: some economists may be harmed in the reading of this paper)

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Yet another craze is sweeping the social protection world: the so-called ***Social Registry***. In recent years, advocates of Social Registries have been circling the globe convincing government after government to implement them, like second-hand car merchants fooling unsuspecting and trusting customers into believing that a 15 year-old Ford Fiesta with 200,000 miles on the clock is the best value-for-money car on the market.

On the face of it, a Social Registry sounds great and the choice of the name makes it sound harmless (and, indeed, sociable). It promises countries the ability to rank their entire population from the poorest to the richest household. Once this is done, they can use the Social Registry to select beneficiaries for all social programmes using just one simple database, thereby ensuring access for only the poorest (perfect targeting – just brilliant!). All that is needed is for enumerators to visit each household in the country and assess their well-being. Given that it sounds so easy, one wonders why no-one thought of it before and why we never find such a great tool in high income countries.

However, on taking a closer look, the logic behind the Social Registry unravels. It depends on two key assumptions that, unfortunately, only economists leaving their common sense in the bedroom drawer before going to work could actually believe.

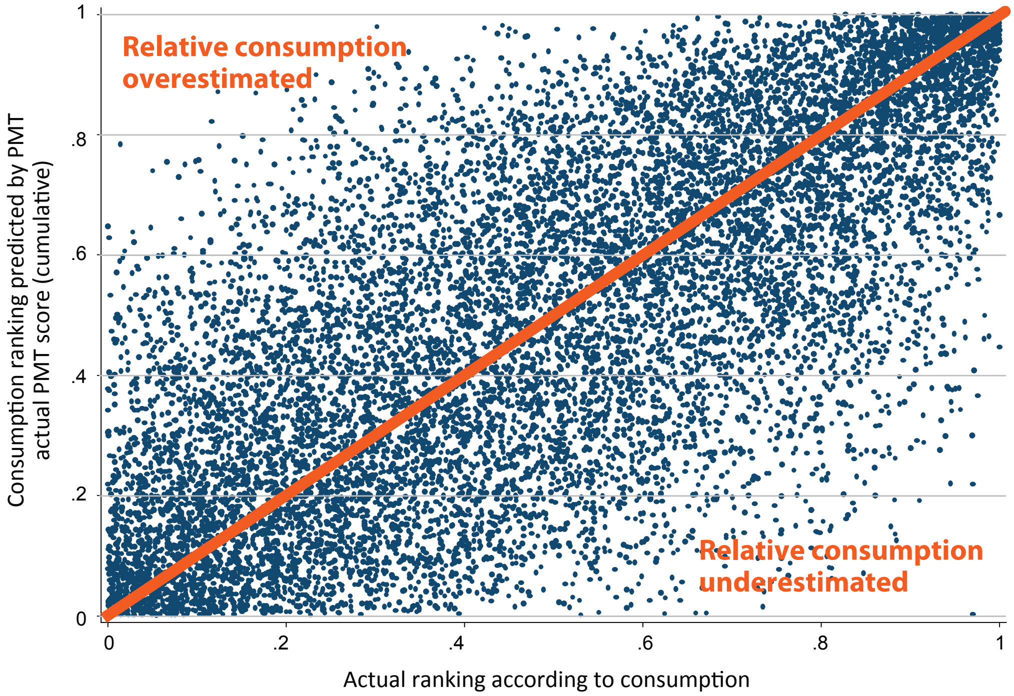
The ***first assumption*** is that it is possible to accurately assess the well-being – or incomes – of households in low and middle income countries. The preferred methodology proposed by Social Registry advocates is the proxy means test: yet, unfortunately, as we have shown elsewhere, this is a highly inaccurate tool and arbitrary in its selection of beneficiaries for social protection programmes. To illustrate this point, Figure 1 plots household consumption in Bangladesh as predicted by a proxy means test against actual consumption measured by the country's national household survey (each dot represents a household). If the assumption underpinning the Social Registry was valid, all households would be lined up along the diagonal orange line from bottom left to top right. In reality, the households are scattered across the graph, indicating that the proxy means test does not come anywhere near accurately predicting household wealth rankings. (Read more about this here).

Therefore, since they use proxy means tests, Social Registries necessarily deliver highly inaccurate results. Indeed, the graph only shows the design errors. Once the proxy means test survey is implemented, the results are even worse.

Social Registries and Single Registries

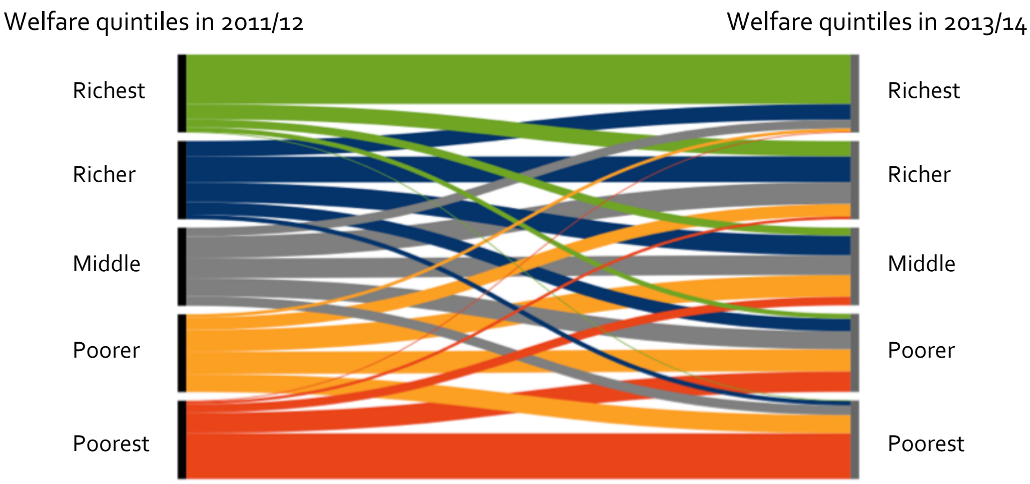
Social Registries should not be confused with Single Registries. Social Registries are merely lists of households with a wellbeing score attached and are used to select beneficiaries of poor relief schemes. In contrast, as my colleagues Richard Chirchir and Shez Farooq explain, Single Registries are warehouses of information from a wide range of social programmes, offering governments – and others – information on the recipients of schemes and the performance of the programmes. They are used to monitor social protection systems. Kenya's Single Registry is a great example (and you can look at it here while reading about it here.)

Figure 1: Scattergraph showing relative rankings of households in Bangladesh by proxy means test prediction of consumption and by actual consumption



Since Social Registry surveys are usually only undertaken every five or ten years – Pakistan, for example, last measured its households in 2009 and is only now attempting to re-score them – the **second assumption** is that household wellbeing remains static day after day and year after year. Yet, anyone with experience of the real world knows that this is impossible. People face crises on a regular basis, which can knock them backwards; or they take advantage of opportunities to improve their situation. So, household incomes, consumption and wellbeing are in constant flux. For example, Figure 2 shows changes in the ranking of households in Uganda after only two years: the colours indicate the welfare quintile within which households were located in both 2011/12 and 2013/14. There is very significant change in the ranking of households over a short period of time, indicating that the second assumption of the Social Registry on static wellbeing does not – and cannot – hold true.

Figure 2: Change in ranking of households in Uganda over a period of two years



[1] Brazil uses an unverified means test for its Social Registry but this, again, is highly inaccurate.

The proponents of Social Registries have tried to overcome the challenge of income volatility by developing 'second-generation' Dynamic Social Registries (doesn't this sound really cool?). These are meant to use on-demand registration rather than a national census: so, whenever a household's circumstances change, it can request to be re-scored by the proxy means test. While again, this sounds great, it comes with a number of challenges:

- The proxy means test is not a dynamic tool. So, while a household may have experienced a crisis, such as the loss of a job, unless the proxies used to measure their wellbeing have changed – such as their level of education or the type of wall in their house – their score is unlikely to have changed. Indeed, if they bought a television just before losing their job – or, indeed, picked up a defunct one from the rubbish tip – they may well be scored as having become richer.
- On-demand registration will result in households on the Social Registry being assessed at different times, which makes their scores difficult to compare. So, if the initial registration of most households was undertaken in 2009, it makes little sense to compare their scores with a household re-assessed in 2015. This would be like comparing apples with pears, since the social and economic context of the country could have changed significantly.
- While households may well ask to be re-scored when they have a crisis, they are unlikely to do so if their situation improves. So, over time, those households with improved wellbeing will keep scores from years earlier that indicate they are much poorer than they currently are. As a result, they will – according to the poverty criteria of the programme – illegitimately continue to access programmes.

So, Social Registries – even those that are supposedly 'dynamic' – are unable to fulfil their function of accurately ranking households from poorest to richest. To believe they could would be on a par with believing that not only can pigs fly, but can do so while simultaneously riding a unicycle, reading Shakespeare and juggling glasses of cocktails without spilling a drop.

The high level of inaccuracy inherent in Social Registries is problematic enough if used to select beneficiaries for only one programme. But Social Registries are increasingly being used to select recipients for a wide range of programmes. As a result, across a growing number of countries, the majority of people living in poverty are being systematically excluded from a broad range of social programmes, with devastating consequences for their wellbeing. Given the damage they can do to societies, Social Registries should, therefore, be renamed **Anti-Social Registries**.

It's also important to note that Social Registries can only be used for poor relief programmes targeted at households (such as conditional cash transfers). They can't – or, at least, shouldn't – be used for more conventional individual lifecycle schemes, such as old age pensions and disability benefits. The Social Registry assesses ***household*** wellbeing: it cannot determine the actual income and wellbeing of individuals within the household. Yet, the world's largest and most common social protection schemes – such as old age pensions – are individual lifecycle schemes so the Social Registry is of no use for them, in particular when these schemes are inclusive (i.e. not targeted at those living in poverty). Leite et al's (2017) report on Social Registries exemplifies this challenge – and the blindness of Social Registry advocates – by promoting a Social Registry in Georgia which is not, and cannot be, used to support selection for the country's main social protection scheme, the universal pension.

When I explain Social Registries to those not working on social protection who have a modicum of common sense, they tend to laugh at the absurdity of the concept. The flaws are obvious and the assumptions evidently very dodgy. Indeed, they cannot even function as effective ***targeting*** mechanisms and, instead, are really only rationing mechanisms for poor relief schemes, choosing a small number of people to receive poverty-targeted programmes from the much larger number of people in need of the programmes. Leite et al (2017) bizarrely call Social Registries 'inclusion systems' when, in fact, one of their key functions is to arbitrarily ***exclude*** deserving households from social assistance.

Nonetheless, for some reason, many highly trained economists continue to advocate for Social

Registries. Perhaps they missed the common sense class at university or are just following the orders of their bosses at their Washington-based institution, who are desperate to sell yet another loan (I promised my colleague Juliet Attenborough that I would not name the World Bank as the main proponent of Social Registries, and I plan to keep my word). But, whatever the reason, their work is harming many of the world's most vulnerable people, who are increasingly being excluded from one social programme after another. Isn't it time for a re-think?

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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

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Stephen Kidd is a Senior Social Policy Specialist at Development Pathways. While he is well-known for his anti-social tendencies, he does not understand why his own problematic behavioural issues should be inflicted on the rest of the world through anti-social registries.

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