STRATEGY TO MOVE STATIC SOCIAL REGISTRIES TO DYNAMIC AND INTEGRATED SOCIAL REGISTRIES

SOPROEN
SOCIAL PROTECTION ENGINEERING

Commited to people

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Discussion Paper

I. CURRENT CHALLENGES

Leite (2017) defines social registries as information systems supporting outreach, intake, registration, and determination of potential eligibility for one or more social programmes. Social registries gather information on households to later support the processes of assessing them and filter a subgroup who could be eligible for a specific intervention or programme. The assessment is made according to the eligibility criteria defined by that programme and the social registry contains enough information to do so. The social registries are created to support the first phase of the social protection delivery chain.

The need for developing social registries is justified upon growing concerns about the fragmentation of the social protection systems. Before their creation, the outreach, intake, and registration processes were done separately by each intervention making these processes repetitive and inefficient. Social registries are aimed at improving effectiveness and efficiency for selecting beneficiaries of different social protection programmes by harmonizing intake and registration of households. In summary, social registries are created to serve as a consolidated source of harmonized information on the socio-economic status of households to determine their potential eligibility for social programmes using geographic, categorical or/and proxy means test approaches.

The general objective of a social registry in the social protection sector is to promote inclusion of poor and vulnerable populations that otherwise are excluded. That is why social registries are considered as *inclusion systems*. They provide a gateway for households to register and be considered for inclusion in one or more interventions without having the fear that they could be excluded.

In addition, each social registry defines their own specific objectives, they can be summarized as follows:

- Intake, store, access, retrieve and share beneficiary data for social protection programmes.
- Enhance and strengthen the coordination of social support programmes at the national level through need-based distribution of social protection programmes.
- Strengthen the harmonization of assessing approaches and processes for selecting beneficiaries of social protection programmes.
- Ensure tracking of the enrolment and graduation of beneficiaries of social protection programmes.

Leite (2017) also suggests that social registries should be first *integrated*[1] to serve as a common gateway for coordinating, registration, and eligibility processes for multiple social programmes. Moreover, social registries must allow *dynamic*

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[1] Also called single, unique, or unified.

inclusion meaning that any household can register into them at any time. In short, the ideal social registry should be integrated and allow a dynamic inclusion of households at any time.

Although not all countries have social registries, they have grown in the past 20 years mainly among middle- and low-income countries. However, most countries could not implement the suggested integrated and dynamic inclusion social registries. Whenever they were created, they developed their social registries as a self-contained database management system without any association to other programmes or administrative agencies, implying little to no interoperability with other systems. Also, countries tended to operate registries with *fixed lists of registrants and beneficiaries* not allowing new households to register while the new census sweep happens. The typical approach is to conduct en-masse registrations or *census sweeps* every 4 to 8 years, data remains the same between census sweeps. Fiscal space constrains, low administrative capacities and lack of political will are the classic justifications to choose this approach and not the one recommended by donor agencies.

As a result, these social registries, almost from inception, face similar challenges which are summarized below:

- *Low institutional capacity* to maintain and improve the information system and their operation.
- *No sustainable financing* to operate and move into a dynamic approach.

Implementation was typically made with funds coming from international development agencies.

- *Data quality and sharing issues* due to technical issues with instruments, lack of protocols to clean data and required functionalities to update and correct information.
- *Problems with data access and security* due to basic and unreliable information systems that were developed to begin the census sweep.
- *No clear policy and legal framework* that would strengthen their operation in the long run.

Despite the above challenges, the main one is *data becoming outdated* rapidly. As time passes by, users require to carry out extensive and additional work to complete their intake, registration, and assessment processes to select and enrol beneficiaries. Users in all these countries wonder whether social registries are helping or making their work even more cumbersome than before. Authorities are having a difficult time trying to make programmes use the available data, some countries even resort to directives forcing programmes to use the data.

Upon these challenges, the units or agencies managing social registries are developing strategies and work plans to mainly tackle the challenges mentioned above and strengthen their operation. Extensive reviews made by the World Bank (Leite, 2017) and Australian Aid (Barca, 2014 and 2017) throughout the past decade show that middle-high income countries have moved from static to dynamic

registries, from self-contained to high interoperability systems with sophisticated methods of data integration. On the other hand, most low-income countries are working to improve their social registries but keeping them still static, only trying to improve data collection efficiency and increase the frequency of their census sweeps.

SOPROEN wants to introduce a proposal to tackle the main challenge of social registries which is the rapid aging of the information, main concern and criticism of the social registry users. The other administrative related challenges, although important, are not analysed and considered in this paper.

II. OBJECTIVES AND ASSUMPTIONS

SOPROEN wants to suggest a feasible strategy to move social registries that are now static and self-contained to at least partially dynamic and integrated following a gradual and smooth process given the low administrative capacity and fiscal space constraints.

Basically, the aim of this paper is to introduce a strategy to reduce the aging speed of the current database[2] and upcoming database[3] of the social registry by cleaning data, partially updating household information, and adding new households using appropriate protocols and instruments.

These actions should help the development of instruments and protocols to improve the effectiveness of social registries. SOPROEN suggests to first understand the issues with the current data, and second to identify and develop protocols and instruments needed to start updating current database in the short run and later the upcoming database when the next census sweep happens.

This strategy is oriented for those middle- and low-income countries showing similar characteristics when dealing with their social registries which is the case according to the reviews made by Australian Aid and World Bank:

- The social registry was created as an _inclusion system_. The social registry provides a gateway for households[4] to register and be considered for potential inclusion in one or more social protection programmes (Lindert, 2020).
- The social registry was designed to _support the first phase of the social protection delivery chain_ of participating social protection programmes. A classical delivery chain includes (a) determination of potential eligibility via outreach, intake, and registration; (b) making decisions on enrolment and benefits; and (c) carrying out the implementation cycle of transactions: payments, verification of conditionalities, grievance and redressal,

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[2] Data captured and stored from prior census sweep and currently being used.

[3] Data to be capture and stored from next census sweep.

[4] Households also called _registrants_ or _applicants_.

case management (updates, claims) monitoring and so forth.

- The initial design of the social registry was a "static" gateway for registering households, a *"fixed list" of registrants*. The registration is done through waves of en-masse data collection (census sweeps).

- The method for intake and registration is *supply driven*. Field teams visit households and collect information *en-masse via door-to-door methods*. The census sweeps occur every 4 to 8 years, and does not allow the registration of new households in between the two en-masse events.

- The *social registry management unit* assesses needs and conditions to determine potential eligibility for the different participating social protection programmes. The software application runs the business rules to select possible eligible households for different programmes.

- The social registry unit has the capacity to provide information to participating programmes in a way they may require. A classical report provided by this unit would be a list of households with basic members' information complying with specific conditions such as categorical and/or poverty information plus other social economic information.

- Neither regular updates are made by the social registry nor protocols have been designed to do so.

III. PROPOSED STRATEGY

A. CHALLENGES

The common challenges of these self-contained and static social registries can be summarized as follows:

- Data collection instruments are deficient. As a result, data entering in the information system is not properly cleaned. The data enters the information system with errors including incomplete information, duplications, and/or information that is entered incorrectly.

- Between census sweeps, the social registry fails to:
  o Including new households that are being created continuously, they must wait for a new census sweep.
  o Updating address of the household when move from one place to another due to migration or displacement.
  o Updating the number of members due to deaths, births, entrance/exit of members due to divorce, or members leaving to create new households.
  o Adjusting or reassessing needs and conditions (poverty and vulnerability conditions) due to household disasters (i.e., flooding destroying the house), loss of means of earning a living, change in educational status, health events and others.

Outdated or static information on socio-economic status can lead to inaccuracies in the determination of eligibility for a specific

programme. Since no updates happen in the database, the information gets very quickly outdated. The older the information, the greater the need for programmes to supplement the information provided by the social registry with field work, and the higher the criticism levels by users.

B. INSTITUTIONAL ACTORS

Key institutional actors are needed to participate actively to make possible to improve the effectiveness of the social registry:

- Active participation of at least the main cash transfer programme, other social protection programmes, agency or programme dealing with rapid emergency response interventions, and the main civil registry agency.
- The participating programmes can be divided into two types although all retrieve information from the social registry to make their own eligibility and enrolment decisions.
  o *Active participating programmes* are those willing to share information because they have reliable information systems and are

constantly collecting household information.
  o *Passive participating programmes* are those who will only continue retrieving information from the social registry, they neither have reliable information systems, nor information is constantly being collected from beneficiaries.

C. STRATEGIC ACTIONS

The intension is to work only with key and most reliable social protection programmes and administrative agencies that could provide information to update the social registry database. SOPROEN proposal includes actions that are doable in a 2 to 4-year period. The actions are divided into two parts, one dealing with current database and the other with upcoming database. In both cases, the plan is to make changes in a way new households can be added and households' information can be updated with information from other sources or third-party agencies. However, it is important to point out that no open demand driven approach is suggested. The next table summarizes the proposed actions.

Table 1: Proposed actions to make the social registry partially dynamic and integrated

DATA	ACTIONS	SOURCE / RESPONSIBLE
Current database	Cleaning procedures	Social Registry unit
	Updates protocols	Cash transfer programme, emergency response interventions and hopefully other social protection interventions
	Adding new households	Active participating programmes Emergency response interventions

	• Full	
	• Partial	
Upcoming database (Next census sweep)	Filtering protocols for next census sweep	Social Registry Unit
	Updates protocols	Cash transfer programme, emergency response interventions and hopefully other social protection interventions
	Adding new households • Full • Partial	Active participating programmes Emergency response interventions

1. Data cleaning of the social registry

With respect to data cleaning, it is important to divide two situations here, what to do with current data already stored in the social registry and what to do with upcoming data (new census sweep). An analysis of the data already stored in the social registry will help to identify issues and inefficiencies in the data collection process and data collection instruments. Digital instruments can always be improved with additional filters and controls to avoid incomplete or wrong data being stored.

2. Adding new households

Given the limited capacity of the social registry, the proposal is not to introduce an on-demand application window interface in the short run, SOPROEN proposes to allow programmes' officers to intake and register new households when they are selecting beneficiaries. Trained programme officers can identify new households in their own assessment process. When households not included in the database are identified, these officers should be allowed to do the intake and registration of these households using the social registry data collection instrument.

3. Adjusting socio-economic conditions demanded by registrants

SOPROEN proposes that programmes' offices can do so when these households are applying for their programmes. Programmes' officers should be allowed to intake and register these households as a condition to allow them to apply for a specific programme. Once the information is collected, the social registry officers approve after some verification and approves the replacement of the information updating the socio-economic information of these households.

4. Information coming from other administrative system

Information could also come from other administrative systems. This is done to secure the most current data from other administrative systems such as the civil registry office for example. For this, data exchange protocols are needed to verify and cross check information provided by registrants. These agencies would help the social registry to correct basic demographic information of individuals like names, date of birth and others. Once information is cross checked, the social registry will take this information in case it is different from what was obtained directly from the registrant.

5. Information coming from other social protection programmes

The demographic information taken from public agencies like civil registries to update the social registry database cannot be changed by any other administrative system. Other updates come from social protection programmes participating in this integrated system. Even though this step of sharing data across agencies is the most sophisticated version, SOPROEN proposes a simplified integrated system for updating information from social protection programmes.

Not all social protection programmes can provide updates to the social registry, only those well-established and large programmes with robust information systems. In most cases programmes like social cash transfers and public works are large, tend to have

information systems, and are monitored by development agencies. Programmes complying with these prerequisites should be declared active participating programmes and are candidates to share information with the social registry to update their information. Socio economic variables are chosen to replace the information contained in the social registry database including address, education, conditions of the house and the like.

6. Information coming from emergency response interventions

Currently, more and more countries are managing emergency response interventions nationwide. When emergencies and disasters happen, the ministry or the agency providing support to the affected gets first information from the social registry. They are benefited through vertical expansion of ongoing programmes. However, these agencies also collect information from affected households not included in the social registry. The longer the social registry information was collected, the higher the percentage of new households.

In addition, emergency interventions leave out the possibility of collecting from new households the entire social registry information, only a portion of it is collected. As such, the proposal of SOPROEN is to allow this partial information to be added to the social registry. The social registry database would end up with having complete and incomplete household information. Although it is not ideal, other programmes

can take advantage of this information and supplement it when needed. Emergency interventions are becoming concurrent, floods and droughts happening almost every year, and the same areas need to be intervened. Therefore, the social registry updated information would be very useful to use in the same areas for a subsequent emergency.

IV. SOCIAL REGISTRY INFORMATION SYSTEMS

It should be noted that not all information that enters the social registry database using the intake form can be updated, only those fields that other institutions are already doing so. In this sense, the institutions that have valid information should allow the social registry information to be updated. For these updates to take place, it is required that functionalities are developed in the social registry information system that allow household statuses to be changed to obtain reports or lists of households pending confirmation of updates, so that once this is done, the update is recorded in the social registry database (see figure below).

Figure 1: Social Registry Database
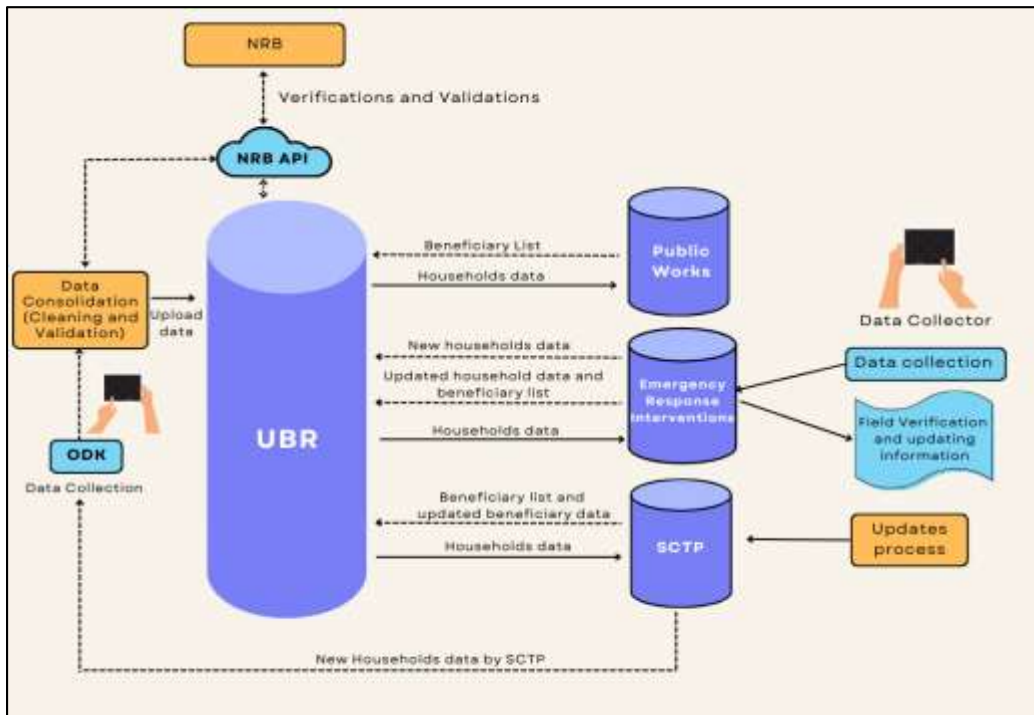
The next table shows the proposed fields to be updated per agency and participating programmes made to the Malawi social registry (SOPROEN, 2023), called Unified

Beneficiary Registry (UBR). In this case, the National Registry Agency (NRB), Social Cash Transfer Programme (SCTP), Public Works and Emergency Response Interventions correspond to the active participating agencies and programmes sharing information with the UBR. Of course, each type of update requires specific protocols of verification and validation to accept the replacement. These protocols must be simple and almost at no cost to make them feasible.

Table 2: Summary of variables to be updated for the UBR, Malawi

| Variable | To be updated by | | | |
	NRB	SCTP	Public Works	Emergency Interventions
National ID	X			
First name	X			
Surname	X			
Date of birth	X			
Sex	X			
District		X		X
TA		X		X
GVH		X		X
Village		X		X
Marital status		X		X
Disability		X		X
Chronic illness		X		X
School grade		X		X
Highest attained education level		X		
Name of school/Institution		X		
Fit for work		X		X
Change of Household Head		X		
Beneficiary of what SSP programme		X	X	X

In short, SOPROEN recommends moving progressively the social registries from a static to a partial dynamic status. This period should last about 4 years to have enough time to design and implement these changes. The objective of this period is to make the social registry *partially dynamic and integrated system*. Later, after a detailed performance evaluation, the social registry can go on with a new strategy to finally reach a *full dynamic status*. This causes the proposed updates to not only be comprehensive but would provide the lessons needed in the next 3 to 4 years before jumping into to the next level and make the social registry *fully dynamic and demand driven*.

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