Integration of administrative records for social protection policies: contributions from the Brazilian experience[1]

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Integrating information for the purpose of articulating social protection policies is hard work. It requires a combination of political will, capacity for institutional cooperation, software development and direct communication channels with citizens. Because of this complexity, countries that pursue this objective often cooperate to exchange knowledge, and the Brazilian Single Registry (*Cadastro Único*), the backbone of some 20 social protection programmes, is frequently cited as a successful example of integration.

Over the past seven years, Brazil's Single Registry has been considered an international example of integrating interventions targeting the most vulnerable populations. Its database contains information on 40 per cent of the Brazilian population and is currently used by more than 20 social programmes in the country. This, however, did not happen overnight, nor was it a simple undertaking. And yet many challenges remain for Brazil to effectively integrate its social protection policies—even non-contributory ones.

The choice to address these challenges assumes that the government should focus on providing a path into these services and non-contributory social protection benefits, even though many people might emphasise the need for citizens to find ways out of them.

At the individual level, establishing an integrated and systemic approach to collecting and storing information on social protection policies helps the State coordinate its activities relative to the various vulnerabilities experienced by citizens throughout their lives. At the population level, an integrated approach allows the State to assess the scope of its initiatives and the remaining gaps in protection.

The establishment of integrated administrative records about social protection policies can help structure and organise a permanent service network for citizens. A project of this type provides important tools to manage citizens' demand for social policies, in addition to objective instructions and funding for public services; in doing so, it encourages the structuring and strengthening of a public social assistance network.

According to Barca and Chirchir (2014), countries have established these integrated models based on three primary objectives. The first is to promote the coordination, supervision, monitoring and evaluation of policies. Integration makes it possible to identify the people who participate in each initiative, facilitate planning across several fields of social protection and establish coordinated monitoring and evaluation strategies across social programmes.

The second objective is to consolidate the processes used to select the target populations of social protection programmes, by sharing indicators about vulnerability and poverty. This does not mean that all social programmes should use the same indicator, but rather that information about a segment of the population will be available to inform social programmes and allow them to serve their target populations as part of a common and comparable scenario. This can reduce exclusion and inclusion errors, increase coverage of the most

vulnerable people and reduce the services provided to non-vulnerable people who are ineligible for specific social programmes.

The third objective is to integrate operations and services to serve citizens—i.e. to build mechanisms through which citizens can, in a single location (or a few locations), obtain information about a set of social protection programmes and join initiatives that may be of interest to them and fit their profiles. In this type of integration, the way services are designed does not reflect the fragmented nature of social protection policy management across government sectors.

It is worth noting that the objectives pursued by countries that have achieved some degree of integration between social protection policies and the registries and systems that support them can work in favour of—or against—the inclusion of vulnerable citizens. The components of integration vary with the objectives of each country and the levels to be achieved.

International agencies and experts engaged in the production and exchange of knowledge about social protection policies, especially those that address the poorest people, usually favour aspects related to the theoretical design of policies: their target population, targeting method, benefit package, delivery chain, monitoring and evaluation and, in particular, their impact on lasting poverty reduction—i.e. the so-called 'exit points'.

However, the situations of vulnerability are too complex to fit perfectly within theoretical models, and the operation of public policies is permeated by more drivers—interests, reasons and morals—than can be grasped by the rules. Thus, although the theoretical design contains inclinations regarding more or less coverage, protection, respect for citizens and justice, among other precepts, it seems to us that the final result will also be determined by characteristics of the operation of such policies.

An integrated registry system can ensure the inclusion of citizens in more and better social protection programmes to which they are entitled, without compromising transparency, republicanism and compliance. However, an integrated registry can also, at local or national level, be used for purposes of exclusion, patronage, persecution and the recurrent bias of criminalisation of poor people. Effective knowledge of these contradictions along the chain of design, planning, operation, monitoring and evaluation of public policies is of extreme relevance, ideally to point them in the direction of social justice.

References:

Barca, V., and R. Chirchir. 2014. *Single registries and integrated MISs: de-mystifying data and information management concepts*. Canberra: Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade.

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Note:

1. The ideas and concepts introduced in this One Pager are further developed in Bartholo, Mostafa and Osorio (2018).