FAQs: SOCIAL REGISTRIES

What’s the difference between Social Registries & Beneficiary Registries?

Distinct functions & population coverage. Both types of registries are related but distinct components of broader information systems for managing social programs. Social Registries support the processes of intake, registration, and determination of eligibility for social programs. They gather and retain data on all applicants, whether or not they become enrolled in a program. Beneficiary registries track information on beneficiaries and benefits to support program implementation (payments, case management, etc.). They maintain information on beneficiaries of specific programs, not all applicants.

Are Social Registries just “mechanisms for implementing proxy means testing”?

No. Social Registries gather and provide information on potential eligibility for social programs based on an assessment of needs based on socio-economic criteria, which vary by country context and the nature of the social programs. Many programs use means-testing, some use self-reported incomes combined with “proxy validators,” many use proxy means-testing (PMT, particularly in contexts of high degrees of informality and limited data capacity), some use hybrid means-testing, others use multi-dimensional poverty indices, and so forth. Programs often combine these socio-economic assessments with other criteria, such as categorical or geographic factors.

Are Social Registries only used for poverty-targeted social assistance programs?

No. Many countries use Social Registries to inform enrollment decisions and/or calculate benefit levels for a range of interventions, some targeted and some universal in nature. In fact, Social Registries are increasingly being used for programs that extend well beyond social assistance, such as: subsidized health insurance, social energy tariffs, education and training vouchers, child care and other social services, housing assistance, financial inclusion services, eligibility for pro bono legal services or court fee waivers, and more. The advantages of using Integrated Social Registries for multiple programs can be significant: lower burden on citizens who don’t have to apply for numerous benefits and services separately, costs-savings and efficiency for user programs, and better coordination of social policy.

Are Social Registries “mere lists of households”?

No. Social Registries allow for flows of information on registrants (individuals, households) and their socio-economic conditions that informs decisions on enrollment, policy coordination, and monitoring. As information systems, their basic architecture includes data intake and exchange, software applications to support both front-office and back-office functions, database management and interoperability (in some cases), and ICT infrastructure. Moreover, Social Registries don’t operate in isolation, and are usually part of broader information systems supporting social programs, including beneficiary registries and administration systems, payments administration, and case management systems.
Increasingly, no. In the past, Social Registries collected most information in a questionnaire/interview format directly from individuals and households. However, as technologies and capacities have improved, interoperability has facilitated data exchange with other administrative systems, which can expand the information available to Social Registries, reduce the amount of information that individuals need to provide directly, improve quality and accuracy, and enhance updating capabilities. Interoperability also facilitates the operation of integrated and dynamic social registries as part of a broader integrated social information system and whole-of-government approach. The SPL Delivery Systems GSG is continuing to work on this topic via support from the RSR fund and a Study Circle on Integration and Interoperability in social information systems. (Gratuitous advertisement for exciting new work and opportunities for collaboration!)

It depends. Another social policy feature of Social Registries that is emphasized in our paper is the extent to which they allow for dynamic inclusion, meaning that access to registration is open and continuous. This dynamism is closely related to the human rights agenda and the progressive realization of universal social protection, whereby anyone who needs social protection can access it at any time. In practice, experience implementing Social Registries is diverse. Many social registries are dynamic, usually relying on a mix of on-demand applications and active outreach to vulnerable populations. In other countries, where social programs are relatively new, coverage is small, fiscal space is constrained, and administrative capacity is limited, registration and updating are carried out less frequently, usually with significant time lapses between "census sweeps." The risk of this more static approach is rising errors of exclusion and inclusion with the passage of time, as the information becomes out of date. When social registries serve multiple programs, this risk is compounded, as access could be denied to potentially eligible people for numerous benefits and services. As such, some countries are building capacity and testing methods to move away from the infrequent "census sweep" approach to build dynamic on-demand capabilities.

No. The typologies of country experiences with Social Registries are quite diverse, in particular with respect to their (a) institutional roles and responsibilities (central and local); (b) the characteristics of their role as inclusion systems (coverage of population, integration for use by multiple programs, degree of dynamic inclusion for intake, registration and updating); and (c) characteristics of their architecture as information systems (degree of interoperability with other systems and structure of database management). Moreover, these systems are continuously evolving over time, with diverse starting points and trajectories. The unifying element for these diverse systems is their core function and operational role, as information systems that support the processes of intake, registration, and determination of eligibility for one or more social programs.