

Social registries: a short history of abject failure

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Preface

In 2019, Development Pathways and Act Church of Sweden co-published the report [*Hit and Miss: An assessment of targeting effectiveness in social protection*](#). The report exposed the limitations of poverty-targeted social protection programmes in terms of their development effectiveness. At the same time, the research demonstrated the effectiveness of universal schemes in reaching those living in extreme poverty.

In 2020, the same organisations co-published the report [*The social contract and the role of universal social security in building trust in government*](#), which considered the role that social protection can play in strengthening or weakening national social contracts, depending on the design of the programmes. It argued that the universal provision of social security schemes can play a significant role in building trust in government and, therefore, strong national social contracts.

Registries of various kinds are indispensable in the implementation of social protection schemes and systems. With the present report, we scrutinise so-called social registries, a type of registry that is increasingly used in the implementation of poverty-targeted social protection programmes in low- and middle- income countries. While this kind of registry is rarely debated, it is a further technical design issue in the area of social protection which is deeply political and influences the degree to which millions of men, women, girls and boys are included or excluded from social protection. This issue, we believe, must not be left to technical experts to solve or discuss but needs the full engagement of policy makers.

Our conclusion is harsh: in short, social registries have the potential to cause significant harm and they have failed wherever they have been implemented, in most cases excluding the majority of people living in poverty from multiple social programmes. Policy makers need to pay attention. Rather than countries wasting resources on social registries, we hope that they can invest in registries that are worthwhile, while ensuring that sufficient effort and resources are invested in giving everyone identity.

We hope that this report will inform practitioners and policy makers in governments, international organisations and civil society and help generate debate on the value of this particular type of registries.

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Executive summary

Within social protection, registries can be extremely useful. Yet, there is one type of registry whose utility is minimal unless your aim is to undertake relatively cheap and inaccurate poverty targeting. This is the so-called *social registry* (perhaps better referred to as an anti-social registry). Since the inception of social registries in Pinochet's Chile in the 1980s, they have extended across the Global South (although their absence in the Global North is telling). The core aim of social registries is to select beneficiary households for poverty-targeted social programmes. They have no role to play in the identification of recipients for modern, lifecycle social security schemes, based on individual entitlements. A better name for social registries would be 'targeting databases,' with their utility restricted to national social protection systems that resemble those of 19th Century Europe.

Global evidence indicates that all social registries have failed abysmally in achieving their core purpose of accurately identifying the beneficiaries of social programmes. The targeting errors found in social registries are very high, as evidenced in the exclusion errors of programmes that use them. The lowest error found, to date, is 44 per cent but some social registries deliver errors above 90 per cent. By using the same targeting methodology across a range of social programmes, social registries systematically exclude the majority of the poorest members of society from multiple schemes, causing significant harm.

A major failing of social registries is that they assume a static world in which households never, or hardly ever, change. Yet, in reality, households change rapidly over short periods of time. The assumption of unchanging households is one cause of the inaccuracy of social registries, given that data is rarely updated for many years. Other causes of inaccuracy are the high design errors when proxy means tests are used, the poor quality of social registry surveys and the falsification of information by respondents. In fact, the COVID-19 crisis has effectively blown apart the utility of all social registries, since relative household wellbeing across all societies has changed dramatically since early 2020. Any information collected by social registries before the pandemic is now virtually worthless.

The financial costs of social registries can be very high, which is one reason why information is updated infrequently. There are much better alternative uses for the funds that are wasted on social registries, such as building Single Registries – which allow governments to monitor more effectively their national social protection systems – or providing identity, through birth certificates and identity cards, to all members of society. There are also ethical questions surrounding the capture by governments of vast amounts of information on their citizens which, in many cases, is not adequately protected.

The numerous failures of social registries have not prevented them from being adopted by many countries in the Global South. They are often promoted by donors who oversell their efficacy and persuade highly indebted governments to finance them through loans.

Governments should carefully examine whether investing in a social registry is of any value. They should also consider whether, in addition to their poor performance, they are prepared to put up with other areas of potential harm associated with social registries, such as the undermining of trust in government and the weakening of national social contracts.

Social registries have no role to play in modern, social security systems. Indeed, if governments wish to transform their societies and support national recovery from COVID-19, they should, instead, focus on building comprehensive systems of universal social security, alongside other universal public services, such as health and education. Hopefully, social registries will soon be relegated to a footnote in the history of failed social policies, where they belong.

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The authors take full responsibility for the paper and any errors. We hope that it will help generate debate on the value of social registries, which have so much potential to cause harm and have failed spectacularly wherever they have been implemented. On the other hand, we are strong believers in the value of other types of registries for social protection schemes and systems and hope that, rather than countries wasting resources on social registries, they can invest in registries that are worthwhile, while ensuring that sufficient effort and resources is invested in giving everyone identity.

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- [Hit and miss: an assessment of targeting effectiveness in social protection.](#)
- [The social contract and the role of universal social security in building trust in government.](#)

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List of Acronyms

4P	Pantawid Pamilyang Pilipino Program (The Philippines)
BDH	Bono de Desarrollo Humano (Ecuador)
BF	Bolsa Família (Brazil)
BISP	Benazir Income Support Programme (Pakistan)
BPL	Below Poverty Line
COVID-19	Coronavirus Disease 2019
CRVS	Civil Registration and Vital Statistics
DFID	Department for International Development
EICV	Enquête Intégrale sur les Conditions de Vie des ménages
FAP	Familias en Acción Programa (Colombia)
GIZ	German Corporation for International Cooperation
GPS	Global Positioning System
GLSS	Ghana Living Standards Survey
HIICS	Household Integrated Income and Consumption Survey
HIES	Household Income and Expenditure Survey (Bangladesh)
HSNP	Hunger Safety Net Programme (Kenya)
ID	Identity Document
IHDS	India Human Development Survey
ILO	International Labour Organisation
IOF	Inquérito sobre Orcamento Familiar (Mozambique)
KPS	Kartu Perlindungan Sosial (Social Protection Card – Indonesia)
LEAP	Livelihood Empowerment Against Poverty (Ghana)
MIS	Management Information System
NHD	National Household Database
NPS	National Panel Survey (Tanzania)
OAP	Old Age Pension
PKH	Program Keluarga Harapan (Indonesia)
PMT	Proxy Means Test
SMERU	Social Monitoring and Early Response Unit (Indonesia)
SUSENAS	National Socioeconomic Survey
TSA	Targeted Social Assistance
US\$	United States Dollar
VHLSS	Vietnam Household Living Standards Survey
VUP	Vision 2020 Umurenge Programme

1 Introduction

Registries can be great things, in particular in social protection. For example, digital management information systems can significantly enhance the effective delivery of social security schemes, national Single Registries can facilitate the sharing of information between programmes and support national level monitoring, while national civil registries can offer identity to all recipients of social protection. However, one type of registry most definitely does not qualify as ‘great’ and that is the *social registry*, a phenomenon that, underpinned by a strong advocacy campaign, is undermining the development of progressive social protection systems across the Global South while harming the wellbeing of hundreds of millions of people who, as a result of social registries, are systematically excluded from accessing a wide range of social programmes.

A simple story gives a hint of the challenges associated with social registries. In 2018, a staff member of the now-defunct Department for International Development (DFID) developed a sudden urge to know how many children under the age of five years were being supported by the Hunger Safety Net Programme (HSNP), a small poor relief scheme in the north of Kenya. He called the programme’s management unit to ask them to use their social registry to give him the answer. He assumed it would be a simple task since DFID had, five years earlier, spent over US\$10 million developing the social registry for the northern four counties of Kenya, which was then used to select the beneficiaries of HSNP. He was to be severely disappointed. The programme manager had to gently explain to him that, since the data had not been updated since the initial survey in 2013, they had no idea how many children under 5 years of age were actually living in beneficiary households, since none of the new-borns were registered on their system. In fact, the programme manager could not even tell him how many individuals were currently benefitting from the programme since they also did not know how many had died since 2013 or how the members of beneficiary households had changed.

Our DFID staff member is, unfortunately, not alone. As social registries spread across the globe, more and more governments are experiencing similar challenges. Despite having spent vast sums of money collecting large amounts of information on their populations, they find that the information they hold is not only out of date but was often never of particularly good quality. Even worse, they find that their social registries are not even able to achieve their main purpose, that of accurately selecting recipients for social assistance schemes: indeed, it is rare for a social registry to achieve a level of targeting effectiveness that is better than a 50 per cent error (Kidd and Athias, 2020).

Despite their failures, social registries continue to pop up in country after country, often driven by donors who oversell their efficacy and, in many cases, persuade highly indebted

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governments to take out loans to finance them. Yet, concerns with social registries are not limited to their inefficacy and high cost. They can also cause real damage, undermining trust in government, excluding the majority of people living in poverty from a wide range of social programmes and, in at least one case, directly contributing to an increase in undernutrition among those excluded by the social registry.¹ This is the reason why, [in another paper](#), I have referred to them as anti-social registries.²

The aim of this paper is to provide an evidence-based consideration of the value of social registries. It will: clarify what they are and what they are not; examine their ideological underpinnings; look at their global spread in recent years and their coverage within the countries where they operate; assess their effectiveness and explain some of the causes of their inaccuracies; discuss the costs of setting them up and running them; assess the ethical and legal challenges with them; and, consider the potential social and political damage that can arise from investing in social registries.

¹ Filmer et al (2018).

² Kidd (2017).

2 What is a social registry (and what is it not)?

A social registry is, in essence, a very simple concept. It is no more than a list of households, with a set of information on their key characteristics. This information is used to rank households in terms of their relative well-being, from poorest to richest. Leite et al (2017) of the World Bank confirm this since they define social registries as: “*information systems that support outreach, intake, registration, and determination of potential eligibility for one or more social programs.*”³ They also state: “*The primary ‘outputs’ of social registries are data that have been transformed into standardized formats or aggregations that permit assessment of needs and conditions against program eligibility criteria.*” Barca (2017) agrees: “*Their primary function is to support and consolidate the initial social protection implementation phases of intake and registration. They can also support the assessment of needs and conditions for the purposes of determining potential eligibility for enrolment in selected social programs.*”

In reality, therefore, a social registry would be more appropriately called a **targeting database**, which aims to enable governments to select beneficiaries for more than one poverty-targeted social programme. Some social registries were even known as targeting databases before they were re-baptised as social registries: for example, the Listahan in the Philippines was first called the ‘National Household Targeting System for Poverty Reduction.’⁴

In fact, many so-called social registries were, initially, the residual data left over from surveys undertaken to select recipients for specific poverty-targeted social assistance programmes. After having spent rather a lot of money collecting data from households for proxy means tests, someone had the bright idea that they could use the same data to target other poverty-targeted social programmes at low cost, even though, as we discuss below, the information held on the databases was already out-of-date. This was the case, for example, with Pakistan’s Benazir Income Support Programme following the initial proxy means test survey undertaken in 2009.

Box 1: The baptism of ‘social registries’

The re-branding of targeting databases as ‘social registries’ is a very recent phenomenon and appears to be a great example of marketing, enabling some donors to sell a product that appears, from its name, to be a social good. As part of the re-branding, there was also a conscious effort to eliminate the term ‘Single Registry’ and replace it with integrated beneficiary registries, a far less catchy name. Barca (2017) went so far as to include a box – on page 8 of her paper – that explains why the term Single Registry should not be used. Strangely, she omits a similar critique of the term social registry, unquestioningly buying into the re-brand.

³ Cf. Lindert et al (2020b: 121).

⁴ Dadap-Cantal et al (forthcoming).

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Nonetheless, a number of social registries – such as Brazil’s *Cadastro Unico* – appear to have been initially developed with the specific purpose of selecting recipients for a range of poverty-targeted programmes.

The World Bank is increasingly promoting social registries as a means of selecting recipients for a wide range of programmes, as indicated by the ambitious diagram in Figure 1, which is taken from Lindert et al (2020b). The diagram, however, significantly oversells the utility of social registries since it omits to mention that the programmes highlighted would have to be poverty-targeted rather than universal and aimed at selecting households rather than individuals. Such diagrams are best viewed as part of an advocacy campaign for social registries.

Figure 1: Adapted World Bank depiction of social registries as the preferred selection mechanism for a wide range of public services

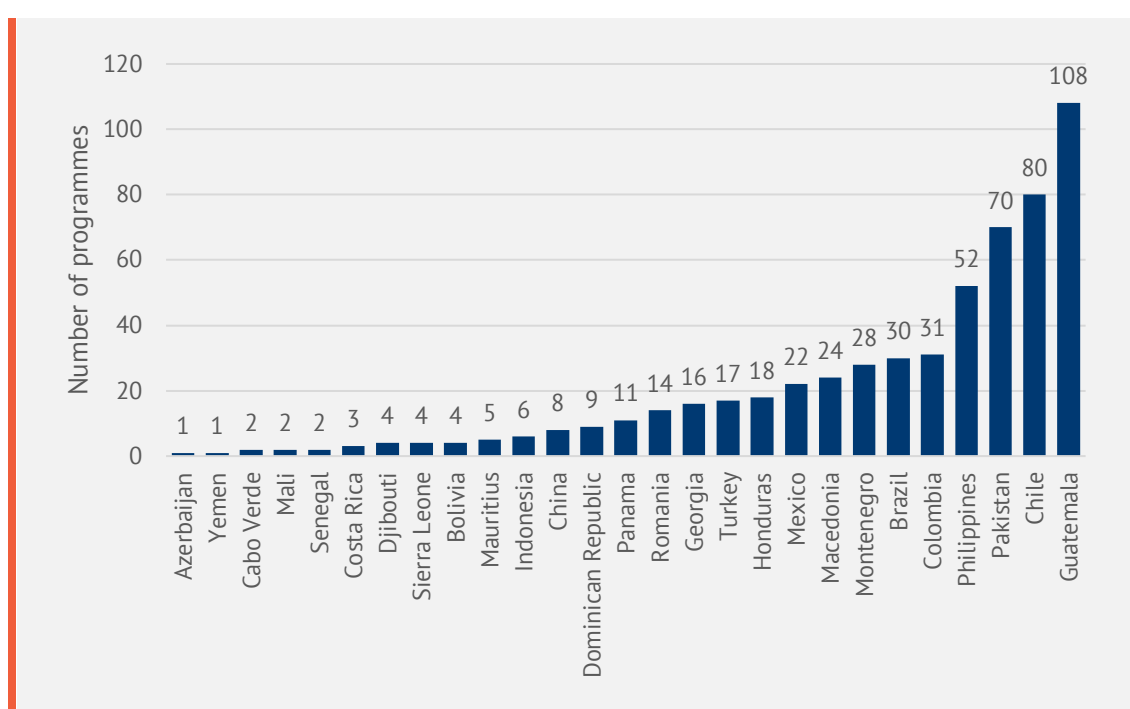


Source: Figure adapted from Lindert et al (2020b)

2 What is a social registry (and what is it not)?

As a result of this advocacy campaign, in some countries social registries have been used to select recipients for a very large number of poverty-targeted programmes: in Chile, the social registry is used across 80 programmes, in Pakistan 70 programmes and, in the Philippines 52 (see Figure 2).⁵ Yet, as Section 7 will show, social registries are highly inaccurate targeting mechanisms. As a result, by using the same failed targeting mechanism for multiple schemes, the majority of the poorest households in a country are often systematically excluded from all poverty-targeted programmes, not just one. This exclusion is, clearly, a major source of harm to these households.

Figure 2: Number of programmes that use social registries in selected countries (around 2015-17)



Source: Honorati et al (2015) and Leite et al (2017).

Some advocates of social registries suffer from over-enthusiasm in promoting their utility. Leite et al (2017) claim that some countries use social registries for universal programmes, despite no country having a social registry reaching all households. For example, they state that social registries are used to identify recipients of Georgia's universal old age pension. Yet, a simple moment of reflection would demonstrate that this is impossible; Georgia's social registry only includes 36 per cent of households nationally and, therefore, cannot be used to select recipients for a universal scheme.⁶

⁵ Leite et al (2017).

⁶ In fact, in Georgia, older people are present in around 50 per cent of households.

2 What is a social registry (and what is it not)?

Social registries have been given an exaggerated prominence within national social security systems by their advocates, often being placed at the heart of a web of other databases and digital functions, as if the whole digital eco-system functioned around them. A good example is a diagram developed by Leite et al (2017) in which the social registry is placed at the centre of a much broader system of information management (see Figure 3 where the social registry is highlighted by the red line). Other diagrams exaggerating the relevance and role of social registries can be found elsewhere, such as in Chirchir and Barca (2020), Lindert et al (2020b) and Barca et al (2021). Yet, as indicated earlier, social registries really are no more than simple targeting databases and, as such, even in countries that use them, they play only a peripheral role within social security systems, with their only function to provide initial lists of potential recipient households for poverty-targeted household benefits. Countries with more modern, individual lifecycle systems that use on-demand registration have no need for social registries (although, of course, they do use sophisticated management information systems).

In fact, many social registries are very simple databases with no digital connection with other databases – known as interoperability – and are entirely self-contained. This is the case even with some large, well-known social registries such as the Philippines' *Listahan* and Indonesia's Unified Database.⁷ In the case of the latter, for example, information can only be shared on discs. In fact, according to Leite et al (2017), only in Chile and Turkey is there a significant level of interoperability. As a result, they usually function very much on the margins of social security systems with limited or no integration.

Most social registries use proxy means tests (PMTs) as the means of selecting households for poverty-targeted programmes. A proxy means test is a form of poverty targeting that tries to identify recipients for social security programmes by collecting data on what are regarded as 'observable' proxies for household income.⁸ Box 2 sets out the typical data that is collected by a social registry using a PMT, as outlined by the World Bank. The proxies are selected by running correlations of national household survey data to identify a relationship between household characteristics and wellbeing (usually either consumption or income). The proxies selected are those that, together, have the strongest correlation with wellbeing. In addition, the indicators should be observable, so that they can be verified by enumerators. The number should also be manageable, so that the social registry questionnaire does not take too long to do: the more questions there are, the longer the survey and the more expensive it becomes. In reality, beyond a minimum number of proxies, incorporating further ones adds little predictive power to the

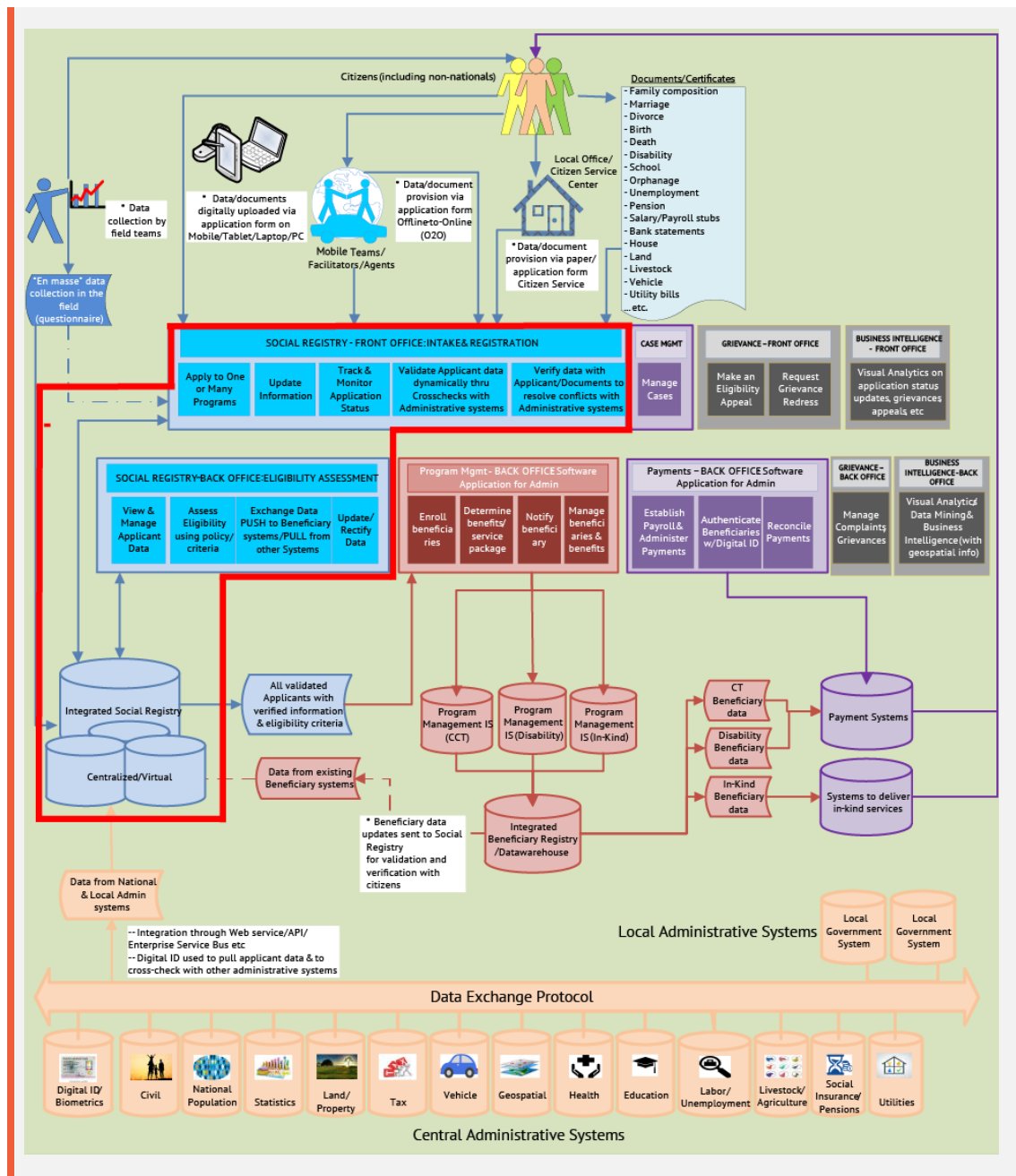
⁷ Leite et al (2017).

⁸ See Kidd et al (2017) for further information on how proxy means tests function.

2 What is a social registry (and what is it not)?

algorithm. Once the proxies are identified, a questionnaire is developed which can be used in a survey of households.

Figure 3: Diagram by Leite et al (2017) which places a social registry at the heart of a broader information system



Source: Leite et al (2017).

The next step is for enumerators to visit, ideally, all households in a country so that they fill in the questionnaire. Once all the data has been collected from households, it is run against the social registry's PMT algorithm to predict household wellbeing.

However, a significant problem with proxy means tests is that they are a highly inaccurate targeting mechanism, with significant in-built design errors (Kidd et al 2017).⁹ The impact of the weakness of PMTs on the effectiveness of social registries in accurately identifying the beneficiaries of poverty-targeted programmes is discussed in Section 7.

Some social registries use alternative mechanisms for targeting. For example, Brazil's *Cadastro Unico* employs self-declared household income, although the information provided is not verified or checked, while Rwanda's *Ubudehe* system used to employ community-based targeting. However, like PMTs, both targeting methodologies suffer from high errors (Kidd and Athias 2020).

According to the logic of a social registry, information should be collected from all households in a country or region. If not, households excluded from the registry will have no chance of being selected for programmes, placing particularly vulnerable households at a high risk of exclusion. Yet, as Section 5

demonstrates, no country globally has a social registry that actually includes all households. In fact, in most countries the vast majority of the population is still excluded from social registries.

Social registries only provide household-level predictions of wellbeing. While they collect information on individuals within the household, this does not go much beyond basic demographic data. Importantly, information is not collected on the wellbeing or incomes of individuals within households. Therefore, social registries can only be used to – inaccurately – assess the relative wellbeing of *households* and can only be employed for poverty-targeted *household* benefits. They should not be used to determine eligibility for conventional means-tested social security schemes for *individuals*, such as old age

Box 2: Typical information collected by a social registry using a proxy means test

Leite et al (2017) of the World Bank describe the typical information collected by a social registry that uses a proxy means test:

- Identifying information and household composition, such as: name, date of birth, gender; relationship with household head; marital status; unique identifiers such as a national or functional ID number;
- Geospatial identifying information on the location of the household, including address and other contact information, as well as GPS geo-coding information);
- Socio-economic status such as: self-reported and/or verified information on incomes for each household member; education, and employment status of each individual;
- Information on housing and assets, such as housing characteristics (e.g. type of housing material, connection to water, electricity, and so forth), self-reported and/or verified information on assets (e.g. vehicle, land, livestock, etc.); and,
- Other information depending on the purpose of the social registry (such as disability status, access to services, health, food security status, registration with employment agencies, etc.).

⁹ For further information on the inaccuracies of proxy means tests see: Kidd and Wylde (2011); Brown et al (2016); and, Kidd and Athias (2020).

pensions or disability benefits. If they are, they will unfairly exclude many individuals. For example, an older person who wishes to apply for a poverty-targeted old age pension may have no personal income at all but may live in a household that is assessed by the social registry as 'non-poor.' Consequently, the individual would be excluded from the scheme, despite their personal absolute poverty. They would be left in a situation of complete financial dependence on their household, with limited personal autonomy. In contrast, South Africa assesses applicants for its means-tested benefits on the basis of their individual income or wealth – or, in the case of a married couple applying for the Child Support Grant, the income of both carers – rather than household income.

2.1 Databases and information systems that are not social registries

There is a range of databases and information systems that can be confused with social registries, but which perform very different functions. A number are set out below:

- A social registry is not a **management information system** (MIS). All social security schemes require digital MISs to enable their effective delivery and manage operational processes such as registration, enrolment, payments, change management and grievances, while facilitating the monitoring of schemes. A social registry plays no role in this. While a programme-specific MIS may receive information on the initial list of potential recipients from a social registry, this list will subsequently need to be verified during enrolment, which should mean visiting all households again, at high cost.
- A social registry is not a **Single Registry** (sometimes known as an integrated beneficiary database).¹⁰ A Single Registry brings together information across a range of social security schemes and enables governments to undertake system-wide monitoring. A social registry is not required for a Single Registry and, indeed, could be problematic since, as discussed below, information in a social registry, even if accurate initially – which is highly unlikely – rapidly degrades and could provide governments with misleading information.
- A social registry is not a system offering **unique identification numbers** to citizens, such as India's Aadhar and Kenya's Huduma. These numbers are held on a separate database and can be linked to other government databases to verify identity. In theory, they could be linked to social registries, as long as the information on the identification number is accurately collected during the survey.

¹⁰ See Chirchir and Farooq (2016) for a more detailed explanation of the difference between the two.

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- A social registry is not a ***civil registry and vital statistics (CRVS) database*** which holds information on birth certificates and identity cards (ID). In fact, social registries often do not collect information on birth certificates or national IDs and, as a result, cannot be linked to civil registries.
- Finally, a social registry is not a ***population registry*** which, in reality, is the database that holds national census information.

At times, advocates of social registries appear to conflate them with other types of database or management information system. For example, Lindert et al (2020b:122) claim that Argentina's linking of 34 social programme databases to the unique ID number of beneficiaries is a social registry; yet, the information given seems to indicate a function of a Single Registry; similarly, Barca's (2017) claim that Uruguay has a social registry does not appear consistent with the description on the website of the Ministry of Social Development which appears to suggest that the system is, as in Argentina, a Single Registry. By making these exaggerated claims, advocates are, once more, in danger of overselling social registries.

3 The ideological underpinnings of social registries

Social registries are deeply embedded within a particular world view and ideology. Despite recent attempts to brand them as ‘inclusion systems’ that support universal social protection and human rights – c.f. Leite et al (2017) – they very much derive from a neoliberal vision of social security, which advocates for a small state, low taxes and low-cost programmes for the poor. Indeed, as indicated above, the only meaningful function of social registries is to identify beneficiaries for low cost, poverty-targeted programmes. It is no surprise that social registries first appeared in Pinochet’s Chile, the poster child for structural adjustment and the Washington Consensus.¹¹ Indeed, Chile’s social registry – the Ficha CAS – was “part of a sweeping effort to target social services to the poor.”¹²

The adoption of the language of ‘inclusion,’ ‘rights’ and ‘universality’ when describing social registries is recent and probably harks back to 2016 when the President of the World Bank, Jim Yong Kim, launched the [Global Partnership for Universal Social Protection](#) with the ILO, seemingly without realising what he was signing up to.¹³ Ever since, World Bank staff have had to try to re-define the term universal within their poverty targeting agenda. For example, they argue that, since social registries offer everyone the opportunity to enter the database and that some allow on-demand registration – thereby enabling households to apply for poverty programmes whenever they need them – they are systems of inclusion and consistent with a human rights approach. For example, Leite et al (2017) of the World Bank argue: “*Social Registries can also help promote universal coverage of social protection systems by providing a gateway for potential inclusion of the poor, vulnerable, and lower-income population to a range of benefits and services that could meet their diverse needs.*”

In reality, social registries are systems of **exclusion**, not inclusion, undermining human rights. The poverty-targeted programmes that use social registries are designed to exclude the majority of the population (i.e. the supposed non-poor), despite the vast majority of people in countries of the Global South living on low and insecure incomes. Further, as discussed earlier, due to the high targeting errors associated with social registries, in most cases they even exclude the majority of the poorest members of society from social security (see Section 7). Indeed, within the World Bank, social registries arose during a period when, as Ravallion (2016) argues: “*Social-protection policy advocacy turned ‘targeting’ (avoiding leakage to the ‘non-poor’) into a fetish—oddly confusing the ends and means of social protection.*”

¹¹ Escobar (2003).

¹² Grosh and Baker (1995); Herrera et al. (2010).

¹³ Kidd (2016).

4 The global spread of social registries

As indicated earlier, the world's first social registry – the *Ficha CAS* – was created in Chile in the 1980s although, in reality, it was probably no more than an early attempt at a proxy means test. Another early adopter of a social registry was India, which, in 1992, introduced a Below Poverty Line (BPL) card which was given to those assessed as living under the poverty line, with the aim of determining their eligibility for poverty programmes. Brazil created its *Cadastro Unico* targeting database in 2001.¹⁴

In reality, though, the use of the term social registry is relatively recent and, as indicated earlier, has been employed to re-name many pre-existing proxy means test databases. Presumably, social registry is believed to sound like a better brand-name than 'targeting database' enabling them to be packaged as products that can be promoted by donors to national governments. The World Bank has been at the forefront of selling social registries to countries, incorporating the costs within loans, although other donors have been enthusiastic promoters of the product.

There are now over 50 countries with targeting databases that claim to be social registries, although some are still programme-specific proxy means tests (see Figure 4 for a list of countries). They can be found across Africa, Asia and Latin America. However, they are not present in high-income countries, mainly due to the fact that high-income countries have more advanced methods of identifying recipients for social security schemes and have no need for social registries (although they do have other more sophisticated registries/databases that hold information on individuals). Further, given the practical challenges associated with social registries – not least their high level of inaccuracy – it is very unlikely that the citizens of high-income countries would accept a social registry. They would also be unlikely to willingly hand over large amounts of personal information to their governments (see Section 10 for a discussion on the ethical challenges associated with social registries). Nonetheless, despite the absence of social registries in high-income countries, donors from some of these same countries have no problem in promoting their use across the Global South.

¹⁴ De la Briere and Lindert (2005).

5 The coverage of households by social registries

As indicated earlier, social registries are meant to be national databases and, ideally, should cover all households within countries. The lower the coverage of households by a social registry, the higher the likelihood of households being incorrectly excluded from poverty programmes. Indeed, if the World Bank's argument that social registries are 'inclusion' systems is to be taken seriously, they should ensure that every household is included.

In reality, as Figure 4 demonstrates, no country has managed to achieve full coverage of households within social registries (although see Box 3 for information on Bangladesh). The highest coverage is 89 per cent of households in Rwanda and five countries have coverage above 70 per cent. Overall, of the 52 countries for which there is data, 43 have coverage below 50 per cent and 26 have coverage below 20 per cent.¹⁵ These low levels of coverage mean that social registries are unable to perform effectively, since many of the households excluded are almost certainly among the poorest households nationally.

The low coverage also indicates that, despite all the hype surrounding social registries, to date, at a global level, they have failed at the most basic level of including *all* households within their databases. While advocates may interpret this as a challenge to redouble their efforts, they would do well to reflect on whether the low coverage globally is, in fact, an indication of the weak support by governments for social registries. In reality, in many countries the only reason that there is any coverage at all by social registries is because donors have promoted and funded them. Without their advocacy and financing, governments would be unlikely to be willing to fund social registries themselves due to their high cost (see Section 9) and limited effectiveness (see Section 7).

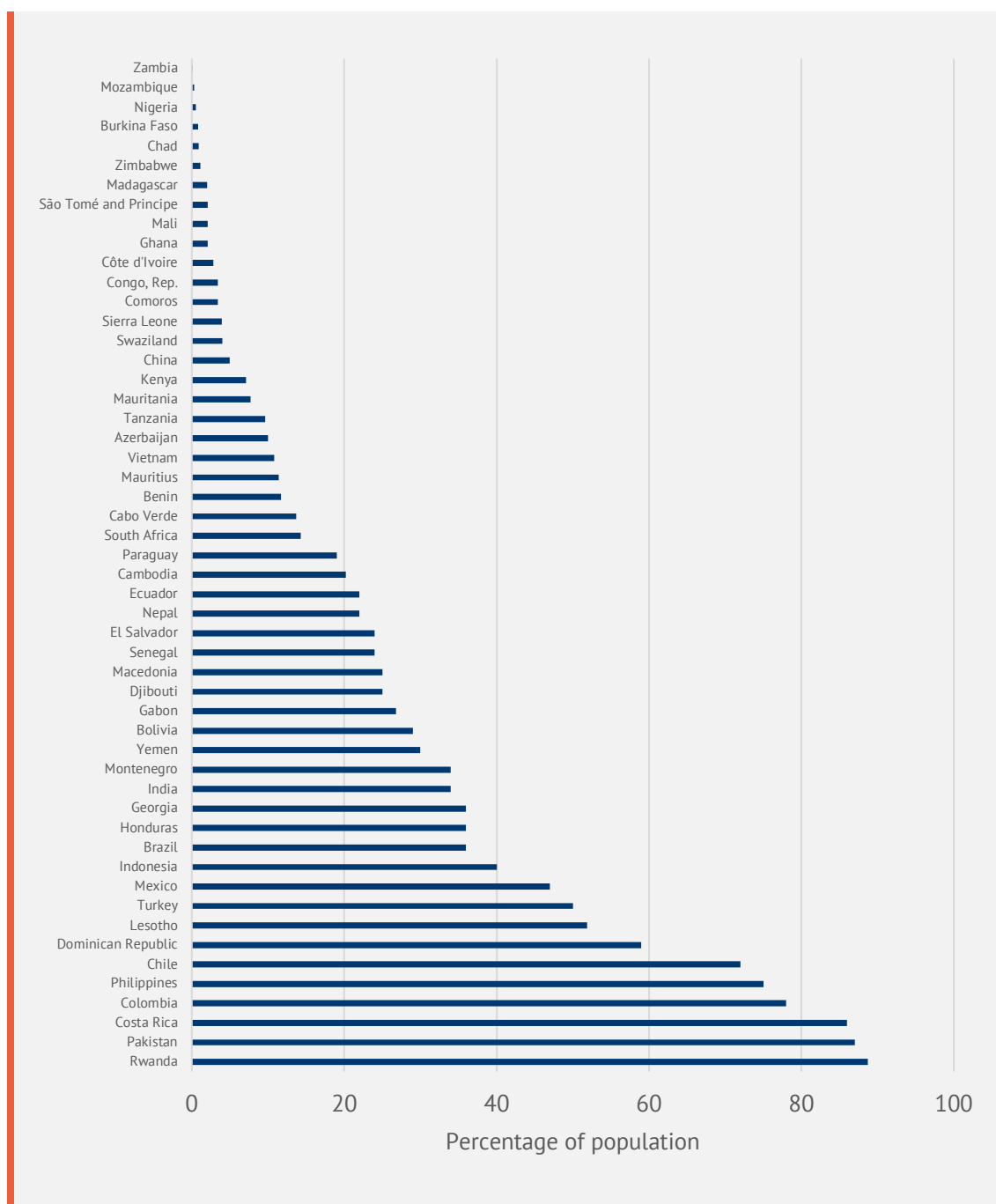
Box 3: The unfortunate story of Bangladesh's social registry

Bangladesh attempted to build a social registry, known as the National Household Database (NHD), with financing and technical support from the World Bank. Around 35 million households were surveyed in 2017 and 2018, amounting to almost the entire population. However, due to delays in developing the software for the social registry, it never became operational. It is now widely recognised that the information collected on households is out of date and no longer of any use. The impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on household wellbeing have made the data even more obsolete.

Source: Jahan (2021).

¹⁵ Barca (2017) claims 100 per cent coverage in Uruguay, but this would need to be verified. Further, the website of the Ministry of Social Development in Uruguay appears to suggest that the system is a Single Registry and not a social registry.

Figure 4: Proportion of national populations covered by social registries



Source: Barca (2017), Leite et al (2017), Beegle et al (2018), Republica (2019), Lopez-Calva (2020) and personal communication with GIZ in Cambodia.

Angola is a good example of a failed social registry. Despite significant investment by the European Union in developing the software for a social registry, the government of Angola has shown no interest in paying for the survey that would provide the information to populate the database. Similarly, in Nepal successive governments have felt little ownership of the social registry and have put it to limited use: despite initiating a social

5 *The coverage of households by social registries*

registry in 2012, by 2019, out of 1.22 million households registered, only 38,000 had been given the cards that would have identified them as 'poor.'¹⁶ In reality, Nepal is a country committed to universal benefits and the only reason it has a social registry is down to advocacy and funding from donors

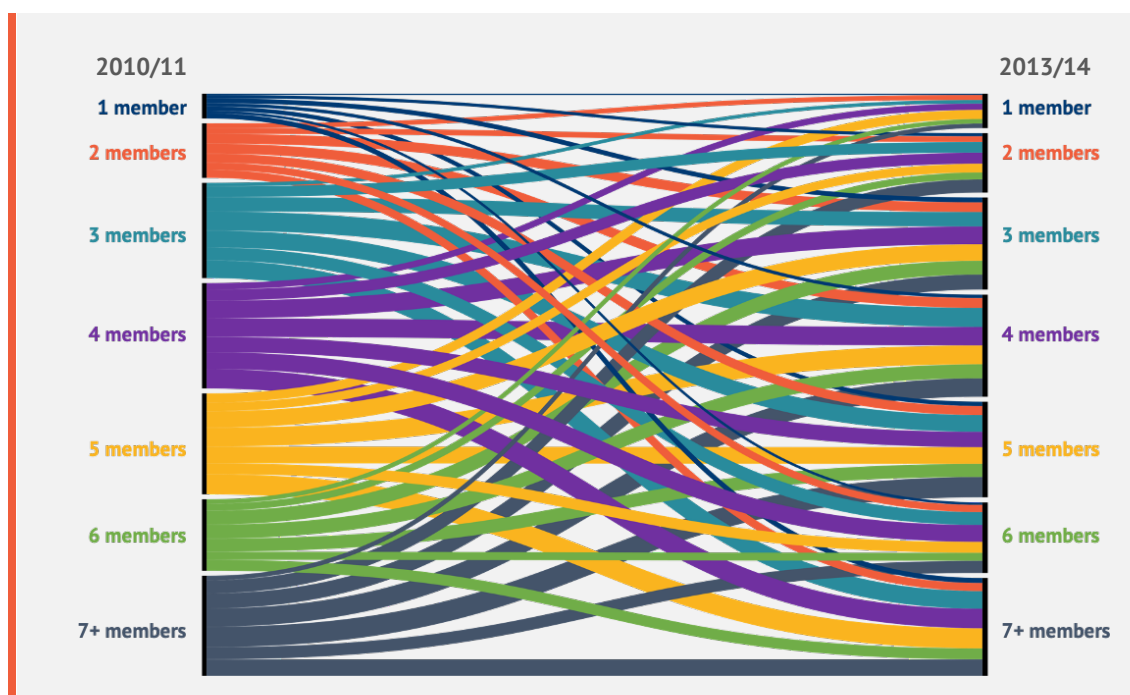
¹⁶ Khanal (2019); Republica (2019).

6 Social registries: imagining a static world

Surveys of households for social registries are undertaken at a particular point in time and the data collected is subsequently used to assess household wellbeing until the next survey is undertaken. As Section 8.5 will discuss in more detail, this may not be for many years. So, if a survey is undertaken in 2010 and a household is assessed for a programme in 2015 without another survey having been undertaken in the meantime, it will be assessed against its situation in 2010. It is as if nothing has changed over time.

In effect, therefore, social registries are based on the flawed assumption that we live in a static world, as if household characteristics remain constant in a form of suspended animation. Yet, in the real world, even one specific characteristic of a household can change rapidly. Figure 5 shows the change in the number of residents in households in Rwanda over a period of around two years. Altogether, 87 per cent of households changed in size during this time and some of the changes were considerable: for example, a number of one person households in 2010/11 were transformed into households of seven or more members by 2013/14, and vice versa. Yet, this is only one of the ‘proxies’ that would be used in a social registry algorithm when determining household wellbeing.

Figure 5: Changes in household size in Rwanda between 2010/11 and 2013/14

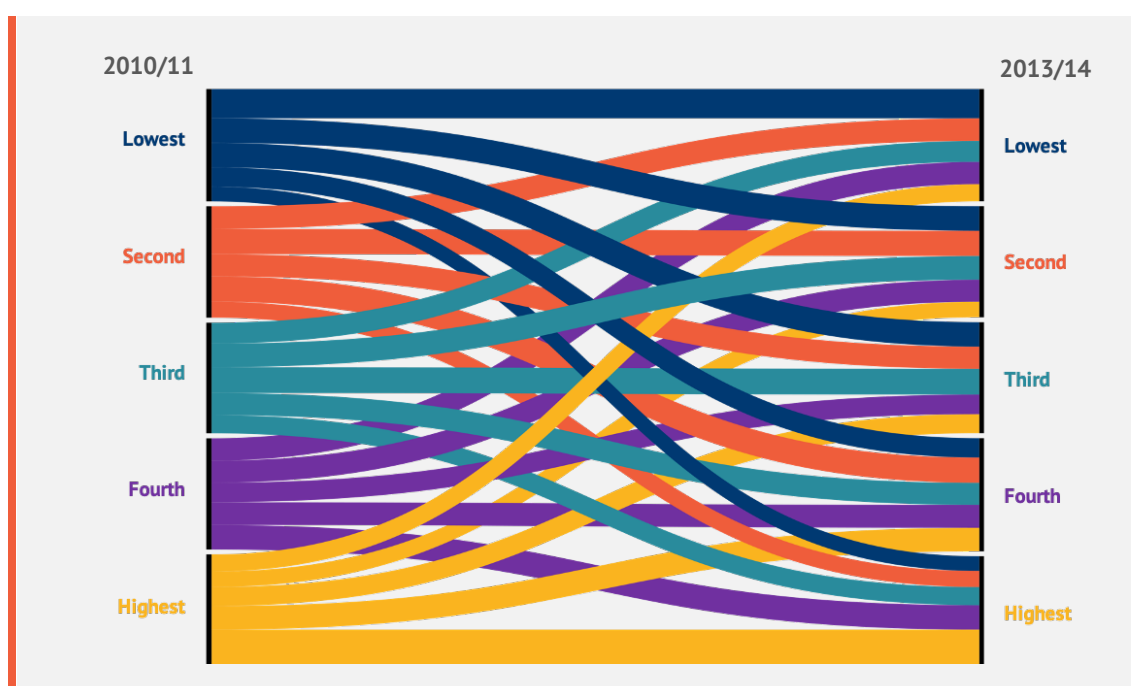


Source: Own analysis of panel data from Rwanda's EICV 3 and EICV 4 household surveys.

When multiple proxies are considered, the changes in household characteristics over time are even greater. As Figure 6 shows how the ranking of households according to the proxy

means test changed between 2010/11 and 2013/14 in Rwanda. The actual proxies changed in 99.9 per cent of households meaning that almost no household remained static over a period of around little more than three years. There was also significant movement in relative rankings, with some households dropping from the top quintile to the bottom and many others moving in the other direction. Fifty-seven per cent of households changed their ranking by 20 percentage points or more.

Figure 6: Change in rankings of household welfare in Rwanda according to the proxy means test, between 2010/11 and 2013/14



Source: Own analysis of the panel data from the EICV 3 and EICV 4 survey datasets.

Consequently, social registries necessarily use out-of-date information to assess household wellbeing even though circumstances within the household change rapidly, often substantially: in some cases, the information may be ten years old. It is no wonder, therefore, that there are significant errors in the accuracy of social registries, resulting in very limited effectiveness.

A further challenge is that many households disappear over time. People can change address while some may dissolve entirely due to circumstances such as death or divorce. Therefore, when targeting is undertaken using a social registry, many people miss out because they can no longer be found. In the Philippines for example, 18.6 per cent of households that had originally been found as eligible for the Pantawid scheme during the

first *Listahanan* survey in 2009 could no longer be found during the second survey in 2014.¹⁷

When a large-scale shock hits a region or country, the usefulness of social registries can disappear overnight. The COVID-19 crisis has demonstrated how household wellbeing can be transformed dramatically in a very short period of time. Many households that were relatively well-off prior to the crisis have lost all of their income and fallen into abject poverty. As a result, the relative ranking of household wellbeing from poorest to richest has changed considerably. Consequently, social registries that were developed prior to the COVID-19 crisis are now of no use at all since the information that they hold reflects a world that no longer exists. If countries were truly committed to social registries, they would completely renew their data post COVID-19 – undertaking mass national surveys – since the information they now hold is worthless. There are no signs of countries doing this. It is as if they are in denial about the weaknesses of the databases that they spent so much time, effort and money creating.

Indeed, the static nature of social registries means that they are not useful for a shock response.¹⁸ If a shock hits a region or country, and a government wishes to provide emergency assistance to the poorest members of society, it is unable to identify them through a social registry since the information on household wellbeing in the registry refers to a period well before the shock. Further, as happened during the COVID-19 crisis, the relative wellbeing of households changes considerably, and the social registry cannot measure this change. Governments will not be able to use the social registry to determine the level of support to give to households since the social registry will not be able to tell them the current size and composition of households. Further, most social registries do not collect payment details for households, which means that governments cannot use them to make emergency payments immediately: they still have to collect this information after the shock has hit.

Social registries can also not be used for monitoring the recipients of social protection schemes. As indicated by Kenya's HSNP programme in the introduction to this paper, social registries are unable to say who is in receipt of a household benefit. Social registries cannot tell governments the current size of households and they certainly cannot say with any degree of certainty who is in the household. They do not have information on how many children have been born into the household since the survey, nor how many have died or even who has married into the household or moved out.

¹⁷ Dadap-Cantal et al (forthcoming).

¹⁸ Advocates of social registries agree on this point: see Leite et al (2017). Nonetheless, they believe that they have a solution with so-called 'dynamic registration,' which is discussed in Section 8.5.

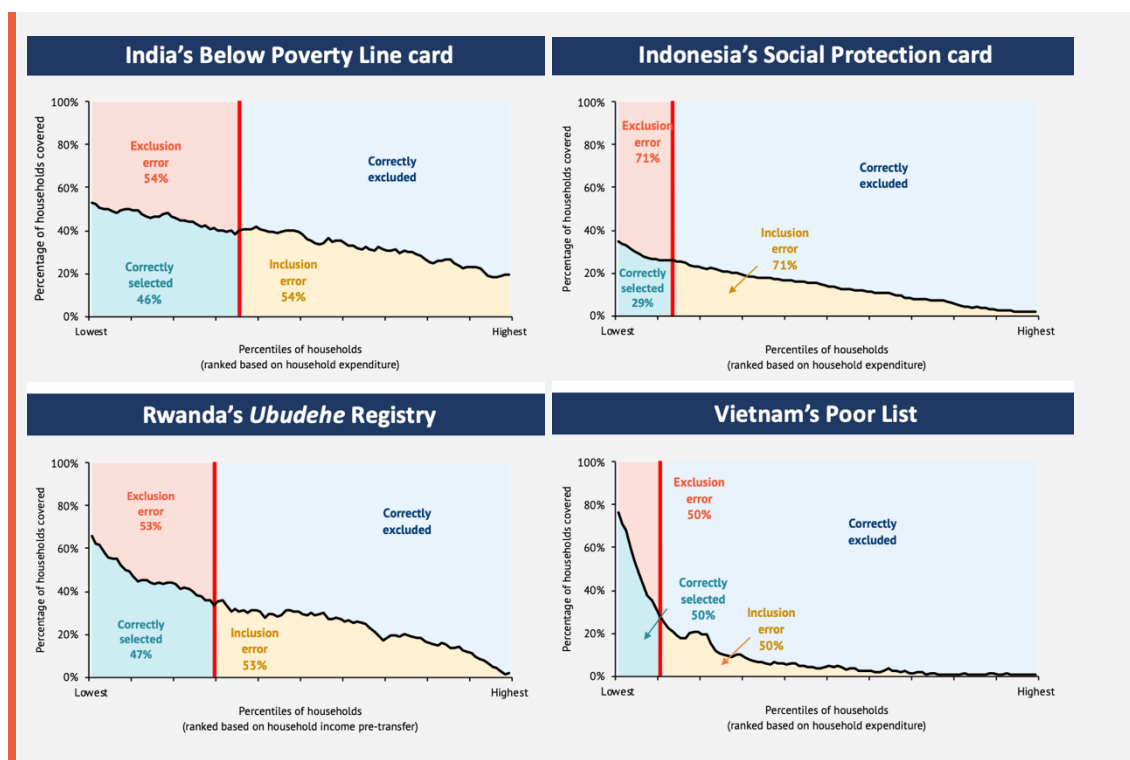
Therefore, governments that may be tempted to use social registries to monitor how many people are receiving support from their schemes are, in effect, flying blind.

So, if, for example, in Indonesia the government were to use the Unified Database to determine how many people are in receipt of a social protection scheme, the registry could only tell them how many would, in theory, have received the programme in 2015 – when the survey was undertaken – but they cannot know how many are currently receiving it.

7 The inefficacy of social registries

The aim of social registries is to select households for poverty targeted programmes, so how effective are they in achieving this aim? The answer is: not very. Four examples of the accuracy of social registries in selecting households for ‘poor lists’ are shown in Figure 7: India’s BPL card, Indonesia’s Social Protection card, those identified as belonging to categories 1 and 2 of Rwanda’s *Ubudehe* registry, and, Vietnam’s Poor List. For each percentile of the population, those who were put on the poverty lists are below the black line and those without are above it. All those to the left of red line are those who are eligible for the lists, with inclusion and exclusion errors measured against that coverage. All of the registries produce high errors ranging from 50 per cent exclusion in Vietnam to 71 per cent in Indonesia. Given that these cards and registries are used to select households for multiple schemes, it is evident that the majority of households living in poverty will have been excluded from multiple schemes, which will have major negative impacts on their wellbeing.

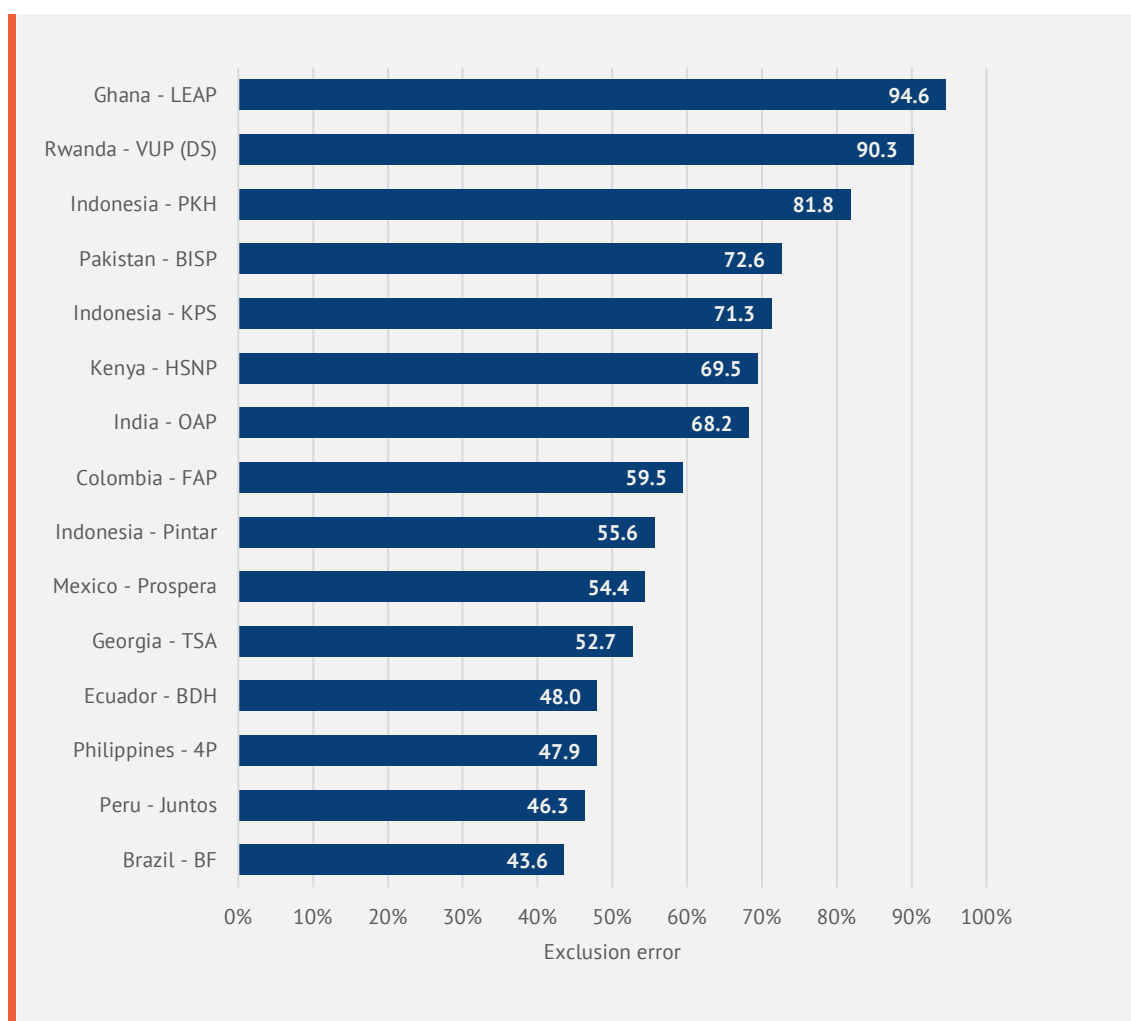
Figure 7: Targeting effectiveness of India’s BPL card, Indonesia’s Social Protection card, Rwanda’s *Ubudehe* registry and Vietnam’s Poor List.



Source: India: IHDS II (2012), Indonesia: SUSENAS 2017, Rwanda: EICV4 (2013/14) and Vietnam: VHLSS (2016)

The effectiveness of social registries can also be assessed by examining the targeting accuracy of individual poor relief schemes that have used them to select beneficiaries. Analysis by Kidd and Athias (2020) has shown that exclusion errors range from 44 per cent in Brazil to above 90 per cent in others (see Figure 8). If similar errors were reproduced across other poverty-targeted programmes that use the same social registries in these countries, in most the majority of the poorest households would miss out on, not just one, but multiple social programmes.

Figure 8: Exclusion errors in poverty-targeted schemes using social registries



Source: Kidd and Athias (2020).

A strange omission from many advocacy papers that have been written on social registries is an evidence-based assessment of their effectiveness. While papers such as Leite et al (2017), Barca (2017), Chirchir and Barca (2019), Lindert et al (2020a) and Barca et al (2021) go into great depth on social registries, they avoid providing evidence on their targeting errors. This omission is highly problematic, as national governments would be much less likely to accept the advice from donors to establish social registries if they

were aware of the errors. In fact, as indicated by Box 4, advocates of social registries can seriously exaggerate their effectiveness.

To a large extent, social registries should be regarded as rationing rather than targeting mechanisms. They are used to distribute – albeit inaccurately – poorly funded social programmes to only a small proportion of those households who actually require support. Most function a little better than a pure lottery in that poorer households are more likely to be included in poverty programmes than better-off ones. Yet, they still often exclude the majority of the poorest households and can appear to people as if they were lotteries.

In fact, a blog by Bance and Schnitzer (2021) has argued that a pure lottery may be an alternative to the current arbitrary and ineffective poverty targeting methods used in low- and middle-income countries. Certainly, one advantage of using a pure lottery instead of a social registry would be that it would be regarded as fair, giving everyone an equal chance of winning. In contrast, selection by social registries is often viewed as unfair, with communities not understanding the strange and inaccurate results that they deliver. And, of course, pure lotteries would be much easier to deliver.

The ineffectiveness of social registries contrasts markedly with the accuracy of universal schemes, which usually generate minimal exclusion errors. As a result, universal schemes significantly out-perform social registries in ensuring that no-one is left behind.

Box 4: Incorrect claims on the accuracy of proxy means tests

Although the papers on social registries do not provide information on their effectiveness, their advocates can exaggerate their accuracy. For example, Blomquist and Rodriguez Caillava (2020) incorrectly claim that they can *'reliably assess eligibility for social assistance.'* Similarly, advocates of the proxy means test – the main targeting methodology used in social registries – also exaggerate their effectiveness. For example, Leite (2014) – the lead author of the main advocacy paper on social registries – claimed that a proxy means test can *'accurately and cost effectively target the chronic poor.'* Leite's assessment has been repeated word for word in the World Bank's 2015 flagship report on safety nets in Africa, where it was once again stated that the proxy means test *'can accurately and cost-effectively target the chronic poor'* (del Ninno and Mills 2015). Barca (2017) is a little more circumspect, stating: *"[A social registry] does not necessarily offer a current snapshot of poverty, unless data is kept sufficiently up to date,"* which suggests that she believes that they have the potential to be accurate (although they clearly do not).

While incorrect claims on the efficacy of social registries may help donors sell them to governments across the Global South, we should really expect much higher standards from donors alongside a commitment to evidence-based policy dialogue.

8 Causes of the limited effectiveness of social registries

There is a range of reasons explaining the high levels of inaccuracy and limited effectiveness of social registries, including, among others, in-built design errors, low coverage, the poor quality of surveys, the provision of false information by households and the infrequency of services. These are discussed in the following sections.

8.1 In-built design errors within social registries

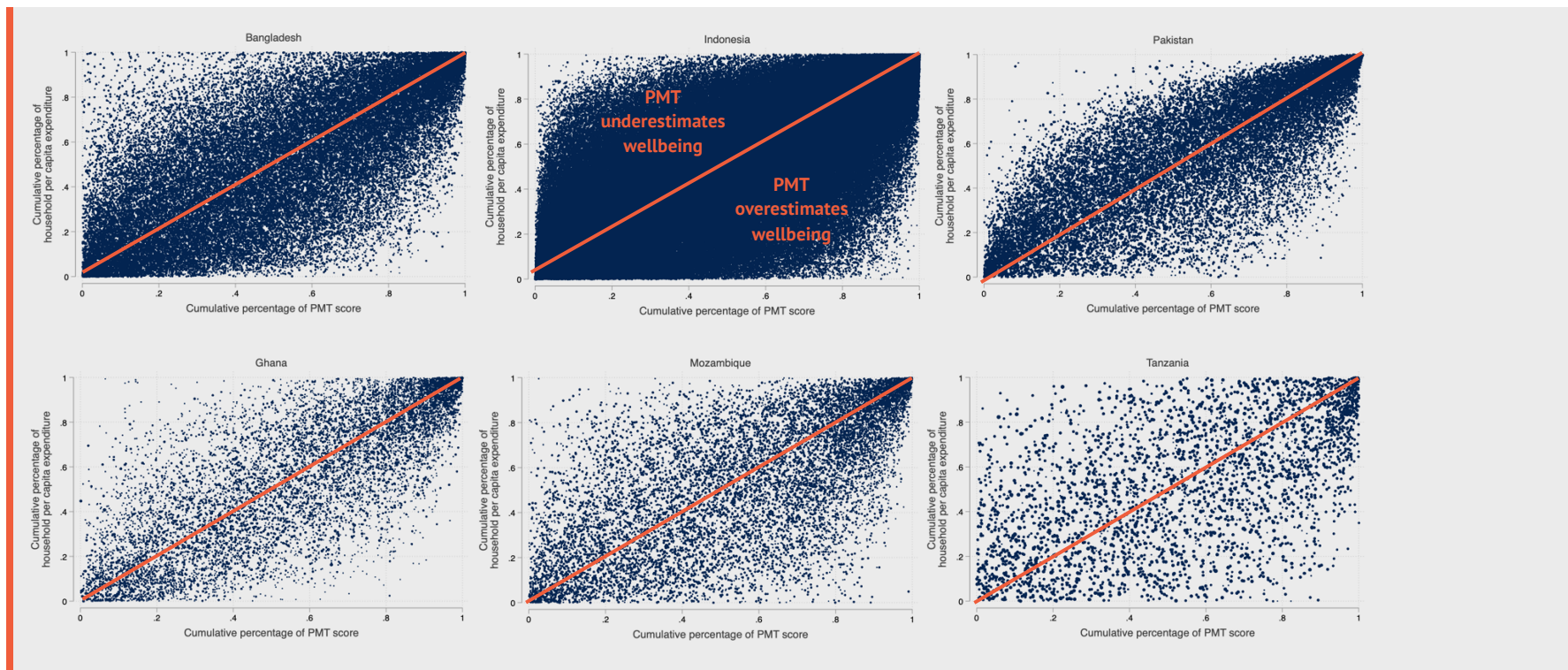
As has been demonstrated by a range of analysts, social registries employing proxy means tests have significant in-built design errors.¹⁹ Even when assessed against the same household surveys that are used to design the social registry algorithms, errors are high: for example, when the poorest 20 per cent of the population is targeted, around half are excluded by design, even before the survey is implemented. The arbitrariness of the proxy means test can be illustrated by using scattergraphs that show the relative ranking of households when comparing the consumption predicted by the PMT and the actual consumption of households as measured in the household survey, with each dot representing a household. As Figure 9 shows the results for six countries, if there were no targeting error, the households would be lined up along the straight orange line from the bottom left-hand corner to the top right-hand corner. In all cases, there is, however, a significant scatter of households indicating a limited correlation between the wellbeing predicted by the PMT and actual household wellbeing (as measured by consumption). If these social registries were used to target the poorest 20 per cent of the population, the in-built design exclusion errors would be 46.7 per cent in Bangladesh, 34.4 per cent in Ghana, 42.6 per cent in Indonesia, 47.3 per cent in Mozambique, 39.7 per cent in Pakistan and 57.2 per cent in Tanzania.²⁰ In practice, however, as discussed earlier, the actual errors, once implemented, would be higher.

¹⁹ Kidd and Wylde (2011), Brown et al (2016), Kidd et al (2017) and Kidd and Athias (2020).

²⁰ The R-squared values for each PMT are 0.546 in Bangladesh, 0.623 in Ghana, 0.515 in Indonesia, 0.538 in Mozambique, 0.631 in Pakistan and 0.306 in Tanzania.

8 Causes of the limited effectiveness of social registries

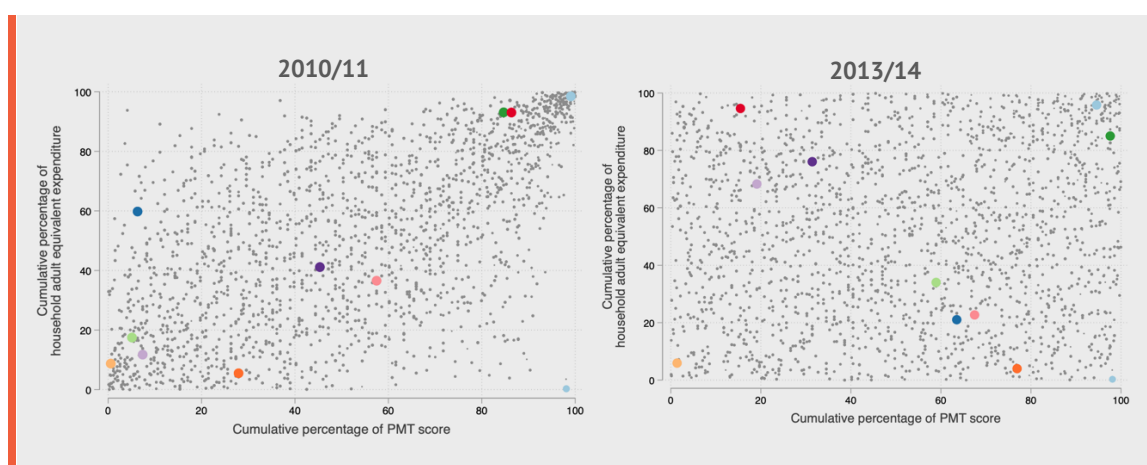
Figure 9: Scattergraphs showing the ranking of households according to the PMT estimate and actual consumption, across Bangladesh, Ghana, Indonesia, Mozambique, Pakistan and Tanzania



Sources: Bangladesh: HIES 2016; Ghana: GLSS 2017; Indonesia: SUSENAS 2017; Mozambique: IOF 2014/15; Pakistan: HIICS 2015/16; and, Tanzania: NPS 2014/15

A further indication of the design errors in proxy means tests and the rapid changes in household wellbeing is shown in Figure 10. This is different to Figure 9 in that it looks at changes in the *same* households in Rwanda over a period of around three years. The scatter in the later dataset is much greater, demonstrating how households have changed in terms of both their characteristics and consumption. However, Figure 10 has also selected ten households randomly – which are matched by colour – and shows how they have changed over two years. Some are in very different situations, indicating both the highly dynamic nature of household wellbeing as well as the design errors within social registries.

Figure 10: Changes in the ranking of the same households in terms of consumption and proxy means test estimates in Rwanda, between 2010/11 and 2013/14



Source: ECIV 3 (2010/11) and ECIV 4 (2013/14)

Consequently, when social registries employ proxy means tests, their high design errors mean that they are set up to fail. The level of design error can be measured using the R-squared: if the correlation between the proxies were perfect, the R-squared would have a value of one. However, the R-squared values in most PMTs are between 0.4 and 0.6, indicating that PMT algorithms do not explain a large proportion of household expenditure.

8.2 Low coverage of social registries

As indicated by Figure 4, most social registries have low coverage. In some cases, it is because they are limited to specific areas of a country. But, in many other cases, it is a deliberate choice to include only a limited proportion of the national population within the social registry and only assess their wellbeing. Usually, this is done to reduce costs, since, as Section 9 explains, surveys are expensive. For example, Indonesia deliberately restricted its social registry survey to 40 per cent of the population, which the

government believed were the poorest. However, there were no clear and objective criteria for selecting these households, which meant that many of the poorest 40 per cent of the population – which changes rapidly over time anyway – were excluded from the survey. In Tanzania’s social registry, the community pre-selected households, which meant that many of the poorest households were excluded during this initial process: in fact, the selection by communities was little better than random selection.²¹ The exclusion of households through pre-selection can significantly increase the errors within social registries. As discussed earlier, if a social registry is to fulfil on its own logic, it should reach all households in a country.²²

Nonetheless, perhaps recognising the prohibitive costs of surveying all households within a country, the World Bank have recently argued that it may be better to establish quotas for social registries so that only a minority of the population are surveyed.²³ The rationale they use is that if all households were surveyed in contexts where poverty-targeted programmes are only able to reach a limited number of beneficiaries, it might raise expectations. This, however, appears to undermine the argument that social registries are ‘inclusion’ systems given that any pre-selection by communities will, necessarily, exclude the vast majority of people. It will also further substantially undermine the effectiveness of social registries while potentially generating conflict and social unrest within communities.

8.3 Poor quality surveys

The effectiveness of social registries depends on the quality of the information obtained during the surveys of households. Yet, undertaking high quality surveys is challenging, in particular given that enumerators are often paid very little – or, in some cases, are voluntary – and may have limited motivation to do a good job. They have strong incentives to undertake surveys quickly, which limits their accuracy. For example, in Zambia, rather than visiting households, enumerators often asked household representatives to meet in groups in public places where the survey questionnaire could be done rapidly, thereby covering many more households per day.²⁴ Enumerators may well be poorly trained to undertake the survey or have limited education. In fact, results can vary depending on the identity of the interviewee in the household. Further information

²¹ Kidd and Athias (2020).

²² The World Bank note that pre-selection has also happened in the Republic of Congo and Sierra Leone (Lindert et al 2020b).

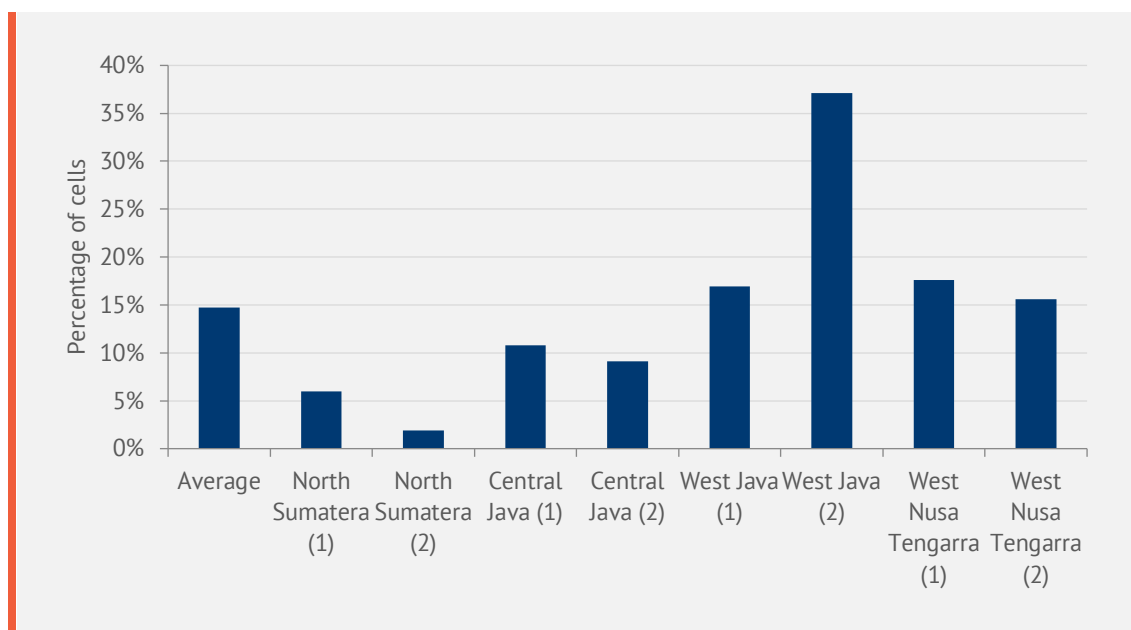
²³ Lindert et al (2020b).

²⁴ Information provided to the authors by Government of Zambia officials in a ‘targeting workshop’ held in 2016.

on the challenges with PMT surveys can be found in Kidd and Wylde (2011) and Kidd et al (2017).

Rarely, though, are studies undertaken to examine the efficacy of social registry surveys. One exception occurred in Indonesia in 2011, when a study found that 15 per cent of cells in the questionnaire had been filled in inaccurately, rising to 37 per cent in one part of West Java (see Figure 11). Given that Indonesia has higher administrative capacity than many other low- and middle-income countries, we should not be surprised if the errors introduced into social registries via surveys are even higher elsewhere, further reducing their effectiveness and reliability.

Figure 11: Proportion of cells in the questionnaire that were filled in inaccurately during Indonesia’s 2011 social registry survey



Source: SMERU (2011)

8.4 Falsifying information

The lower a household is ranked by a social registry, the greater the likelihood that it will be able to access a poverty programme. Consequently, there is a big incentive for households to falsify the information they provide during social registry surveys. Many are likely to do so, although the extent of the falsification of information in social registries globally has not been measured. Indeed, there is little incentive for those managing social registries to assess the level of falsification of information, since this would undermine trust in their database.

Nonetheless, it is easy to falsify information. Brazil's *Cadastro Unico* social registry asks households to declare their incomes, but it does not verify the accuracy of the information given, so there is no risk to those interviewed if they lie to the authorities. Further, despite *Bolsa Familia* – which uses the *Cadastro Unico* to select its recipients – being the most accurate poverty-targeted programme across the Global South, there is no evidence that this is the result of the means-test. Instead, it would appear to be down to geographic targeting and municipalities being given quotas of beneficiaries, based on their poverty levels.²⁵

Advocates of social registries believe that it is more difficult to falsify information when proxy means tests are used. This may be the case, but it is still relatively easy to do. Indeed, the government of Chile was so worried about households committing fraud that they stopped making the information on the algorithm public.²⁶ The World Bank (2009) has expressed similar concerns. While it may be possible to hide from households the information to be asked the first time a proxy means test is undertaken, this will not be the case the next time. Consequently, households will know which durable goods to hide before the enumerator arrives or will be prepared to lie. It is difficult for the enumerator to know whether they are receiving information that is correct, in particular as the survey only takes 20 minutes or so. Further, even though the information that households provide is meant to be objectively verifiable, that is often not the case. For example, if animals are held away from the homestead, the enumerator will not be able to count them; if someone denies being the owner of a car parked outside a house, it is not possible to prove that the car is theirs; and, if a household claims to have additional members who are temporarily absent, it is difficult to prove that they do not exist. Social registry administrators could try to put in place measures to catch those providing fraudulent information, but this would significantly increase the cost of the registry while, potentially, adding little to its effectiveness. Given that household characteristics can change markedly over time, the value of pursuing fraudulent behaviour is likely to be limited.

In effect, social registries face the challenge that households who lie so that they appear poorer will be rewarded by being more likely to receive benefits, while those who tell the truth will be punished by being more likely to be excluded from poverty-targeted programmes. During qualitative research on a social registry in northern Kenya a government official observed: “During the first PMT survey, those who honestly answered

²⁵ See Kidd and Athias (2020) for more information.

²⁶ Grosh and Baker (1995).

the questions were penalised; now, during the second survey, everyone will become dishonest.”²⁷

8.5 The infrequency of social registry surveys

While advocates of social registries propose that surveys should be undertaken every two years at most – and, as Box 5 points out, they can perhaps be optimistic in reporting on the actual frequency – in most cases data is not updated for many years. For example: in Pakistan there was a gap of more than 10 years following the first PMT survey in 2009; in Indonesia, a survey has not been undertaken for six years (since 2015); in the Philippines there was a gap of six years between the survey in 2009 and the second one in 2015; and, in some areas of Mexico,

Box 5: Incorrect claims on the frequency of social registry surveys

Statements on the frequencies of social registry surveys are often incorrect or optimistic. For example, Leite et al (2017) claim that surveys are re-done in Pakistan, the Philippines and Indonesia every 4-5 years while Barca (2017) has claimed that, in Indonesia and Mexico it is every 3 years. As the main text shows, in each of these cases, the space between surveys in these countries has been considerably longer. Their claims on the frequency of surveys in other countries should, therefore, be treated with caution.

surveys were not re-done in some areas for more than 10 years.²⁸ However, there are a small number of countries that undertake registration more frequently: Vietnam, for example, does it annually while Rwanda re-classifies its population every two years.

Given the rapid changes in household characteristics that were described in Section 6, the accuracy of the data within social registries degrades rapidly, making them increasingly ineffective. Even the advocates of social registries agree with this. Leite et al (2017) state: *“Although these en masse registration waves can work well as a means to ‘get started’ and to fill initial data gaps, the risk of errors of exclusion and inclusion increases with the passage of time, as the information becomes out-of-date and excludes households whose situations have changed or worsened and are unable to access the registry.”*

Using a database that assumes that household wellbeing is static makes little sense. In the Philippines, for example, the *Listahan* was used to significantly expand the *Pantawid* conditional cash transfer scheme in 2014, using data that was collected in 2009. In the five-year period since the initial data was collected, the situation of many households would have changed dramatically, almost certainly significantly increasing targeting errors. In fact, in 2014, 48 per cent of intended recipients were excluded from the

²⁷ Kidd et al (2017).

²⁸ Zoleto (2011); Dadap-Cantal et al (forthcoming).

Pantawid scheme, with exclusion errors reaching as high as 75 per cent in areas where coverage of the scheme was lower.²⁹

The advocates of social registries believe, however, that they have come up with a solution: dynamic registration. They propose that, every time there is a change in a household, it should notify the social registry so that the information is kept up to date. This is clearly an impossible task: households are highly unlikely to make the effort to register even obvious changes, such as the number of people in the household, never mind changes in other proxies, such as whether they have a television or the number of animals they possess (indeed, why should someone notify the government every time they buy a television?). And, of course, households are highly unlikely to update information when their situation improves although they are more likely to do so when it deteriorates. The only way that social registries can be kept current is by governments undertaking frequent surveys, yet, as discussed in Section 9, this would come at a prohibitive cost.

Further, the use of so-called dynamic registration to update the information on individual households is logically problematic. If a social registry survey has been taken of a population in one year, updating the information of a sub-set of households in later years would mean that, when governments are selecting households for entry into programmes, they will be comparing apples with oranges: some households would be assessed using older information than that of others, which would make it an unfair assessment.

While repeating social registry surveys on a more frequent basis – such as annually – would enhance their accuracy, the errors would nonetheless remain high, due to the other challenges they face. High errors and low accuracy are the price countries pay for investing in social registries. And, indeed, it is the high cost of social registries that is a

Box 6: Dynamic registration or on-demand applications?

Dynamic registration is also used to refer to social registries that are developed through on-demand application processes. For example, in Georgia, applicants for the country's main poor relief scheme – the Targeted Social Assistance (TSA) programme – and other poverty programmes make on-demand applications and are assessed according to the proxy means test. Their information is kept for a period of time but, since they have to re-apply every four years, the information is renewed when they re-apply.

Unfortunately, this does not address the challenge of infrequent registrations. A household may apply for a scheme at one time but, if its eligibility for a programme is assessed three years later, the information will no longer be correct. Further, given that households will apply for schemes like the TSA at different times, when assessed for a different programme in the future, data collected at different times in the past will be used, so the challenge of comparing apples with oranges remains.

²⁹ Kidd and Athias (2020).

8 *Causes of the limited effectiveness of social registries*

key reason for countries not re-registering households on a more frequent basis, a challenge that is discussed in the next section.

9 The costs of social registries

So, how much does a social registry cost? Based on the limited information available, the costs can be significant, not in terms of the initial development of the software and the algorithm to be used in social registries employing PMTs, which can be done at a minimal cost – although, in Turkey, it was US\$7.8 million³⁰ – but the costs of the actual survey. Table 1 sets out costs found in the literature, which range from as low as US\$1.27 per household in Colombia to as high as US\$26 in northern Kenya. However, it is interesting to note that the World Bank (n.d.) regarded the US\$12 per household spent in Tanzania as relatively inexpensive – in their words, “only \$12 per questionnaire administered” – which could provide a reasonable benchmark for costs in rural Africa.

Table 1: Reported costs to register individual households during social registry surveys³¹

Country	Cost per household (US\$)
Argentina	\$3.80-\$4.60
Bangladesh	\$2.48
Brazil	\$3.90-\$14.00
Chile	\$2.80-\$6.90
Colombia	\$1.27-\$2.52
Indonesia	\$4.00
Kenya (HSNP programme)	\$26.00
Nepal	\$10.60
Pakistan	\$3.00
Tanzania	\$12.00

These costs per household translate into significant expenditures at a national level. Barca (2017) reports that the costs of initial surveys were US\$90 million in Mexico and US\$80 million in Argentina, Jahan reports US\$87 million in Bangladesh, while Kidd et al (2017) found costs of US\$60 million in Pakistan and US\$100 million in Indonesia. If the Tanzania social registry were to be undertaken nationally across all households, it would cost US\$149 million. Table 2 outlines potential costs in a range of countries if the social registry survey incorporated all households at a cost of either US\$5 or US\$10 per questionnaire. The costs would be considerable, reaching as high as US\$215 million to US\$450 million in a large country like Nigeria.

³⁰ Leite et al (2017).

³¹ Sources: Kidd (2014), Republica (2019), Jahan (2021).

Table 2: Cost of social registry surveys if they were rolled out nationally, reaching all households, in selected countries (at US\$5 and US\$10 per household)

Country	Expenditure (US\$5 per household)	Expenditure (US\$10 per household)
Ethiopia	US\$105 million	US\$219 million
Iran	US\$121 million	US\$241 million
Kenya	US\$66 million	US\$131 million
Malaysia	US\$40 million	US\$80 million
Nigeria	US\$215 million	US\$430 million
Uganda	US\$51 million	US\$102 million
Vietnam	US\$135 million	US\$270 million

At these levels of expenditure, it is unsurprising that countries are reluctant to undertake social registry surveys frequently. Policy makers would clearly balk at the costs, when considering other national priorities, in particular if they understood the limited effectiveness and utility of social registries. Indeed, these high costs make it unlikely that many national scale social registries will ever happen, despite the best efforts of advocates. Hopefully, countries will not find themselves in the situation of Bangladesh which, after spending US\$87 million on a PMT survey, found that its data was unusable, while its debt burden to the World Bank, which funded a large proportion of the costs, had risen (see Box 3).³²

Given the high numbers of people across the Global South who have not yet had their births registered or do not possess national identity documents, it is questionable why countries would prioritise social registries over offering identity to their citizens. Surely, if funding is available to register people, priority should be given to offering birth certificates and national identity cards. With these, citizens would be visible to the state and better able to access public services. The quality of the information would almost certainly be significantly higher than that achieved through a social registry, while also not degrading over time (as long as death registration is also funded).

A further significant benefit of giving all citizens and legal residents birth certificates and identity cards would be to facilitate their applications for individual, lifecycle social security entitlements, such as child benefits, old age pensions and disability benefits. Such schemes would have much greater impacts on household wellbeing than the type of poor relief programme supported by social registries.

Offering all citizens birth certificates and identity cards would be a public good and an effective basis for the inclusion of everyone within public services. The value of this

³² Jahan (2021).

9 *The costs of social registries*

investment is unquestionable. In contrast, spending large sums of money on social registries in countries that are cash-constrained may be considered by many to be a waste of money.

10 The ethics of social registries

There are dangers inherent in citizens providing governments with large amounts of personal information which, if appropriate safeguards are not put in place, could be misused. As outlined in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the privacy of personal information is a fundamental human right, which is often repeated in national Constitutions. As Hosein and Nyst (2013) observe, “Emerging economies and developing nations across Africa, Asia and Latin America are seeing the rapid deployment of technologies that many more developed countries are hesitant to use in the absence of legal safeguards and, indeed, critical analysis.” They further identify four key problems with the new technologies that are being adapted across the Global South, all of which apply to social registries:

- Technologies are being deployed that raise significant concerns with regards to privacy and other human rights.
- Such technologies may not necessarily be appropriate for achieving development goals or may have undesirable side effects.
- These technologies are already seen as legally and technologically problematic in more developed countries.
- These technologies are deployed in the absence of relevant and adequate legal frameworks, in contravention to international human rights and national constitutional requirements.

Any information collected by social registries should only be used for the purpose for which it was given and, indeed, when the information is collected during surveys, all adult household members should be made fully aware of the reasons for collecting the information and their permission for its use should be recorded. We have found no evidence that this happens during social registry surveys.

In fact, when governments take decisions to use social registry data that was collected for one programme for another purpose – such as selecting recipients for a different poverty programme or linking the information to another dataset– they should first of all ensure that everyone on the dataset has given permission for their information to be used in this way. Again, this rarely, if ever, happens. In contrast, the position taken by many governments across the Global South is that they are the owners of the data and can use it as they wish. Further, social registries often do not have in place processes to enable citizens to access the data held on them. Such practices would not be permitted in most high-income countries although, of course, donors from these countries often employ much lower standards of data management when developing social registries across the Global South than they would use in their own countries (or on themselves).

Great care should be taken with the information on social registries to maintain privacy and avoid data breaches. Again, the level of security can vary: in one South-East Asian country, data from a large social registry was handed out to local government officials on discs that could easily be lost or copied as they travelled home. Stringent legal safeguards and security measures need to be in place to protect the privacy of data.

At times, personal information on social registries has not even been held by national governments but by others. In the same South-East Asian country mentioned above, for many years the data on the social registry was on servers that were actually owned by a foreign power. In another example in East Africa, large amounts of personal data within a social registry were held by a UN agency, rather than by the government.

Data protocols need to be in place to ensure that governments do not use social registry information for their own ends. For example, in elections, having access to social registry data could be of great use to politicians in their campaigns; it could also be used for surveillance purposes. Therefore, if countries wish to have social registries – and all the problems that come with them – they should embed them in legislation with strong protocols in place that dictate how data can be used, so that citizens are protected.

Overall, therefore, much more needs to be done to put in place appropriate legal safeguards and security for social registries. Without this, the dangers of the information they hold being misused increase significantly. Nonetheless, given the inaccuracies of the data in social registries and their limited effectiveness, governments should consider first of all whether it is worth the effort even developing a social registry.

11 The social and political costs of social registries

Social registries run the risk of generating a number of social costs. Of particular concern is that they may well undermine trust in government. Social registries produce inaccurate results when selecting beneficiaries of programmes, which could create a perception of the state as acting unfairly and in an arbitrary manner. Indeed, once citizens realise that they are being selected for schemes on the basis of data that they provided five or ten years earlier, their faith in government is likely to be further weakened. As Kidd et al (2020) explain, building trust in government is best achieved through the universal provision of services whereas the widespread use of poor quality, poverty targeting methodologies, through systems such as social registries, is likely to generate distrust. This will weaken the national social contract with potentially broader implications, such as discouraging citizens from paying taxes and incentivising civil unrest.

Further, since social registries reward those who game the system and punish those who tell the truth, they could undermine national ethics, effectively legitimising fraudulent behaviour. Governments could only address this by undertaking extensive checks on the accuracy of data – in effect, by returning to a proportion of households to undertake more in-depth investigations – but this could result in the state being perceived as intrusive, while prosecutions of those who have provided false information would further undermine trust in government.

Social registries support programmes that provide benefits to households rather than individuals. In the case of a cash transfer, it will be given to one person in the household and there is no guarantee that it will be shared with other members of the household or, if it is, whether this will be done on an equitable basis. In large households, it is likely that some members will miss out, often the most vulnerable (such as people with severe disabilities, including many older people). This would undermine the purpose of the government's programme, which is to enhance the wellbeing of all household members. Such issues would not arise if governments were to implement a rights-based lifecycle social security system, offering benefits to individuals rather than households. In this way, multiple household members would receive the benefits, empowering them and, of course, ensuring that the most vulnerable households receive higher levels of support. Such a system does not require a social registry since the registration for individual schemes would be done on an on-demand basis. However, it would require high quality digital management information systems that use unique identifiers for each applicant and recipient.

In fact, because social registries support households rather than individuals, they cannot be rights-based. Human rights are held by individuals and not households, with each individual in a household being a rights bearer. As indicated above, if a social security transfer is given to a household, there is no guarantee that all individuals will benefit equally, which means that the rights of many will not be upheld. Further, the arbitrary nature of the selection of beneficiaries by social registries is not aligned to a rights-based approach: the paper has already discussed how, even though a household may be one of the poorest in a country, there is no guarantee that the social registry will identify it as such. So, even the target populations of social registries – the poorest members of society – are not guaranteed access to schemes for which they are eligible, thereby undermining their human rights.

12 Conclusion

A social registry is an example of how policy makers – and so-called technical experts – can, at times, inhabit worlds of fictional constructs, which result in poor quality policies and public service delivery. Social registries are based on the fiction of a static world, in which households never change (or, at least, do not change for periods of five to ten years). Their efficacy is limited given that the data they include is often of poor quality and degrades rapidly over time: they are far from being the 'honest brokers' for quality information that Leite et al (2017) describe. Further, when social registries are based on proxy means tests, the algorithms used for selecting recipients of poverty-targeted programmes are highly flawed and deliver inaccurate and arbitrary results. Indeed, countries that are unwilling to invest in adequate social protection schemes – and, as a result, have to ration the number of recipients – may well find that a pure lottery is a better option than a social registry.

Social registries are embedded within a particular ideological approach that seeks to promote household-based, poverty-targeted programmes, based on a 19th Century model of social security. While this approach gained prominence during the period of structural adjustment that was imposed on countries across the Global South at the end of the 20th Century, it continues in legacy initiatives such as social registries (and proxy means tests, social safety nets, etc). This approach is a long way from the type of rights-based, lifecycle social security systems that are found in many high-income countries and are slowly expanding across low- and middle-income countries, despite the opposition of some donors and those who believe in small and minimalist states.

One result of the COVID-19 crisis is that it has blown apart the utility of all social registries globally. Prior to the crisis, their ability to determine household wellbeing was limited but, following the economic crisis resulting from COVID-19 – which has created large numbers of new 'poor' – it has further deteriorated. Pity those countries that spent large sums surveying households for their social registries prior to COVID-19 and now find themselves sitting on almost worthless information.

Governments could do much better than investing in social registries. Developing Single Registries that enable governments to more effectively monitor their national social security systems would be a good first step. Ensuring that every citizen has a birth certificate and identity card would be a much better use of the funds currently employed in developing social registries and would provide the basis for each and every member of society to access public services, while civil registry and vital statistics databases could be linked to Single Registries.

Most importantly, governments need to focus on building systems of universal social security – and other universal public services – that will not only transform the lives of their citizens but will stimulate national economic recovery from COVID-19 and strengthen national social contracts. It is disappointing that some donors and international agencies continue to promote them, despite the evidence on their inefficacy: for example, in April 2021, the IMF argued: “To improve coverage [of social protection], governments need comprehensive social registries, including those that cover the informal sector.”³³ Yet, the IMF could not be more wrong: instead, global and historical evidence indicates that what governments need are modern, comprehensive lifecycle social security systems that offer protection to citizens from the cradle to the grave. Social registries have no role to play in this. Hopefully, they will soon be relegated to a footnote in the history of failed social policies, which is where they belong.

³³ IMF (2021).

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