Social Protection Information Systems in Asia and the Pacific

In Asia and the Pacific, social protection is recognised as a critical tool for improving food security, addressing the root causes of malnutrition and protecting people from risks and shocks. Over the past decade, social protection systems in the region have been strengthened and expanded in the face of growing challenges such as economic and health crises, climate change and conflict, contributing to stability, resilience and socio-economic growth.[1]

One of the key tools enabling the effective delivery of social protection is its information systems (see glossary on page 9). These serve as decision-making tools, store data and information on actual and/or potential beneficiaries, an enable the management, coordination and monitoring of programmes. In Asia and the Pacific the effectiveness and efficiency of

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[1] WFP. 2023. Enhancing Food Security and Nutrition and Managing Risks and Shocks in Asia and the Pacific Through Support to Social Protection Systems.

social protection registries and related information systems vary according to their policy, systems, data and digital foundations, as well as their maturity, functionality and adaptability to meet different needs, leading to different outcomes across the region.

To better support governments' social protection plans and reforms, WFP's Regional Bureau for Asia and the Pacific undertook a review of selected social protection information systems in the region to identify opportunities to strengthen, innovate and make them more inclusive. This briefing note summarises the main findings.[2]

Regional overview

Maturity

Social protection registries and information systems in Asia and the Pacific vary widely in terms of their maturity: from nascent systems underpinned by paper-based data collection and storage to emerging and established systems with increased functionality, digitalisation and integration. Social protection information systems can be broadly categorised as:

- **Nascent to emerging information systems, such as those in Afghanistan and Myanmar**, characterised by high fragmentation and little or no digitalisation, with a primary focus on developing management information systems for individual programmes.

- **Emerging information systems in countries such as Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR) and Nepal**, where initial steps are being taken to address fragmentation by establishing a social registry, which is still at a

WFP and its support to social protection

WFP is one of the world's leading agencies working with governments and partners to improve the quality, accessibility, equity and inclusiveness of social protection to better meet the needs of people facing risks and shocks. Leveraging its presence and experience, and with a portfolio spanning food security and nutrition, resilience-building, climate and disaster risk financing, digital innovations and adaptive and shock-responsive social protection, WFP offers expertise across different elements of policy and programme design to improve access to and delivery of social protection support, aligned with its global corporate strategy for social protection.

In Asia and the Pacific, WFP provides strategic and technical support, along with capacity strengthening services, to enhance social protection policy, systems and programmes in 16 countries. In social protection information systems, WFP drives data strategies, management, digital innovation, and technology solutions, backed by robust data analysis, protection measures, and safeguards. Currently, WFP is actively supporting the governments of Cambodia, Bangladesh, the Kyrgyz Republic, and the Philippines, among others, to plan, strengthen, improve and expand national social protection information systems.

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[2] The review was led by Valentina Barca, an independent consultant, supported by Francesca Ciardi, social protection officer for WFP Asia Pacific, and carried out in late 2023.

very early stage, but is gradually being strengthened.

- **Emerging to established information systems, such as in Cambodia, Bangladesh, Pakistan, the Philippines and Indonesia**, characterised by increasing functionality, use and institutionalisation, as well as efforts to improve interoperability and other key dimensions.

- **Established information systems, such as in the Kyrgyz Republic**, which provide an effective digital platform for the sector and beyond, including through relatively extensive interoperability.

Functions

In several countries, including **Nepal, Pakistan, the Philippines, Indonesia, Bangladesh** and **Sri Lanka**, the focus is on developing and strengthening social registries, given their potential to facilitate the coordination of key functions such as registration to support targeting. These improvements have been further catalysed by responses to COVID-19, when countries expanded existing social protection programmes or introduced new ones to mitigate the socioeconomic impact of the pandemic.[3]

While beneficiary registries are widespread across the region, there is less focus on their integration through integrated beneficiary registries. Integration can enable coordination between different social protection instruments (e.g. between social assistance programmes, or between social assistance, social insurance and labour market interventions), social and support analysis, budgeting, monitoring, and planning, including understanding the actual coverage of social protection programmes in order to address duplication and gaps. An exception to this trend is the **Kyrgyz Republic**, which prioritises integration in line with the country's strategies to strengthen coordination between different programmes. Other countries recognise the importance of this function. For example, **the Philippines**, with support from the World Bank, is considering a 'unified beneficiary database', based on basic identification systems. **Myanmar** and **Sri Lanka** are also prioritising integrated beneficiary registry functions, integrating key activities across programmes in their forthcoming information systems.

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[3] Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific. 2021. Social Protection Responses to the COVID-19 Crisis in Asia Pacific.

Institutionalisation

The institutionalisation of social protection information systems is gaining traction across the region, with an increasing number of countries incorporating them into policy, strategy or legislation. The **Philippines** successfully integrated its social registry, Listahanan, into formal government structures through an executive order in 2010. Similarly, **Cambodia**'s IDPoor initiative, established by sub-decree in 2011, is currently updating its policy and strategy framework to reflect evolving priorities. The institutional setting for social protection information systems varies widely across countries in the region. In **Pakistan**, beneficiary datasets are hosted by the National Database and Registration Authority, also responsible for issuing biometric national identity cards. In **Nepal**, the Department of National ID and Civil Registration under the Ministry of Home Affairs is the federal agency responsible for the country's integrated social registry. In **Lao PDR**, the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry is leading the establishment of the national social registry, while in **Indonesia**, housing has been recently transferred to the Ministry of Social Affairs to reflect its centrality to the country's social protection sector.

Data coverage

In terms of the coverage of individuals and households assessed for eligibility and inclusion in the information systems, **Pakistan** and **Lao PDR** are examples of countries with ambitious targets of 100 percent coverage of the countries' population for their social registry. Other countries set coverage targets in terms of poverty or vulnerability, such as the **Philippines** and **Indonesia**. Levels of data coverage and accuracy can also be influenced by the degree to which vulnerable people have access to data collection and registration processes, which can be hampered by issues such as lack of official identification.

Data collection approaches

Approaches to data collection vary widely across the region. Some countries rely on static 'census sweeps', which are administratively driven processes that are typically completed every three to five years. These approaches to data collection face challenges related to cost, long time intervals and data quality. Notable efforts to strengthen on-demand registration approaches and continuous data collection, including through interoperability with other government databases, can be seen in **Cambodia**, the **Kyrgyz Republic**, **Pakistan** and **Indonesia**. Many of these approaches were initiated or expanded during COVID-19.

Interoperability

Progress towards interoperability is most significant in countries with robust ID systems, as exemplified by **Pakistan'**s successful interoperability during its COVID-19 response and the notable achievements in the **Kyrgyz Republic.** Even countries with less developed systems are working to improve strategic data sharing, as evidenced by **Nepal**'s efforts to digitise and link civil registration data.

Other considerations

Aligning information systems strategies with the digital landscape and operations of each country is essential. In addition to the dimensions analysed above, it is important to stress that the social protection information systems landscape depends on a wide range of contextual and historical factors. These factors need to be assessed when comparing experiences across countries. For example, some countries offer comprehensive **lifecycle programmes**, with well-developed social insurance systems and more extensive experience in their digital management, while others prioritise investment in social assistance programmes and a few flagship poverty-

focused initiatives. The robustness of **policy and regulatory frameworks** also varies: some countries have strong institutional and intra-ministerial support, while others lack comprehensive support.

**The interface between digital ecosystems and access is a critical factor**, including the strength of basic systems such as ID and civil registration, as well as broader issues such as e-government infrastructure and digital penetration. While progress has been made in the region to expand registries and programme coverage, people facing socio-economic challenges often lack identity documents and face additional barriers to

Coverage of social registries: who is included?

Social registries inform the targeting of multiple programmes, each with different eligibility criteria and objectives. They must therefore be designed to minimise inclusion and exclusion errors caused by data quality issues. These issues can arise from, among other things, enrolment and update strategies, data accuracy and lack of interoperability. Key considerations include:

- **Strategic data coverage: Ensure that data coverage aligns with policy objectives. For instance, if social registries only target those pre-identified as "poor", their effectiveness in addressing broader vulnerability, food security, and nutrition-related risks will be limited.**

- **Inclusivity: Consider whose data is being collected, and who is being left out and why. Inclusive, evidence-based data collection enhances its usefulness and impact.**

- **Dynamic inclusion: Avoid static registration. Develop strategies to ensure updated coverage, including newborns, migrants, internally displaced people, those wrongfully excluded, and households with changing conditions.**

- **Rollout plans: national, macro, and micro-geographic registration rollout plans need to be data-informed, predictable, transparent, and flexible to meet evolving needs.**

- **Redress: Guarantee opportunities for redress to address grievances and correct data errors.**

Figure 1: How different solutions compare to a country's total and 'eligible' population
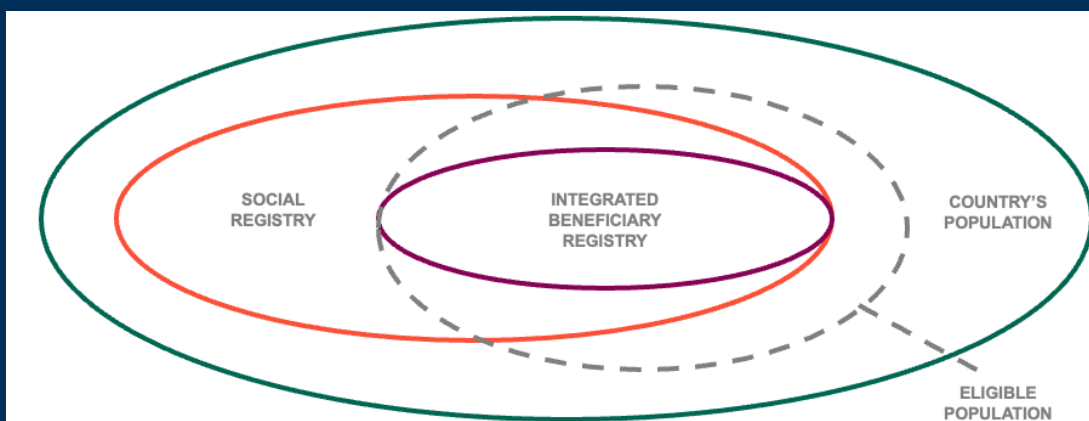
Source: Barca, Valentina. 2017. Integrating data and information management for social protection: Social registries and integrated beneficiary registries.

accessing registration and inclusion in these systems. Addressing these risks and technological constraints associated with digital IDs and decision-making processes at the design stage is key to reducing exclusion, but also raises concerns about surveillance and cybersecurity.

Finally, levels of **fragility and conflict** require adaptive strategies and robust controls to prevent social protection data from being misused for political manipulation. For example, the consolidation of datasets without adequate data protection measures can increase vulnerability by aggregating sensitive information, leading to possible discrimination and breaches of personal security. There are also opportunities for humanitarian partners to share data responsibly and build ecosystems to improve programme coherence, such as through the Humanitarian Exchange Language and Zero Knowledge Proofs.[4]

WFP's role in supporting social protection information systems

Country contexts and capacities, as well as the purpose, functions, design and maturity of social protection information systems, shape the way WFP tailors its support in areas ranging from policy formulation, data collection, validation and hosting to data access, processing, sharing and protection. In line with WFP's global social protection strategy,[5]

modalities of support may include: a) direct assistance to governments; or b) the implementation of complementary activities that simultaneously strengthen and inform national systems. Based on these approaches, the Asia-Pacific regional review identified several areas where WFP's operational experience, analytical capabilities and field presence, including in fragile and conflict contexts, can help improve the effectiveness and reach of social protection information systems across different components.

WFP can support governments in improving social protection information systems to **address not only poverty but also multi-dimensional vulnerability, food security and nutrition**, using strategic, analytical and operational expertise to influence policy and promote a comprehensive understanding of these issues. This includes advocating for and strengthening capacities and systems to improve **data coverage, relevance, accuracy and timeliness**, including in contexts of protracted, recurrent and sudden crises and shocks. WFP's support can range from strategic planning to practical implementation, such as around **data analysis and management** with the aim of improving the effectiveness, inclusiveness and nutrition-sensitivity of social protection efforts, particularly where government capacity is limited. WFP's expertise in **mainstreaming accountability,**

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[4] Schoemaker, Emrys. 2020. Linking Humanitarian & Social Protection Information Systems in the COVID-19 Response and Beyond.

[5] WFP (2021). World Food Programme Strategy for Support to Social Protection.

protection and safeguards, including tracking assistance, identity management processes, privacy impact assessments, beneficiary grievance redress and programme monitoring, can help governments integrate these measures into a comprehensive strategy that addresses issues of exclusion and promotes a 'leave no one behind' approach.

In WFP's complementary programming, the use, validation, updating and feeding of data are key areas of mutual support with government social protection systems. For example, WFP could increase its **use of government social protection data** for planning, budgeting and targeting purposes, through robust data-sharing agreements, including pre-agreeing 'red lines' where data cannot or should not be used by WFP. In turn, WFP could improve the quality of government data by building **validation and updating** processes into these agreements, developing joint standard procedures and linking newly collected data back to the government registries. Another important area is **data feeding**, where WFP could collect data on behalf of the government or share anonymised data that it collects, where feasible and appropriate in accordance with corporate guidelines,[6] ensuring consent and special care for sensitive groups such as displaced persons, refugees and ethnic minorities.

Examples of WFP's support to social protection information systems in Asia and the Pacific

Cambodia

WFP supported the rollout of the Ministry of Planning's IDPoor database to identify newly poor households for social assistance after COVID-19, thereby strengthening the country's shock-responsive social protection system. WFP also helped link IDPoor to WFP's Platform for Real-time Impact and Situation Monitoring, an online system that integrates real and near time geospatial, disaster risk and socioeconomic vulnerability data to support government planning for risk reduction, climate adaptation and adaptive social protection approaches. Now managed by the National Committee for Disaster Management, with technical support from WFP, the system can inform the targeting and prioritisation of preparedness, humanitarian response and social protection interventions.

Bangladesh

WFP has supported the Ministry of Women and Children's Affairs to establish a management information system and a dedicated unit within the Women's Affairs Department. This system streamlines digital services such as online self-registration and monthly cash transfers through the government-to-person payment system. The system currently manages data for over 2 million beneficiaries under two flagship social assistance programmes, with plans to expand to 7.5 million by 2026. WFP continues to support the ministry by improving system interoperability, with future plans to integrate with the Bangladesh Election Commission and the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare databases.

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[6] WFP. 2024. Global Data Strategy 2024–2026.

Examples of WFP's support to social protection information systems in Asia and the Pacific (Continued)

Nepal

In Nepal, WFP applies robust data protection policies across its operations and uses privacy impact assessments to improve government social protection systems. WFP plans to provide technical assistance to government to establish a data protection policy and data-sharing mechanisms for social protection. This will include conducting a privacy impact assessment to identify programmatic, protection and reputational risks based on the government's digital and cybersecurity capacity and applicable data protection laws.

Kyrgyz Republic

WFP supported the Ministry of Labour, Social Security and Migration in digitalising the paper-based social passport, a registry of low-income families, as part of the national information system 'Sanarip Aimak'. WFP developed a legal framework, organised training for local counterparts, and provided data entry equipment. WFP also conducted an in-depth privacy impact assessment. The findings will support the strengthening of data protection and data-sharing arrangements between emergency response actors and the government.

Conclusion

This review of information systems in Asia and the Pacific has highlighted the importance of long-term planning, cross-sectoral coordination and continuous adaptation to ensure a dynamic digital foundation for inclusive and equitable social protection support. It has also highlighted some emerging links between social protection information systems and other sectoral systems in disaster risk management, employment and health as part of interoperability. Information systems, such as social and beneficiary registries, are essential for the effective delivery of social protection. There has been significant expansion of these systems in the Asia-Pacific region, further catalysed by COVID-19.

Social protection registries and information systems vary in maturity across the region, from nascent (fragmented, paper-based) systems in Afghanistan and Myanmar to established (institutionalised, fully digitised and interoperable) systems in Indonesia and the Kyrgyz Republic. These systems remain a critical area for investment and further strengthening to improve the coverage and adequacy of social protection, as well as the cost-efficiency and effectiveness of programmes to address multidimensional needs and the impacts of climate change and other shocks.

WFP plays various roles in working with governments and other partners on social protection information systems, including in contexts of fragility. Activities include data policy and strategy development, data management, digital innovation and technology solutions. WFP helps governments to collect, assess and address multidimensional vulnerability data; improve data coverage, accuracy and timeliness; mainstream

accountability, protection and privacy safeguards; strengthen identity management processes; and improve beneficiary grievance redress and programme monitoring systems. Currently, WFP is actively supporting the governments of Cambodia, Bangladesh, the Kyrgyz Republic and the Philippines.

WFP also seeks to leverage government social protection information systems in a complementary way. This involves using data from these systems for internal planning and targeting through robust data sharing arrangements. In turn, WFP can improve the quality of government data by building in processes to validate and update data, developing common procedures and linking newly collected data back to the source. WFP can collect data on behalf of the government or share anonymised data it collects in accordance with its data protection policy, ensuring consent and special care for sensitive groups such as displaced persons and refugees.

Social registries and information systems are growing rapidly as part of national social policy agendas and digital transformation initiatives supported by global alliances such as the Digital Convergence Initiative. As WFP continues its digital transformation process, it will continue to support government and development partners in this space, across the variety of geographic contexts and sectors in which it works in Asia Pacific.

Glossary: Social protection information systems

Social registries: Systems that facilitate outreach, intake, registration and eligibility determination for multiple social protection programmes. They centralise data collection by compiling information on potential beneficiaries who are then targeted by specific programmes and services, based on eligibility criteria. Social registries also help assess the need for social programmes by profiling the needs and conditions of different population groups.

Beneficiary registries/databases and their management information systems (MISs): Systems that manage the administration of benefits for distinct programmes and oversee the enrolment and delivery of social protection programmes. They maintain information on beneficiaries and interface with systems that handle payments, grievances, case management and other functions.

Integrated beneficiary registries: Systems that bring together data on beneficiaries from multiple programmes to provide a consolidated view of who is receiving different types of benefits. They help monitor and coordinate the delivery of social protection programmes, identify gaps and duplications in coverage, and tailor benefits and services to the needs of different groups. They can also support integration of other delivery functions such as payments.

Interoperability: Systematic sharing of data, for example with other government registers and information systems - ID systems, tax registers, land registries, etc.

Source: World Bank. 2024. Sourcebook on the Foundations of Social Protection Delivery Systems.