



Peer Review on the 'Social Protection Information System (SPIS)'

23 November 2017, Vilnius (Lithuania)

Executive Summary

The Peer Review offered an opportunity to discuss the information systems for the electronic management of social protection administration in the selected peer countries. The event was hosted by the Ministry of Social Security and Labour of the Republic of Lithuania. Government representatives and independent experts¹ from eight countries, notably Bulgaria, Finland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovenia, and Spain, as well as representatives from the European Commission discussed the current and future use of data and information management tools in the context of social protection policies and the challenges related to their implementation.

Promoting well-functioning and fair welfare systems across Europe is one of the key initiatives of the European Commission under the framework of the European Pillar of Social Rights launched in 2017. This framework includes essential social protection rights for people across Europe, the administration of which crucially depends on effective data management systems. The Lithuanian Social Protection Information System (SPIS) is a good practice example of a system that ensures the delivery of rights as included in the European Pillar of Social Rights.

The Ministry of Social Security and Labour of the Republic of Lithuania initiated the development of a SPIS in 1997. Its initial purpose was twofold, firstly, to help the municipalities manage the administration and provision of social assistance and secondly, to facilitate the application procedures for beneficiaries through an online portal. SPIS was subsequently developed and since 2005 provides a complex database that enables the municipal officers to collect, store, monitor and exchange information between the municipalities and other public institutions on social assistance provision. The system has been further developed and currently offers a range of online social assistance application services to (potential) beneficiaries.

In total, 60 local municipalities are responsible for managing social assistance provision, while the Ministry of Social Security and Labour is responsible for the formulation of the overall social protection policy and its legal framework. In 2016, there were around 595 000 social assistance recipients out of a total population of 2.8 million. 999 000 applications were submitted of which 17 000 were submitted online. There are presently around 63 different types of social assistance, 26 of which are available online and can be applied for through the SPIS (e.g. child allowance, social benefit, or compensation for heating expenses and water costs).

¹ From Lithuania, Finland, Poland and Italy (on behalf of Italian government).

The key learning messages from the Peer Review can be summarised as follows:

Advantages and disadvantages of SPIS for strategic planning

- **Data provided by information systems is useful but needs to be supplemented with other sources in order to inform policy development.** The advantage of information systems, such as the SPIS, is that they provide quick and real-time data on the beneficiaries. While being of limited use for future policy development, this information is still important to assess the current situation. Strategic policy planning requires both detailed data on individuals receiving support and more aggregate information on outcomes, measured through social indicators. However, systems such as SPIS in their current form are not well-suited to analyse whether the social protection system is functioning properly. Aggregated contextual data (e.g. data on social exclusion) or additional information on the quality of services are needed for this type of analysis whereas most information systems were not built to serve as a tool for strategic planning. A way to obtain this type of data was proposed by Spain where a continuous and anonymized sample of the labour force population is drawn from the social security administrative data and used also for strategic planning. Currently, however, the possibilities to include these additional data are limited because of legal restrictions (see below).
- **Additional databases need to be combined, but legal restrictions pose a barrier.** A legal basis is needed but often lacking to foster cooperation between the different public institutions in order to share relevant data. Due to data protection law, it is often not possible to grant access rights to persons from other public institutions. In most cases only anonymized and/or aggregated statistical data can be collected or shared, although individual level data would be better suited to analyse the needs of specific target groups and develop the appropriate new policy measures. The lack of such combined databases impedes the possibilities to offer holistic support to users and facilitate effective policy development. Time is needed to establish procedures of data sharing across different public registries. Yet the challenge remains to overcome the important and purposeful legal boundaries to combine all necessary databases.

User-friendliness and follow-up information

- **SPIS are efficient and simple systems of distribution of social benefits.** The information systems become a one-stop shop for beneficiaries to apply for social benefits in a simple way.
- **SPIS would greatly benefit from including information on beneficiaries after they have stopped receiving benefits.** To assess the success of support and activation measures, the follow-up information on beneficiaries who no longer receive benefits needs to be collected. This is currently not the case in the selected Peer Review countries, but has been identified as a crucial prerequisite to improve the service delivery to individuals.
- **Feedback loops should be built into the systems in order to further develop and improve the systems.** A needs-based approach, which focuses on user-experiences, can foster a higher user-friendliness, accessibility, enhanced service delivery and better collection of data in the systems overall. While from an IT perspective the feedback loops could be incorporated relatively easily, there are legal data protection boundaries that would hinder the inclusion of individual-level data. In part, Finland has put such feedback loops into place at the municipal level, where beneficiaries together with social workers discuss outcomes of the received assistance. This information then feeds into the development of new policy measures. The information is, however, not linked to the overall information system.
- **Automatic renewal of certain benefits could be built into SPIS.** In Slovenia, for example, certain benefits such as child benefits, are renewed automatically each

year, without the need to re-apply. The beneficiary is simply informed at the beginning of each year of the amount s/he is eligible for and is given a certain period to raise their objections. This reduces the bureaucratic burden and facilitates access to these services. However, it is crucial to be aware of the fact that this can only be done with certain benefits, since the importance of personal contact must not be underestimated in the provision of social assistance.

Key challenges and how these can be best addressed

- **Lack of digital skills poses a major problem to increasing the user base.** Both the lack of digital skills and the lack of access to digital technology pose a difficulty to many people wanting to use the online systems. However, this could be addressed through many channels. In Finland for example, libraries, social centres and NGOs provide computer equipment that can be used locally, with trained staff to assist with online systems. In addition, Finland has adopted a multi-channel approach to the provision of social protection assistance since digitalization of the full population is not feasible.
- **The lack of digital skills of staff (e.g. social workers, municipal officers) is another barrier that hinders the potential of fully exploiting the SPIS.** This could be addressed through providing additional training opportunities.
- **Increasing coordination between employment services and social protection services would be a benefit but is a great challenge,** again mainly due to the personal data protection issues. The combination of these two areas would enable policy makers to further monitor the success of activation measures and make the information system a more powerful tool.
- **Reaching those at risk of social exclusion poses a challenge** for social inclusion institutions. It is difficult to reach those potential beneficiaries who might be eligible for social assistance due to fear of being stigmatized or feeling ashamed of asking for help and due to limited IT skills. In principle, electronic social protection systems should facilitate reach out to potential beneficiaries, but the lack of information about not-registered beneficiaries still poses a barrier.

Further information

The full report, presentations and background papers are available at:

<http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?langId=en&catId=1024&newsId=9006&furtherNews=yes>