



Peer Review on “Social Protection Information System”

Synthesis Report

Vilnius (Lithuania), 23 November 2017

DG Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion



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1 Introduction

1.1 Background and purpose of the Peer Review

The Peer Review on the Social Protection Information System offered an opportunity to discuss the information systems for the electronic management of social protection administration in a number of 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.

The Ministry of Social Security and Labour of the Republic of Lithuania initiated the development of the Social Protection Information System (SPIS) in 1997. Its initial purpose was twofold, firstly, to help the municipalities to manage the administration and provision of social assistance and secondly, to facilitate the application procedures for beneficiaries through an online portal. The 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 for social assistance 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).

1.2 EU policy context

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 is a good practice example of a system that ensures the delivery of rights as included in the European Pillar of Social Rights.

1.3 Key learning elements from the Peer Review

The key learning elements from the Peer Review are summarised below:

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.

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

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 the 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, as happens for example in Spain, would be to draw an anonymized sample of the labour force population from the social security administrative data and use continuous research on it in for strategic planning. Currently, however, the possibilities to include these additional data are limited in some Member States because of the 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 laws, 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

- **System such as SPIS are efficient and simple ways 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 the systems.** 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 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 userbase.** 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 among staff** (e.g. social workers, municipal officers) is another barrier that hinders fully exploiting the possibilities of 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 reaching out to potential beneficiaries, but the lack of information about beneficiaries who are not registered still poses a barrier.

2 Lithuania: The Social Protection Information System

2.1 Introduction

This summary of the Lithuanian system is based on the Host Country Paper². To facilitate administration of social support and social services at the municipal level, the Ministry of Social Security and Labour of the Republic of Lithuania (SADM) initiated the development of a Social Protection Information System (SPIS). SPIS is a complex database that enables municipal officers to collect, store, monitor and exchange information on social assistance provision between municipalities and other public institutions. In addition, the system offers an online application, where individuals can apply for benefits online.

Its key objectives are to:

- Simplify the application process for beneficiaries through an online platform;
- Collect data on social support and social service provision at the municipal level;
- Strengthen cooperation between national authorities and municipalities in providing social assistance;
- Fraud prevention through detecting citizens who simultaneously apply for social support from several municipalities.

2.2 The social protection system in Lithuania

The Lithuanian social protection system, like many other systems throughout EU Member States, is based on two pillars: social insurance on the one hand and social support and social services on the other hand. The state social insurance fund administers the former and municipalities (or other licensed institutions) the latter. The Ministry of Social Security and Labour ensures the overall functioning of the social protection system and safeguards its legal framework. It is responsible for the social protection policy design and implementation, including the establishment of eligibility criteria and the standard application procedures for receiving social assistance.

Individual municipalities autonomously administer and manage social support and social services delivered to their residents. Municipal officers make decisions on who receives social assistance and may decide to provide additional types of social support or social services, covered from municipal budgets without being accountable to the ministry. Furthermore, each municipality has its own method of administering social assistance within its social assistance departments.

Social support and social services target the most vulnerable or disadvantaged individuals. In most cases, they include children, survivors, the elderly, disabled persons, socially excluded persons, and households with an income lower than the fixed minimum standard per each member (currently at EUR 102 per month). The overall goal of social support and social services is to grant necessary assistance to those who are unable to provide and care for themselves due to a variety of reasons.

At the start of 2016, the Lithuanian population collectively comprised 2 888 558 individuals, half (51%) of whom constituted the active labour force. Approximately 990 000 applications asking for social support or social services were filed in 2016. Some individuals file applications several times, as they are often entitled to more than one type of social assistance or, alternatively, re-apply after their applications are rejected. Thus, roughly 600 000 individuals, or approximately 21% of all Lithuanian population, received some kind of social assistance during that year.

² Available at:

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

The target groups may receive various types of compensations, social care services, technical assistance, social assistance or benefits in cash. Depending on the benefit type, they are distributed either depending on individual income or irrespective of it. Currently, there are approximately 70 standard types of social support and social services available throughout Lithuania and some additional social assistance measures specific to each municipality.

2.3 Facilitating administration of social support through information system

The Lithuanian good practice example of an information system for social protection offers opportunities for peer learning across EU Member States. This section describes the development and specificities of SPIS.

2.3.1 History of SPIS

The SPIS relies upon a strategic partnership agreement between the SADM and all 60 Lithuanian municipalities. The SADM began working on SPIS in 1997. The starting phases of the project defined the conception and scope of the information management system. This phase lasted until 2003. During this time, extensive discussions in working groups took place between the municipality representatives and SADM. Then, during the later phases, the primary version of SPIS was developed. The SADM supplied social assistance departments across municipalities with the necessary technical equipment and provided training courses for municipality officers. The system was fully functioning as of July 2005, when municipal officers started collecting data on social assistance provision in their respective municipalities.

The latest SPIS developments took place between October 2010 and June 2013 and then between May 2014 and June 2015. These changes were in line with a need to modernise and expand the SPIS operational capacity, including online social assistance provision.

2.3.2 Structure of SPIS

In general, SPIS³ is a complex database that integrates data on social assistance recipients, mainly used by municipal officers. However, the social assistance provision database is accessible to the public without registering on SPIS. Municipalities may access data on the type of social assistance provided in each month of every year, starting from 1997.

The system also operates as an online service provider for individual users. It follows a six-pillar structure that encompasses all types of social assistance. These pillars include: child protection, school pupils' support, cash benefits, social services, assistance to persons with special needs or the disabled, and housing support benefit.

The users of SPIS are individuals and municipality officers. Individuals in need of social assistance may use SPIS to request and receive some types of social support and social services without leaving their homes. Anyone may register on SPIS, provided they have access to the overall *e-Valdžios Vartai* (E-Government Gateway). The E-Government Gateway operates as an authentication platform for individual users. Municipal officers use SPIS on a daily basis to manage social assistance provision. Each officer has an individual user ID that is in line with strict data confidentiality regulations. Each officer may access particular user applications and view particular databases with specific information on each individual.

2.4 Future developments

The developments foreseen for the future of SPIS include: increase digital skills of users and government officers, increase the number of social benefits for which users

³ An introductory video that was presented during the Peer Review can be found here: <https://vimeo.com/244058062>

can apply online, legalize scanned documents as proof of eligibility, development of an e-file for each beneficiary to reduce paper use and extend the system to social services as well. Another necessary improvement is to integrate additional databases, such as data from employment services, health care and social services, to enhance the functioning of information systems even further.

3 Discussion points

The Peer Review provided an insightful opportunity to learn and exchange recent approaches for enhancing the administration of social support and social services by using the advantages of current technological developments. The Lithuanian SPIS was compared to other information systems from selected Peer Review countries. Among those Member States that were present at the Peer Review, Poland and Slovenia have similar systems, although at a more central level, while Bulgaria, Italy, Latvia and Spain have developed information systems with varying degrees of centralisation or decentralisation and across different social protection areas. Finland has no system comparable to SPIS but uses different electronic and non-electronic channels to facilitate the administration of benefits.

Following the presentation of the various information systems available across the Peer Review countries, the discussion mainly focused on: i) the differences and similarities of social protection information systems; ii) the tensions between data protection requirements on the one side and the need for greater data availability for strategic planning on the other side; iii) the successful coordination strategy that is a prerequisite for building such systems; iv) and the need for additional features of information systems to make them more effective tools to help users and the need for other means to complement information systems for policy making. Each of these aspects is summarised below.

3.1 Differences and similarities compared to the Lithuanian SPIS

Overall, the discussions and comparisons with other participating countries underlined the following positive aspects of the Lithuanian SPIS:

- The successful coordination effort, involving all municipalities, data providers and government bodies, is a key success factor of SPIS.
- The system is very quick and time-saving for individual users and government officers. This improves the efficiency of the whole administration of social protection and benefit delivery. Further, it allows to get a quick descriptive overview on the number of users of the benefit system.
- It provides transparency and clarity, especially through the online platform.
- Related to that, it functions as a fraud detection and a fraud prevention tool, since cross-checks across municipalities and different databases are possible and evident for everyone.

Conversely, other features of the Lithuanian system and similar systems in other participating countries were considered to need improvement:

- While the information system is well-suited for the functions it was originally envisaged for, e.g. fraud detection and simplification of application procedures, it is – at least at this stage – less suited to be used for other demands, such as strategic policy development. Other data sources need to be included/developed to fulfil these functions.
- Aligning data protection regulations with increased demands on data availability needs further improvements. This was recognised as one of the key challenges, with more effort needed to coordinate demands from both sides, data protection and data availability.
- Lack of digital skills and equipment needs to be addressed, since it still poses a major barrier to increasing the userbase of the system.
- Regular evaluations and upgrades of information systems for social protection should be conducted.

- The system(s) should include automatic renewal for some yearly benefits, such as child benefit, without beneficiaries having to reapply again each year.

3.2 Variations and similarities of information systems for social protection across the Peer Review countries

The Peer country papers and discussions at the Peer Review highlighted the major similarities and differences in social protection systems and systems to manage data on social protection across the Peer Review countries. Similarities emerged in terms of aims of the systems (e.g. focus on improving efficiency of administration of social protection, or simplifying application procedures for beneficiaries), type of data collected and common challenges the Peer Review countries faced during the coordination process across different data providers and government institutions.

Differences between the countries were highlighted with respect to the level of centralisation and the size of countries, which in turn affects the feasibility of such coordination efforts (e.g. comparing Lithuania or Slovenia to Poland or Italy). Further, variations in design of national welfare regimes and institutional frameworks are reflected in the differences of social protection information systems. Another dimension that differs across countries is the degree to which the models are focused on clients and potential beneficiaries or rather on supporting the work of municipal officers or workers at centres for social work.

The main differences between the Lithuanian SPIS and the information systems in Slovenia and Poland

At first glance, the Lithuanian and Slovenian (see Box 3.1) information systems are quite similar. Yet, important differences emerge once we look closer at the structure of each system. The Lithuanian system is much more decentralised and comprehensive, focused both on services and cash benefits, while the Slovenian system is very centralised and focused only on cash benefits.

In both cases, relevant ministries relatively early envisaged potential benefits of IT-supported decision-making processes. Similar benefits for users, decisionmakers, ministries, and other stakeholders were recognized during the developmental phase of the systems. IT solutions help making social assistance systems more transparent, more efficient and user-friendly. They also provide important financial savings for the state budget, at least in the case of Slovenia, where it was estimated that the efficiency of the system helps save EUR 2-3 million each year.

In Poland (see Box 3.1), a similar information system to the Lithuanian one is in use. However, they differ in the origins, development paths and some functions. The Polish system is more directed at supporting local officers in processing application forms via on-line information checks and less on potential beneficiaries. Nevertheless, an online platform was established, where individual users can apply for services online.

Box 3.1 The centralised data management systems in Slovenia and Poland

A key feature of the social protection system in **Slovenia** is its high degree of centralisation. Eligibility rules for granting social support, organisation of providers' networks, financing of the system and criteria for quality assessment are based on the legislation of social assistance, the responsibility of the Ministry of Social Affairs and the national parliament. A network of Social Work Centres (SWC; under the umbrella of the Ministry of Social Affairs, but very much embedded in local municipalities) is responsible for the allocation of social support, mainly in the form of means-tested cash transfers. To facilitate the work of SWCs, the Ministry gradually developed an information system, IS SWC, in 2001. However, important modifications related to the IT support of the system were needed due to a reform of the Slovenian means-tested benefits in 2010, which established the SWCs as one-stop-shops for claiming all means-tested benefits and subsidies. The main

goals of the reform were, among others, to make the system of distribution of means-tested benefits more transparent, efficient and user-friendly; to harmonise eligibility criteria for means-tested benefits; and to improve the targeting of the system. To this end, the mechanism for collecting data across all relevant data sources, especially the data needed for the means-test, needed to be enhanced. Otherwise, the necessary simplifications and the establishment of a more user-friendly approach would not be achieved. For this purpose, negotiations with each data provider were held, to discuss what type of data was needed and in what format. This was a lengthy process, because data providers are not only public authorities, but also private ones (e.g. banks). In addition, the information commissioner was involved throughout the whole project, since data security was the main issue. In the end, the Ministry of Public Administration and the Ministry of Social Affairs were awarded for their efficient solution that was found and resulted in the IS SWC 2 system by the UN Public Service Award 2013 and recognised as an example of good practice in Digital Government Strategies by the OECD. The efficiency of the solution is also reflected in the yearly amount saved with the help of this system, which is estimated to be around EUR 2-3 million each year. Next year a new feature is to be implemented, called informative calculation: all benefits that are granted for one year should be automatically renewed without having to reapply. These benefits are child benefits, state scholarships, subsidies for kindergarten and subsidies for school meals.

Due to the size of **Poland**, with 16 regions, 380 districts and 2 478 municipalities, developing IT systems for any area of public administration is a great challenge. The Polish administration uses multiple information systems provided by the Social Insurance Institution (Platform for Digital Services, PUE ZUS), the Labour Offices, and the healthcare sector. The system closest to the Lithuanian SPIS is the Central Social Security Information System, CSIZS, which is maintained by the Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Policy. The system was developed over the period 2008-2014 under the project "Emp@tia" (Emp@thy), also partially funded by the European Union. The system replaced and/or unified previously separate systems which were used at the various institutions responsible for granting social benefits and developed new functions and features. It is subject to high data protection and confidentiality rules secured by the Chief Inspectorate, while the overall IT standards are set by the Ministry of Digitalisation. The system is highly centralised; eligibility rules are set by the Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Policy, and apply for the whole country. This applies specifically for family and cash social assistance benefits, which are financed mostly through the central budget. In fact, municipalities are only involved on the technical side, in benefit delivery. The main aim of the system is to support local agencies in granting specific social benefits through combining various (external) databases, which are needed for cross-checking information from applications. Furthermore, a central database of beneficiaries is being established and maintained, and a digital platform with all the necessary information was created to provide e-services for individuals and to facilitate online applications for users. Recently, there has been a surge in the number of users due mainly to the new child-raising benefit "Family 500+". In the case of this benefit, parents do not need (as of 2017) to provide documents or other information to the authorities when they apply for financial support. They only have to file an application once online and the administration will complete the application form by using the information it already has in its database. These services are now available at information portal Emp@tia and in 2016, 600 000 applications for "Family 500+" benefit were filed online. The ministry is cooperating with a number of large banks to use their online banking services for the identification and authentication of Polish citizens for the application of its eGovernment services.

Among the main improvements of the CSIZS system are its time saving effect for individual users and government officers at social assistance centres, better fraud

detection and fraud prevention due to cross-checking data, and its flexibility in including new benefit schemes. At the same time, there are some areas for further improvements, such as extending it to include more social security benefits, making available the collected information in a user-friendly way and, similar to other countries, fostering cooperation between labour offices and social assistance offices.

Source: Peer Review country papers

The information systems in Latvia and Bulgaria

The system in Latvia, see also Box 3.2, is relatively new and therefore still facing some challenges. Especially the coordination between the Ministry of Welfare and the municipalities needs to be improved. In addition, there are a range of different systems that need to be unified. In Bulgaria, also a country with a centralised welfare system, an information system in the area of social protection is being developed since 2008. The system, for now, only facilitates the work of social workers; there is no online portal which can be used by individuals.

Box 3.2 The information system in Latvia

The information system in **Latvia** was compared to the Slovenian one, however, it is in its initial stage. The Ministry of Welfare has seven different sub-divisions, such as children rights or labour market and social protection. Each of them has their own information system. However, the Ministry itself has two systems: one covers all social services that are financed by the government and only the Ministry can access data from this system. The other one, SPOLIS, provides an anonymised sample of the first, based on three-months aggregates from the individual-level data base. One main challenge is to bring together not only the information systems that are in place in the seven different sub-divisions of the Ministry of Welfare and to create one joint database, but to bring on board also the centralized information system on municipal benefits (SOPA). Municipalities are required to transmit information to the Ministry, however, coordination especially on data quality is difficult.

Source: Peer Review country papers⁴

Information systems in a decentralised context – Italy and Spain

In Italy and Spain (see Box 3.3) initiatives to create information systems for social protection exist and are being extended. The size of the countries and the strong distribution of competencies at the regional level in Italy and even more so in Spain, adds another layer of complexity. It is therefore difficult to compare them to systems in smaller countries, such as Lithuania and Slovenia and more centralised ones, such as Poland and Slovenia.

Box 3.3 Information systems in decentralised countries: Italy and Spain

In **Italy**, the history of information systems for social services goes back to 1951, when an Istat survey on residential care facilities was conducted. Throughout the years various measures in the direction of information databases have been implemented, with various grades of success. It remains a challenge to guarantee a national information system for such a large country with 21 regions and over 8 000 municipalities. However, starting from the year 2000, with the Law 328/2000, the government decided to boost the development of the National Social Services Information System. The last and most outstanding measures, in line with the before mentioned law have been the "Casellario dell'Assistenza" or the social services information database, and more recently in September 2017, the Unique

⁴ Available at:

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

Social Services Information System (SIUSS). The main goals of SIUSS are to guarantee a complete knowledge of social needs and services dispensed by the integrated system of interventions and social services and of all information needed to programme, manage, monitor and evaluate social policies; to monitor the granting of a minimum level of services; to strengthen the controls on benefits illegitimately received (fraud detection); to have at their disposal the data necessary for strategic planning and design of interventions through the integration with the information systems for health, labour and other social policy areas as well as the information systems for services management already present in municipalities; and finally, to receive data for statistical, research and analytical purposes.

At this initial phase, there are some obstacles for the implementation of the information system in Italy. Given its strong decentralised structure, there are a range of problems related to harmonising procedures. For example, every region now uses different tools to evaluate the multidimensional social and health profiles as well as needs of beneficiaries, which in turn generate different data records. It is a challenge to obtain homogenous data for SIUSS. In addition, harmonized data protection legislation is also an issue, since each region decides individually what data can be released. One key challenge here is to secure data protection and prevent identification in especially small municipalities. As depopulation becomes increasingly a problem in some regions, in municipalities with 10 to 20 inhabitants this is almost impossible.

A prerequisite for the well-functioning of the SIUSS is the availability of digital equipment and skills at all administrative levels. Especially in small Italian municipalities the necessary technology to promptly provide data for SIUSS is lacking. To enable regions, municipalities and the National Social Welfare Institute (INPS) to fulfil their data provision obligations a digitalisation process was initiated. This includes on-site training and training via a webinar platform⁵, both of which are being rolled-out.

The context in **Spain** is even more complex than the one in Italy. The large size of the country, the design of the welfare system (closer to the Bismarck style welfare model) and the even stronger distribution of competencies to the regions pose great challenges for information systems. There are at least three different major information systems at the national level in place that would be mentioned, one for all social security benefits (Registro de Prestaciones Sociales Públicas), one for long-term care system benefits (SISAAD), and one on social services users (also called SIUSS), developed in collaboration with the regions.

Source: Peer Review Country presentations⁶

In Finland the situation is different. There is no information system comparable to SPIS, however, there are similar systems in other areas, such as public and private health care services. In general, data on social protection as well as on health care is dispersed across a number of different information systems, which are in turn managed by different authorities.

Box 3.3 The system in Finland

In **Finland**, the social protection system is divided into social security and social welfare. According to the Constitution of Finland, there is a right to social security for everyone who cannot obtain the economic means necessary for a life in dignity.

⁵ Link to the webinar platform: <http://network.ot11ot2.it/posts/2017/10/6011/materiali-del-webinar-il-nuovo-sistema-informativo-unitario-dei-servizi-sociali>

⁶ Available at: <http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?langId=en&catId=1024&newsId=9006&furtherNews=yes>

Municipalities were mainly responsible for the application process and for the delivery of social benefits. However, there have been variations in provision of social benefits across municipalities and therefore a process of transferring the responsibility and delivery of social benefits from municipalities to the state has started. Even though Act on Social Assistance applies to all municipalities in the same way, the interpretation and application of legislation has varied across municipalities. It is mainly KELA, the Social Insurance Institution of Finland, which is responsible for the distribution of benefits now.

In Finland there is no system comparable to SPIS, which integrates data from public institutions on social assistance or other social benefits or services. As in Lithuania, in Finland there has been a trend to integrate social protection systems. Nowadays a problem of Finnish system are fragmented databases without access for public officers. People in most vulnerable situations use many benefits and services and thus use many systems. Also in Finland the use of several client databases has been problematic. Health care and social welfare data are dispersed in a number of different information systems managed by different authorities. The reason for problems in using clientele registers is that there are restrictions on using clientele data and public officials don't have access to all information they need. Even in one organisation there are various roles and user rights for accessing client information, not to mention the multi-sectoral client processes and data systems.

Kanta service (which is the national data system services for public and private healthcare services, pharmacies and citizens) has similar features as SPIS. Kanta service for social care is developed by Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, the National Institute for Health and Welfare (THL) and KELA. The goal is to improve the information management and document management in social welfare and develop national information system solutions. The final aim is to develop the client data systems in social welfare in such a way that the client details are easier to utilise by social welfare professionals nationwide.

Data protection is a crucial element of Finland's advancements in the digitalisation of public administration. In comparison to Lithuania, in Finland individuals have a lot of influence for exchange of information between public officials: one can choose, if client information is available in other clientele databases. In addition, the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health has, together with stakeholders, has drawn up a strategy for Information Management in healthcare and social welfare (eHealth and eSocial Strategy 2020). The central idea of the strategy is to put information related to social welfare and health care services into effective use to support well-being and to enhance the services. The objective is also to support the active role of citizens in maintaining their own well-being by improving information management and increasing the provision of online services.

There are also differences in scope of digitalisation of public services and benefit systems in Finland. There have been several programmes for digitalisation of public services and there is an ongoing National Service Architecture Programme (KaPA 2014-2017) and a Digital Municipality experiment. KaPA aims to facilitate digital exchange by citizens, companies and organisations with the authorities and to promote corporate opportunities for leveraging public administration databases and services. In Finland digitalisation of health care began in the 1980s, but active efforts to standardise the content and technology of information management in the social welfare sector started only in the mid-2000s.

Source: Peer Review Country papers⁷

⁷ Available at:

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

3.3 Data protection vs. data availability

Strict data protection measures are key when designing and operating information systems of this kind. This was recognised by all Peer Review countries, especially in view of the enormous amounts of personal data that must be processed. To secure high standards for data protection of SPIS in Lithuania, data protection is provided via a data centre, data clusters, firewall, and the Ministry is currently evaluating the benefits of purchasing modern automatic tools to improve data security. Also in Slovenia, the information commissioner was part of the project from the initial design phase onwards. This guaranteed that the IS SWC (2) was security-compliant. In Poland, all information systems including the CSIZS, must fulfil general Internet communication standards set up by the Ministry of Digitalisation, as well as data protection and confidentiality rules secured by the Chief Inspectorate of Personal Data Protection. In Italy, compatibility of SIUSS with the regulation on personal data protection set by the National Authority for Personal Data Protection poses a great challenge due to demographic change and depopulation of some regions in Italy. As mentioned above, identification issues arise in small municipalities.

Looking at the municipal level in Lithuania, municipal officers have different access rights for confidential data. Granting access to personal information to various databases (needed e.g. for asset tests) is a complex legal matter because such personal information may be confidential and subject to strict data protection rules. However, this limits the functionality and effectiveness of the SPIS, since some municipal officers, while responsible for granting benefits, might in the end not have the access to the necessary data. Municipal officers report that resolving this issue should not be difficult given that most of them already have the legal right to work with most confidential information. However, securing access to personal data remains complicated. Both municipal officers and individual users would greatly benefit if this issue was resolved, as this would allow expanding the provision of social assistance even further. This has been identified also as an issue throughout the participating countries. A legal basis is needed but often lacking to foster cooperation between the different public institutions to share relevant data.

Complying with data protection requirements is recognised as paramount in all Peer Review countries, while it creates barriers to enhancing the system further and using it for other objectives as well. Recently, the advantages of using the collected data for new, initially not envisaged, purposes such as statistical analysis and strategic policy development, are becoming more and more evident. These possibilities are however limited exactly due to the high data protection standards across Peer Review countries. It is often not possible to grant access rights to persons from other public institutions. In most cases only anonymised 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. Information is only made available on a highly aggregated level, for example, stating the number of beneficiaries of one particular benefit. The Peer Review countries identified the need to use more of the data on individuals receiving benefits to enable policymakers to design better targeted benefit schemes.

A simple example was given, for the type of data needed for the design of an activation measure: The Ministry knows that there are more jobs available in urban areas. To decrease unemployment in rural areas, policymakers think of granting unemployed persons, e.g. a voucher for obtaining a driving licence or support for buying a car so that they can commute to a workplace in a bigger town or city. From information systems, such as SPIS, the Ministry can obtain information on people living in rural areas that are unemployed and receive some type of social assistance or unemployment benefit. However, to identify whether such a policy would indeed be useful, the Ministry would need additional data on assets (e.g. cars) or on who has a driving licence on an individual level, that can be matched with the data collected

through SPIS. So far, however, the data received from other data sources is aggregated statistical data that cannot be matched to individual data files in SPIS.

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.

Furthermore, strategic policy planning and evaluation 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 mechanism to obtain this type of data was recalled by Spain where a continuous and anonymised 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 again limited because of legal restrictions.

3.4 Successful coordination strategy

Lithuania received great appraisal during the Peer Review for its successful good practice example of a coordination strategy, on which the success of SPIS crucially depends. A strategic partnership between all 60 Lithuanian municipalities and the Lithuanian Ministry of Social Security and Labour was formed in 2005. Even though the consensus is legally not binding, it has proven to be a lasting one with many positive effects.

One of these effects was that there is indeed one unified SPIS. Some larger municipalities, such as Vilnius city, have been considering building their own information system, which of course would have been easier and faster to develop. However, they could be convinced of the long-term benefits from one unified system.

The lengthy process towards reaching the agreement created a deep sense of ownership among the municipal officers responsible for administration of social benefits. Firstly, this has helped to build a system that is tailored to the needs of municipal officers and in the end also to the individual benefit recipients. Secondly, this process not only increased the acceptance of the system, it also helps to continuously improve it. Municipal officers feel responsible for the system and provide feedback in order to improve the system. Both SADM representatives and municipal officers have already worked side by side on the SPIS for a number of years, building mutual trust and laying the ground for a successful future cooperation.

Some other Peer Review countries, such as Latvia and Finland, mentioned that the creation of partnerships has proven to be a very difficult process for them. In Finland, the partnership agreements are rare and in practice it is always the legislation that is needed for the co-operation between the central administration and municipalities. In Latvia, municipalities are difficult to convince of the benefits such a system might bring. This is mainly due to them wanting to retain independence from the central Ministry. Representatives from Slovenia and Lithuania mentioned that it is key to take the necessary time for this negotiation process. Another key factor of success is to build the system in the most transparent way possible.

3.5 Weaknesses of the information systems and potential remedies

The implementation of the information systems is a great success to enhance the management of social protection systems. There are, however, next steps that need to be taken to guarantee that the systems remain useful tools in a constantly evolving

and dynamic environment. The discussions at the Peer Review also focused on additional features of the existing information systems that need to be developed or improved.

One of the main problems identified by Latvian and Slovenian representatives is how to reach those people who do not apply for benefits and are therefore not captured by the system, even though they barely manage with very low incomes. These people "at the border" might not apply for various reasons, the most common ones are shame or fear of stigma. In principle, electronic social protection systems should make it easier to reach out to potential beneficiaries, but the lack of information about the beneficiaries who are not registered still poses a great barrier to designing suitable policies for these people who are at risk of social exclusion.

The media can be a useful channel for changing the perceptions about people who receive benefits. For example, stories about parents who can support their children better with the help of child benefits, decrease the stigma associated with benefit use. An especially innovative approach was created in Poland. A state financed TV series, called "Deep Water" portrays people who are in danger of social exclusion and shows their lived experiences with the social welfare system (see also Box 3.4). The series is fictional, but based on real stories. The aim was to reduce the stigma, expected or real, around people receiving social benefits.

Box 3.4 Changing the perceptions about people who receive benefits

In 2011/2012, a TV series with the title "Deep Water" was created, touching upon issues of social exclusion, showing the lived realities and struggles of people who are recipients of social assistance⁸. The first season was financed under ESF and had around 2.18 million viewers (14.3% share of all viewers)⁹. The second season was not as successful. The TV series received positive critical acclaim and even received an award in the Prix Italia contest for best TV series. Polish state TV station sold the license for the TV series to France, Germany, Romania, Australia, Israel and Iran¹⁰.

One additional tool to complement information systems on social protection which has been mentioned is a microsimulation model. In Finland this model is developed by THL, the National Institute for Health and Welfare, and is used by the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health and the Ministry of Finance to assess the overall benefits of a reform of the social protection system.

⁸ The trailer can be found here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5kyF2vy63r0>

⁹ Source: <http://www.wirtualnemedial.pl/arttykul/drugi-sezon-serialu-bleboka-woda-stracil-1-63-mln-widzow>

¹⁰ Source: <http://www.wirtualnemedial.pl/arttykul/bleboka-woda-tvp2-ma-zostac-sprzedana-do-10-krajow#<http://www.wirtualnemedial.pl/arttykul/bleboka-woda-tvp2-ma-zostac-sprzedana-do-10-krajow>

4 Lessons learned and priorities for the future

The Peer Review highlighted the following lessons learned

The Peer Review highlighted how much common ground exists between the information systems across the Peer Review countries. Although the systems vary in scope and size, especially given the differences in welfare regimes across the Peer Review countries, the core idea behind each system is very similar.

Two main lessons emerged from the discussion on information systems in the area of social protection. The first is that while information systems are becoming an increasingly important tool across many areas of public administration, especially social protection, there is a need to adjust the legal framework (most importantly on data protection) to increase their scope further. The main goal is to use the data collected through the systems also for more strategic policy planning. This requires closer coordination among different authorities and data providers. All partners first need to "speak the same language" and this process takes time. However, while this might be a great investment in the beginning, it is crucial for the system to work efficiently in the end. The path to achieve this is likely to be different for every country, but room for more support for Member States from the European Commission in this area was identified, to further enhance the development of these information systems.

The second main take-away message from the Peer Review was that information systems are very useful tools, but they cannot replace professional social work. Client orientation as a guiding principle has to be paramount. Information systems can enable better and more targeted collaboration of different stakeholders and facilitate the work of professionals in the municipalities and/or other public institutions responsible for social assistance, but direct professional work and empowerment of users is crucial. The Peer Review highlighted also that creating an entirely digital social protection system with online applications as the sole channel is not the aim. Some population groups can never be reached through digital means and people should have a choice between digital and non-digital channels. Rather, the Member States should strike the optimal balance using a "multi-channel" framework.

The Peer Review also identified the following priorities for the future

In short, the main future priorities for the Lithuanian SPIS were identified as the need to increase digital skills of users and government officers, increase the number of social benefits for which users can apply online, legalise scanned documents as proof of eligibility, development of an e-file for each beneficiary to reduce paper use and extend the system to social services as well. A key future priority for all countries in the Peer Review is to integrate additional databases, such as data from employment services, health care and social services, to enhance the functioning of information systems even further. Further priorities across the countries also emerged and are discussed below.

Automatic renewal of certain benefits

Peer Review countries were inspired by the example from Slovenia, where certain benefits such as child benefits, are renewed automatically each year, without the need to re-apply. The beneficiary is simply sent an automatic informative calculation at the beginning of each year of the amount s/he is eligible for and is given a certain period to raise their objections if the projected calculation is incorrect. This is integrated into the information system, reduces the bureaucratic burden and facilitates access to these services. However, this can only be done with certain benefits, since again the importance of personal contact must not be underestimated in the provision of social assistance.

Feedback loops are necessary

A client oriented 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. It is crucial for evaluating the system in general, to have feedback loops in place, and to monitor whether the system meets the demands of all users. 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.

Digital skills need to improve

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, and to some extent already has been, addressed through many channels. In Lithuania, video instructions for people applying for social security are helpful in getting citizens as users of SPIS. 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 digitalisation 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.

Follow-up after benefit ends

Another need that emerged during the discussion was to include follow-up information on recipients after they stop receiving benefits. This is important in order to assess the success of support and activation measures. This is currently not the case in the selected Peer Review countries, but has been identified as a crucial prerequisite to improve the benefit and service delivery to individuals and therefore to enhance the possibilities for better strategic planning. Nevertheless, the issue was raised that only information that is really needed should be collected to avoid creating overly complex data files. Again, this needs to be specified by all data providers and data users jointly.



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