Management Information Systems in Social Safety Net Programs: 
A Look at Accountability and Control Mechanisms

The paper aims to provide practitioners working on Social Safety Net (SSN) projects with practical ways to use information management practices to mitigate accountability and control risks. The paper outlines a Management Information System (MIS) framework for SSN projects, as well as identifying risk mitigation strategies to be considered in MIS design and evaluation. The analysis draws on several Conditional Cash Transfer (CCT) programs in Latin America that incorporate industry standards and information management practices for both automated and paper-based projects.

Accountability and Controls in SSN: An MIS Perspective

The size, visibility, and risks of error, fraud and corruption require a disciplined and systematic approach to risk management in SSN programs. A MIS is a management tool that can provide programs with the accountability and controls processes required to mitigate operational risks. Effective MIS risk mitigation strategies should be considered throughout key stages in the design and implementation processes of safety nets, as highlighted in Table 1.

MIS for Safety Net Programs: An Integrated Framework

A review of CCT programs indicates that MIS risk mitigation strategies are often implemented outside of a comprehensive strategy, resulting in ad hoc decision making, rework and increased costs. An integrated MIS framework can help support information flows thereby ensuring the timeliness, accuracy and relevance of interventions. Figure 1 illustrates the four main components of the MIS and how they fit into the flow of information between program processes, providers and consumers of SSN programs. The four MIS components include governance and organizational structure, information management, application management and infrastructure.

The implementation of an MIS also involves substantial challenges and risks, which should be properly evaluated. Most MIS systems fail because of business reasons, including lack of sponsorship, poor governance, deficient organization structure, and undefined roles not because of poor technological systems. Consequently, the paper recommends a top down approach for evaluations, starting from the business environment to ensure that infrastructures and technologies are aligned.

Table 1: MIS Risk Mitigation Strategies

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<tr>
<th>SSN Process</th>
<th>Examples of Risks</th>
<th>Examples MIS Functions</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Beneficiary identification</td>
<td>Inclusion error, exclusion error</td>
<td>Data quality, security, records management</td>
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<tr>
<td>Monitoring of co-responsibilities (CCTs)</td>
<td>Unwarranted penalization, Wrong payments, Poor impact evaluations</td>
<td>Data governance, quality, Database management and architecture</td>
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<tr>
<td>Payments and benefits</td>
<td>Irregularities, interruptions.</td>
<td>Data and systems availability management</td>
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<td>Institutional Arrangement</td>
<td>Coordination, enforcement, funding</td>
<td>Data governance, organizational structure</td>
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<td>Beneficiary registration</td>
<td>Service interruption, Misuse of information</td>
<td>Disaster recovery, Security management</td>
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<td>Complaints resolution and appeals</td>
<td>Program abuse, credibility, poor learning</td>
<td>Records management, Process monitoring</td>
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<tr>
<td>Monitoring &amp; Evaluation</td>
<td>Poor decisions, Political economy risks</td>
<td>Data quality/integrity, records</td>
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with the operational processes of Safety Nets programs. The rationale and key issues associated with each of the components are illustrated in Table 2.

**Evaluation and improvement of current systems**

Three distinct steps should be followed to ensure that effective evaluation processes result in the realignment and expansion of management information systems. First, diagnostic testing should be undertaken to ensure stock-taking of the current state of the MIS and information management practices. Second, an MIS strategy should be developed according to program’s objectives. Finally, an action plan must be developed to implement the improvements of the system. Of course, if this exercise is done after major technical decisions have already been implemented, necessary improvements might be extremely costly.

**Final considerations**

The design and effectiveness of an MIS will need to consider a number of external factors. This includes country context, program maturity and feedback, the use of paper versus electronic recordkeeping, the interaction with complementary systems, procurement requirements, economies of scale and knowledge sharing.

### Table 2: MIS Components and Key Evaluation Issues

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<tr>
<th>Component</th>
<th>Rationale</th>
<th>Key Evaluation Issues</th>
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<tr>
<td>Governance Structure</td>
<td>Provides a business environment.</td>
<td>Institutional arrangements, government and service provider agreements, roles and responsibilities, governance, external expertise.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Information Management</td>
<td>Ensures program quality and security</td>
<td>Data cross checks, information traceability, data collection at local level, benefit payment and reconciliation, information security and access, operation oversight</td>
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<tr>
<td>Application Management</td>
<td>Prevents vulnerability in day-to-day operations</td>
<td>Development process, quality assurance, change management, confirmation and release management</td>
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<tr>
<td>Infrastructure</td>
<td>Appropriate operating equipment</td>
<td>Hardware capacity and planning, software updates and maintenance, secure hardware and software, disaster recovery and planning.</td>
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