Setting up a Unified Social Registry in Burundi: Moving towards better coordination within social protection

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1 Introduction

Located in East Africa, Burundi is the country with the lowest gross domestic product (GDP) per capita in the world (World Bank and OECD 2021). The Burundian civil war has had detrimental socioeconomic consequences, especially during its most intense period, from 1993 to 2000. The resulting strong economic contraction persists even today, despite perceptible improvements in the living standards of households since 2006.

According to the 2013/2014 Modular Survey on Household Living Conditions (*Enquête Modulaire sur les Conditions de vie des Ménages*—ECVMB), the country has an estimated population of 11.5 million people, and 64.6 per cent of the households live below the national poverty line. After Rwanda, Burundi has the highest population density in continental Africa. This, combined with a high dependence on the agricultural sector—which has grown slowly in recent decades—has led the country to an acute shortage of land, which has brought down the standard of living (UNICEF and World Bank 2014).

The social safety net programmes implemented in the post-conflict transition period (up to the early 2010s) were designed to facilitate the return, resettlement and reintegration of refugees, displaced persons, former combatants and other war victims. With this transition process coming to an end, the past decade was characterised by the growing importance of social protection and programmes fostering productivity and community resilience over the long term, although there is still a significant number of humanitarian aid programmes (UNICEF and World Bank 2014; République du Burundi 2015).

There has been significant progress in the area of social protection during the period, including the creation of an intersectoral National Social Protection Commission (CNPS), and a National Social Protection Policy (PNPS) accompanied by a National Social Protection Strategy (SNPS). Additionally, the country implemented a partial subsidy of healthcare for vulnerable people and informal workers, as well as free primary education and healthcare for children under 5 years old and pregnant women (République du Burundi 2015), on top of an increasing number of cash and social transfer programmes.

However, their coverage remains limited. *Merankabandi*, the flagship national Social Safety Nets Project, reached about 2.3 per cent of the population with cash transfers during its first phase (World Bank 2020).[1] Moreover, 15 per cent of the population is covered by the Health Assistance Card (EDS 2016/2017) and approximately 5 per cent by mandatory contributory programmes (République du Burundi 2015). Some of the institutional challenges of the sector include a lack of synergy, coherence and coordination between interventions as well as the absence of common targeting, supervision, and monitoring and evaluation tools.

To address these challenges, the 2015 National Social Protection Strategy foresaw the establishment of a Unified Social Registry—called *Registry* in this Policy Brief. This tool would target the poorest households and those in vulnerable situations to ensure harmonised programming at the local level and avoid gaps and redundancies across programmes (République du Burundi 2015). In broad terms, the role of such a Registry in Burundi—as in other countries facing fiscal constraints and high poverty rates—would be to improve the allocation of resources and increase the efficiency of non-contributory programme targeting, while also taking into account their complementarity in the fight against the multidimensional aspects of poverty.[2]

To provide support to Burundi in these endeavours, the International Policy Centre for Inclusive Growth (IPC-IG), in partnership with the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the World Food Programme (WFP) and the Permanent Executive Secretariat (SEP) of the CNPS conducted a feasibility study and developed a roadmap for the implementation of the Registry in Burundi. This brief summarises the main stages of this roadmap and the recommendations made to the country based on international good practices, interviews with key informants and a comprehensive literature review.

FIGURE 1

Overview of the roadmap stages
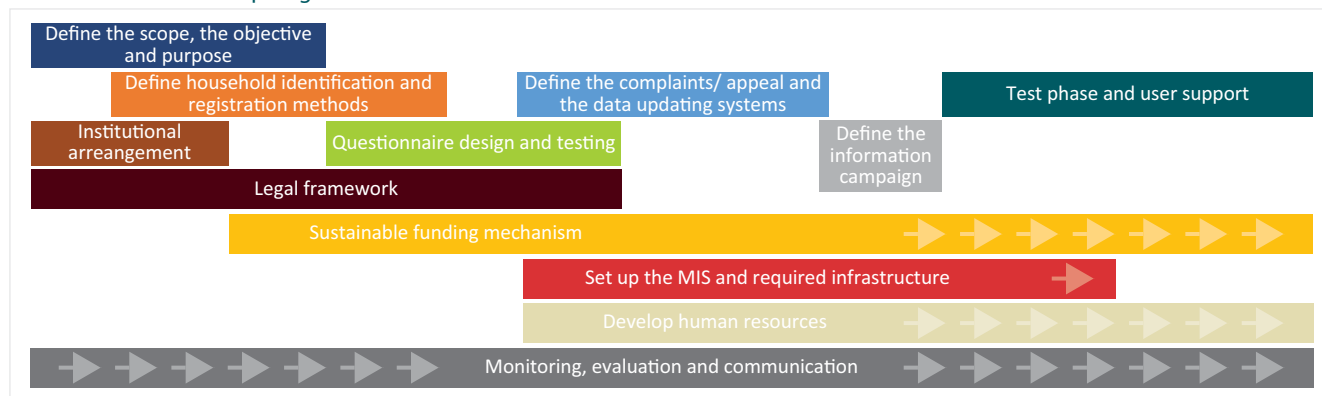
Source: Author's elaboration.

2 Main roadmap stages and short-term recommendations:

2.1 Define the scope, the objective and purpose of the Registry (estimated duration: 6 months)

2.1.1 First and foremost, the country should establish a priority list of the functions expected from the Registry. The two options offered by the IPC-IG to Burundi are as follows:

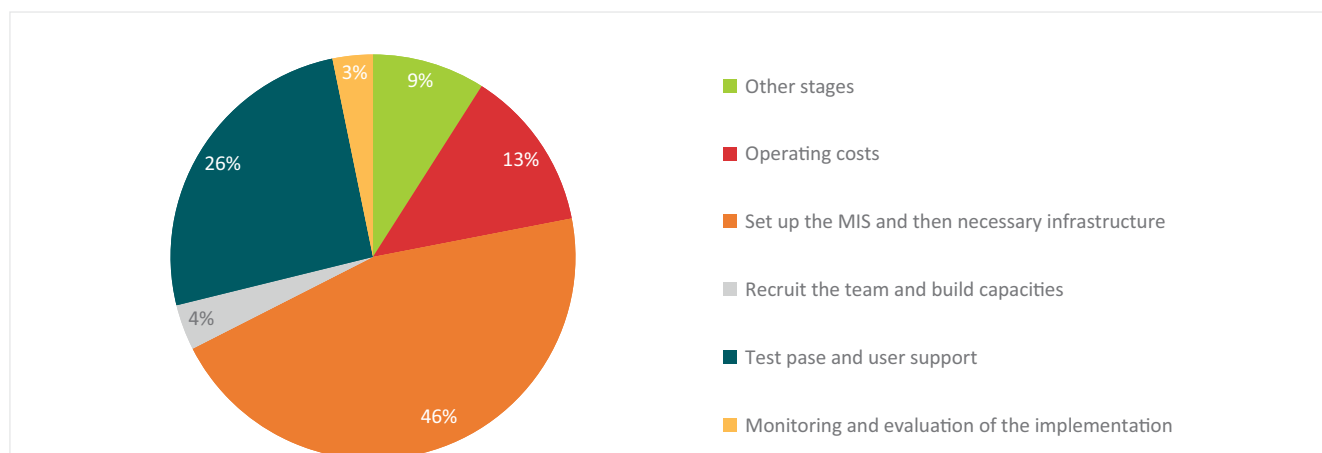**OPTION A**—A Registry that integrates household registration a common gateway for user programmes[3]
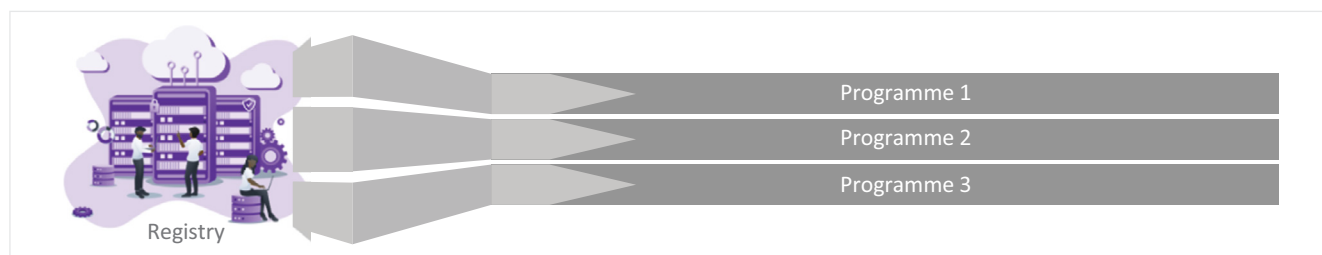
Using a common questionnaire, the Registry would collect and provide non-contributory programmes with household data, feeding their selection process. It would also offer them the possibility of ranking the needs of the registered population to ensure better targeting. The Registry and the national flagship programme would share the same data collection and management information system (MIS).

In an optimistic scenario, it is estimated that a first perfectible version, with a limited number of user programmes, could be launched in two to three years and would cost between USD3.5 and USD4.5 million. In the long term, the Registry could exchange data with other sectors if the same unique identifier is used.

FIGURE 2

Breakdown of estimated costs for implementing Option (a), as a percentage of total cost

- Other stages
- Operating costs
- Set up the MIS and then necessary infrastructure
- Recruit the team and build capacities
- Test pase and user support
- Monitoring and evaluation of the implementation

Source : Author's elaboration.

**OPTION B**—A Registry that tracks a limited number of key social protection variables and indicators[4]
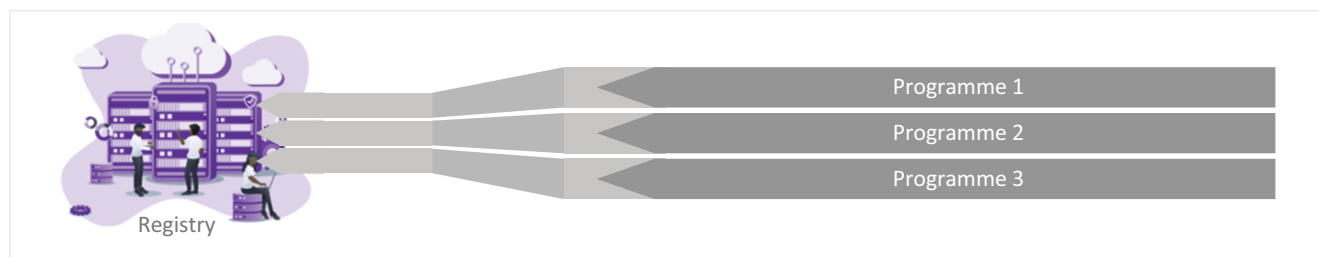
The programmes integrated into the Registry would periodically send data regarding predefined common indicators (e.g., number of beneficiaries per municipality). The Registry compiles this data and makes them available in an aggregated way. Option (b) would imply a lower level of coordination among social protection policies and programmes than Option (a), but local-level coordination would nevertheless be essential.

The optimistic estimate foresees less time (2 years) and resources (between USD1 million and USD 1.5 million) for launching a first perfectible version of Option (b). In the medium term, it would be possible to identify individuals registered in several programmes if the same unique identifier is used. In the long term, Option (b) could become comparable to Option (a), if new households are registered in the Registry' database.

FIGURE 3
Breakdown of estimated costs for implementing Option (b), as a percentage of total cost
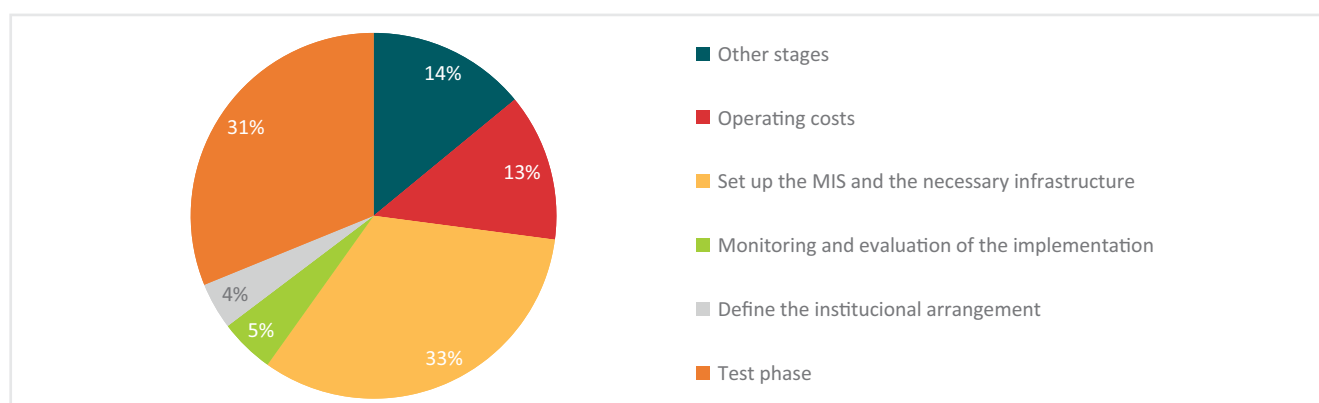
Source : Author's elaboration.

It should be noted that under both options, programmes would keep their eligibility criteria and would still be responsible for their own beneficiary selection and enrolment processes.

The authors recommended Option (a) since it would build on the achievements of the existing national flagship programme. It would also lead to stronger coordination regarding the identification of beneficiaries, while feeding a national database that would help establish more effective emergency responses in the future as programmes expand horizontally.

Option (a) was chosen by the Government of Burundi in 2021 as it is represented the closest match with the objectives established by the SNPS and the Social Protection Code.

2.1.2 Next, the first programmes that demonstrate interest in integrating themselves into the Registry should be identified and a data-sharing agreement should be signed with them.

2.1.3 A study should be carried out in partnership with the Statistics and Economic Studies Institute of Burundi (ISTEEBU).

2.2 Define the institutional arrangement
(estimated duration: 2 to 8 months)

2.2.1 Identification of the Registry's implementation, supervision and coordination bodies. These bodies will be in charge of making decisions related to the Registry's features and structure, supporting stakeholder coordination, detailing its budget, and ensuring its proper functioning and development of internal skills.

The country must choose between centralising all the responsibilities within the same body or entrusting them to several bodies. Decentralisation is more common in federal or highly decentralised countries, which is not the case of Burundi. Thus, two options were proposed for the short term:

(i) Concentrate the Registry's operational management within the national flagship programme's project management unit. This method has the advantage of building on the existing infrastructure and the human capacities already developed for the flagship programme to facilitate and accelerate the implementation of the Registry. Potential risks, as identified by other international experiences, include users of other programmes feeling neglected or the Registry lacking independence from the flagship programme. However, these could be prevented through the definition of precise protocols and principles, under the supervision of

the SEP/CNPS. Additionally, Registry management skills should be transferred to a permanent government body prior to the end of the programme.

(ii) Set up a technical body in charge of the Registry's operational management under the CNPS. This option would better ensure the independence of the Registry and the active participation of stakeholders, avoiding potential feelings of neglect. This technical body should be created from the ground up, and it would implement the decisions taken at the government level while acting under the supervision of the CNPS. Therefore, the technical capacities for the Registry's management should be further developed within this body. This could lead to an extension of the implementation timeframe.

In both cases, the supervision of the Registry should reside within a permanent government structure. The overall coordination between actors, the strategic planning and development of the Registry will be all be under the purview of the government, which will act as the 'project owner'.

2.2.2 Definition of the data-sharing (with user programmes and ministries) framework and method, with technical support from the ISTEEBU and the National Council of Statistics.

2.2.3 Mapping of local actors with the minimum necessary skills to participate in the implementation and promotion of the Registry, as well as the definition of their needs in terms of human, financial and material resources.

2.2.4 Development of the Registry's operational manuals and user guides for all actors involved.

2.3 Establish a legal framework (estimated duration: 12 to 16 months)

2.3.1 Drafting the data and privacy protection legal framework, including legal guarantees. This framework must include the following data protection principles: right of access, of correction, of objection and of free and informed consent for registered individuals; proportionality in the collection and use of data; confidentiality and security measures; responsible data sharing; data accuracy; and individual liability for breach of privacy rights.

2.3.2 Development of the legal framework establishing the Registry, the implementation bodies and the regulations defining the roles and responsibilities of ministries and programmes. This could be a law or a decree that would define the Registry in the long term. However, some flexibility would be left for decrees and ordinances specifying the implementation modalities, budget, human resources framework, etc., at a later date. This must be a gradual process as the Registry evolves and the legal framework is progressively instituted.

2.4 Define household identification and registration methods (estimated duration: 4 to 6 months)

2.4.1 If Option (a) is adopted, sources of information must be selected so as to allow for the identification of micro-regions with high poverty and vulnerability rates. Subsequently, this identification will indicate the priority areas for household registration. The main source of information should be national statistical surveys.

Given that in Burundi these surveys are not yet carried out at the communal level—the lowest territorial level in the country—secondary sources must be used for triangulation, allowing for the production of more geographically precise vulnerability analyses.[5]

2.4.2 The staff responsible for household registration should be identified. It would be recommended to rely on the flagship programme's teams and conduct registration using the 'active search' method. This method consists of rotating teams travelling continuously across the country, prioritising certain regions with high concentration of poverty and vulnerability. It should be combined with on-demand registration, carried out by the decentralised offices of the Ministry in charge of national solidarity and of the SEP/CNPS, and by the local units of the Burundian Red Cross.

2.5 Select, standardise and test common variables (minimum duration: 6 months)

2.5.1 If Option (a) is adopted, a joint questionnaire must be developed to inform the variables of the user programmes' selection processes. The questionnaire used in the flagship programme should serve as a starting point. However, having variables that do not report the eligibility criteria of all programmes would be a potential risk in case they do not actively participate | at this stage. It is crucial to include the following types of variables in the common questionnaire: household composition; identity of individuals; socioeconomic characteristics; conditions of housing and household items; land ownership; geographic coordinates; and variables allowing for interoperability with user programmes and ministries.[6]

If the choice is made for Option (b), the variables selected must be those that the social protection sector wishes to track within the programmes. Unlike Option (a), these variables would not constitute a single questionnaire used by all the programmes, but would rather be integrated into each programme's questionnaires.

For both options, this stage must be carried out through a consultative process integrating the programmes to ensure ownership, with technical support from the ISTEEBU. Variables must be standardised among the integrated programmes and should correspond to the variables represented in the national surveys to the extent possible. Moreover, it is technically impossible for the Registry to include all variables from all programmes, as this would risk considerably weighing down the database, ultimately rendering it unusable.

2.5.2 Testing the questionnaire and analysing the quality and the usefulness of the data collected to inform the selected variables.

2.5.3 Development of a standard training manual for data collection teams.

2.6 Define the complaints/appeal and the data updating systems (duration: 2 to 6 months)

2.6.1 If Option (a) is chosen, the Registry would need a complaints and appeal management system linked with those from user programmes so as to enable referrals. It is recommended to adapt the flagship programme's system to

serve both it and the Registry, since it contains well-developed operational processes and a digital module in its MIS. However, each user programme must have its own system for handling specific complaints.

2.6.2 If Option (a) is adopted, household data must be updated in the Registry' database with a realistic frequency, which should not exceed every 4 years. This frequency should be defined by evaluating the administrative capacity, available resources, needs of the user programmes and trends in the evolution of variables. It is recommended to combine active search with on-demand self-declarations from households. Financial incentives and a deadline for self-declaration should be established to incentivise households to update their information.

2.6.3 If Option (b) is selected, data informing the common variables among the different user programmes must updated. Therefore, programmes are responsible for sending their updated data to the Registry. A deadline must be established according to the dynamics of the interventions of each programme. Ideally, it should not exceed 6 months for emergency programmes and 1 year for other types of programmes.

2.7 Establish a sustainable funding mechanism (ongoing)

2.7.1 Decide how the government will fund the Registry in the long term, including certain Registry-related costs in the national budget to ensure its sustainability. The funding could start with a gradual increase in the share of costs covered by the government. In the short and medium term, the government should consider financing less costly but nevertheless strategic components of the Registry, such as the coordination of stakeholders.

2.7.2 Development of a co-funding system for the Registry, with contributions from international partners and the government.

2.8 Set up the MIS and required infrastructure (8 to 12 months)

2.8.1 If Option (a) is adopted, it would be recommended to build its MIS based on the flagship programme's system, which already contains essential modules that can be adapted to serve the Registry' data collection and information management purposes. The pros of the flagship programme's MIS include a user-friendly interface for local staff, as well as functionalities for data analysis and visualisation, and for the development of monitoring and evaluation reports. Additionally, it was developed using a cloud-hosted server, which allows Burundi to minimise material procurement costs and benefit from a large, secure computing capacity.

2.8.2 The Registry's MIS must generate a social identification number for each registered individual, which would remain the same throughout their lives. Ideally, this identifier should be the unique identifier from the flagship programme. Other programmes and sectors should, over time, replace their own identifiers with the one from the Registry, enabling integration between different social protection programmes over the medium term, and data sharing and verification among other sectors in the long term.

2.8.3 Regardless of the selected option, a minimum infrastructure

must be set up at the central and local levels, including IT and office equipment. If Option (a) is chosen, more infrastructure would need to be deployed to the local level.

2.9 Develop human resources (ongoing)

2.9.1 New service providers must be hired and civil servants assigned to fill the following roles: IT management; oversight and coordination; communications management; household registration; local level representation; and monitoring, evaluation and data analysis.

2.9.2 Staff skills must be continuously developed across all territorial levels during the Registry's various stages of implementation. In addition to providing training opportunities, it is recommended for the team to be composed of a mix of consultants and civil servants. The latter would benefit from external expertise, ensuring capacity transfer in the long term. If Option (a) is chosen, representatives at the local level must be appointed and Registry-specific data collection teams assigned.

2.10 Develop the public information campaign (2 to 4 months)

2.10.1 If Option (a) is adopted, a national public information campaign must be carried out to raise awareness of target audiences about the existence of the Registry, the rights of registered individuals and the data collection and updating procedures. A national communication plan should be prepared, communication channels defined and a communication strategy developed aiming to reach the most marginalised individuals and groups.

2.11 Test phase and user support (4 to 12 months)

2.11.1 Once the legal framework, MIS and infrastructure are in place, the Registry should start enrolling households and sharing their data with user programmes to test data quality and make improvements to address any issues encountered.

3 Conclusion
The feasibility of the Registry is confirmed by Burundi meeting two essential conditions:

- **Political will**, as demonstrated by the commitment of the President of the Republic and by the creation of a steering committee.

- **Initial investment** by the national flagship programme in infrastructure and development of skills necessary for the Registry.

1. The programme intends to reach the entire poorest quintile of the population in its second phase (World Bank 2016).

2. This would allow, on the one hand, to identify redundancies across programmes targeting the same households to address the same risks and, on the other, to enable programmes that address different risks to reach the same households.

3. Programmes that use data shared by the Registry.

4. Costs were estimated by cross-checking information shared by international experts in the field, IT service providers, the Statistics and Economic Studies Institute of Burundi (ISTEEBU), and SEP/CNPS against costs detailed in budgets and audit reports of projects implemented in Burundi.

5. For example, food security analyses, satellite images and data collected by civil society organisations could be used.

6. E.g., the identifier of the beneficiary card, if the household is already registered in a programme.

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