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The Single Registry:
Two popular sayings and the names of things[1]

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Forgive me, dear reader and masters of social sciences, if I resort to the outdated use of biological analogies, but I find them useful here to understand the situation of Brazil's Single Registry by the end of 2022. Twelve years after the launch of the latest version of the Registry, which is still used today, it was chronically obsolescent, a condition whose treatment had been neglected for many years.

To make matters worse, the Registry suffered at least two cardiorespiratory arrests between 2021 and 2022. These were caused by the adverse incentives of the monetary floors of the *Auxílio Brasil* programme, in a context beset by rampant misinformation and drastic underfunding of the Unified Social Assistance System (SUAS). The Registry was on the brink of a shallow grave due to these arrests, which rendered it into a registry of *isolated* individuals, instead of individuals placed *within* their households and territories.

This process resulted in the number of single-person households benefiting from the former *Auxílio Brasil* rising from 15 per cent in 2021 to a staggering 27 per cent by December 2022. The Single Registry, Brazil's largest social inclusion gateway—used by over 30 social programmes and built over two decades—had floundered within two years.

By January 2023, it was clear that there was no other choice: before addressing obsolescence, it was necessary to stop the cardiorespiratory arrests. After all, to succeed, first it is necessary to survive. This required working on rectifying information regarding household composition and relied heavily on resuming federative coordination to rebuild the Single Registry within SUAS.

To start this assessment, it was necessary to reach an agreement with the Federal Public Defender's Office, which, in late 2022 had requested the suspension of Registry update initiatives that would lead to disruptions in cash transfer payments. The courts accepted the Defender's argument, according to which the actions carried out by the previous administration after the electoral period to update and rectify the information in the Single Registry had no adequate planning and did not properly inform households, municipalities or states.

After this agreement was reached, two initiatives were carried out to correct the Registry. The first had to do with income, identifying about 1 million inclusion errors in the former *Auxilio Brasil*, which was later redesigned and rebranded as *Bolsa Familia*—the programme's original name. The second initiative regarded household composition and was active from March to December 2023. These initiatives were agreed upon within SUAS. For the household composition correction initiative, the Federal government allocated an additional BRL 199.5 million to municipalities and states. This funding made it possible to reduce the share of single-person households in the cash transfer programme from 27 per cent to 19 per cent—bringing it much closer to the historical average—and to encourage *active search actions* for municipalities to enrol those most in need.

In tandem with the household composition assessment, other measures were taken to improve the Single Registry's data intelligence and regulations, as well as to train management staff. This led to the exclusion of the registries of 900,000 households that had not updated their data since 2016/2017, even when explicitly and officially requested to do so, and of an additional 600,000 deceased individuals. These actions comprised those who, despite figuring in the Single Registry, no longer benefitted from social programmes.

1. This article was originally published in Portuguese (Bartholo 2024).
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It is worth highlighting the innovative character of the integration of the Single Registry with the National Social Information Registry (CNIS) and the *Presença* (Attendance) System. The CNIS provides data on social security benefits and formal employment, and its integration with the Single Registry made it possible to update the income records of more than 18.5 million individuals, resulting in savings to *Bolsa Família* of around BRL 7.8 billion in 2023. The *Presença* System records the bimonthly school attendance of *Bolsa Família* beneficiaries, and its integration with the Registry allowed for updating the school and educational attainment level data of seven million low-income students. These actions contributed to improving the Single Registry, steering it towards greater data interoperability and contributing to the quality of life of registered individuals—preventing them from spending their time and resources to visit a public office to furnish data that the government already has access to.

Additionally, a partnership was established with the Ministry of Management and Innovation to modernise the Registry, and the Single Registry Observatory was launched, a user-friendly tool for active transparency and planning, allowing for the assessment of the multiple dimensions of poverty affecting households, referenced in each Social Assistance Reference Centre (CRAS) at the municipality, state, or national levels. This tool allows, for example, for each municipality to know how many registered households lacking access to sanitation, or with people with disabilities, are referenced in each Centre. The *Bolsa Família* and Single Registry Monitoring Network was also launched, tasked with improving the efficiency of public spending without criminalising poverty or implying that inclusion errors are mostly interpreted as fraud.

Regulatory standards were reviewed to ensure higher quality in the identification of each registered individual, and substantial investments were made to resume training for individuals involved in Registry management across all Brazilian municipalities. A Manager dashboard and the "Registry in Motion" publication series were launched on the Single Registry Management Portal, providing real-time administrative information, quick courses, live sessions, and podcasts, contributing to the training of over 10,000 Registry staff throughout 2023. Furthermore, a partnership was established with the National School of Public Administration (ENAP) and the Office of the Comptroller General (CGU) to start an innovation lab, which will enable designing and testing Registry improvements together with the population.

These actions are made possible by various enabling factors: federative coordination; incentives for municipalities to propose *active search* strategies; monitoring; information sharing; and extensive dialogue. The Single Registry is fed and shaped in each CRAS, in each registration office, in each of Brazil's municipalities. Every day, thousands of people are interviewed by over 50,000 trained staff, coordinated by the social assistance sector within municipalities. All of this must happen before the Single Registry can become an administrative record database; to forget this basic fact is to overlook the essential conditions that enable the Registry's very existence.

Such initiatives have contributed to the Single Registry breathing again in 2023 and entering a path of improvement and innovation. It is now necessary to keep steering it along this path: invest in structuring the Single Registry network and continuous staff training; inform the population about its rules and criteria; update its coverage estimates as soon as new Census microdata are available; update and modernise the system; make inroads in initiatives related to data integration and data intelligence; and assess the need for changes in the registration form. And, of course, keep continually and permanently reviewing outdated and potentially inconsistent registrations.

After all, if the Single Registry is a reflection of life, which is dynamic, there is no reason to think that initiatives to correct and improve it should be stagnant and incidental.

To this end, it is necessary to always uphold republican goals above corporate interests, and continue fighting to increase the budget for the decentralised Single Registry network. Federal co-financing for this network is still far below what is necessary to ensure the requisite structure for a registry that covers over 40 million households and feeds over 1.5 per cent of Brazil's gross domestic product (GDP) into *Bolsa Família* benefit payments. Increasing investment in the Single Registry simultaneously contributes to poverty reduction and to greater efficiency in public spending.

Restoring the Single Registry to its rightful place as a globally renowned social technology is not a quick or easy task. It requires reviewing concepts; broad testing; systems specification; database validation; and reviewing materials and training processes for 5,570 municipalities and over 50,000 practitioners. It involves changing a system which comprises hundreds of millions of individual records and impacts the payment of the country's largest cash transfer programme. For all this to happen free of significant risks, it is necessary to strike a balance between two wise popular sayings: "haste makes waste" and "perfection is the enemy of good".

These continuous efforts to improve the Single Registry must be conducted responsibly, as the Registry involves the concrete life of millions of people living in contexts of scarcity and is beholden to a crucial objective: to serve as an open door for social inclusion. Therefore, proper nomenclature matters.

It is borderline deceitful to approach Single Registry course corrections from the shallow and prejudiced perspective of 'combing through' vulnerable households, accusing them of being scammers or dependent on the State. One does not use lice combs to 'clean' social registries—i.e., scrutinise vulnerable people, as it is commonly said in Brazil—simply because people are not insects. It is possible to comb through fraud, which must be identified and combated daily.

But most inclusion errors do not characterise fraud; rather, they comprise households teetering on the brink of poverty, struggling to survive. We must remember that poverty is dynamic. And if all of us, from the base to the top of the income distribution pyramid, *depend* on public policies, there is no need to reserve the term 'dependents' only for those whom the Brazilian State took longest to support.

The name of things matters because all people matter. Therefore, actions to correct and improve the Single Registry must first and foremost be considered as a way to feed it better and more reliable information, clearly highlighting the needs of Brazil's poorest populations and allowing the government to understand and act on the gaps in social protection that prevent people from eating, living and socialising decently, and from sleeping without the spectre of poverty crushing their dreams.

Reference:

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