ISPA Quality Assurance protocols

The ISPA tools are based on the cumulative knowledge, experience and perspectives of the initiative's partner agencies, including the world's leading social protection experts and are therefore considered to be of considerable quality. Moreover, ISPA is committed to guarantee high technical standards in the application of its various tools as well. Therefore, Quality Assurance (QA) protocols will be developed (and submitted for the approval of the Executive Group). The objectives of the QA protocols are twofold: i) Ensure that ISPA assessments follow a standard process and methodology thus allowing for comparability of results over time within countries, ii) ensure that ISPA assessment and country reports are technically sound thus ensuring confidence in the findings and iii) ensure high quality of the tools.

QA protocols should be applied to (i) the ISPA tool application process, ii) the TORs for the Assessment team that will carry out the in-country application of the ISPA tool(s), and (iii) to the country report produced by the Assessment Team (AT). While the first two aim to validate the process that needs to take place for the implementation of an ISPA assessment, the third seeks to guarantee accuracy and technically soundness of the report and endorsement of the partner agencies providing technical assistance to implementing government agencies.

(I) Proposed quality assurance protocol elements for the ISPA tool application process

a. **Clear agreement on the process:** The lead government agency has a clear understanding of the objectives, advantages, scope and limitations of the ISPA tool to be applied as well as of the process, time and resources implied in the application and in particular of its role in the process. In the case of an ISPA tool application that is supported by ISPA international agencies, a written agreement is reached between participating ISPA agencies and the lead government agency on the process and intended outcomes.

b. **Preparatory phase**: Is thorough preparation time planned into the assessment process including a thorough pre-field-phase desk research and preparation before in-country interviews and research (e.g. 80/20 ratio). In many cases basic questions can be addressed and clarified upfront, which ensures precious time with national stakeholders is reserved for specific questions, which cannot be clarified by desk research.

c. **Composition of the assessment team**: Does the composition of the assessment team reflect the variety of sectors, perspectives and experiences of national and international (bilateral, multilateral) partners in the respective country – and thereby enable a coordinated assessment?

d. **Ownership and participation:** are the essential national stakeholders identified, informed (in time) and is their participation throughout the assessment process ensured (providing inputs, data and information up-front, discussing of preliminary findings, informed of results and follow-up activities)? At least two rounds of multi-stakeholder consultations were carried out at national level (one to inform about ISPA and consult with stakeholders and one to present and discuss preliminary findings). The draft report was revised on the basis of the discussions during the consultation.

e. **Method-mix**: is a 360 degree perspective (international databases, national databases, technical documents, qualitative interviews with key stakeholders) adopted for a thorough assessment or is methodologically limited approach indicated?

f. **Country context**: The tool (in particular the questionnaire and assessment matrix) are adapted to the country context at the beginning of the exercise in light of agreed objectives, scope and priorities discussed in the agreement (see (a)).

g. **Access to date/information**: Are all – for the respective tool – relevant national and international databases identified and their relative merit considered in the process (e.g. ASPIRE; WHO's Global Health, etc.)?

h. **Communication**: Does the TOR include a rundown of whom (ISPA partners in the country, national partners etc.) when to inform and to brief and debrief?

i. **Interagency:** Development partners are invited to participate in the ISPA assessment process through the ISPA secretariat

j. **Formation of the assessment team**: The composition of the ISPA assessment team and the reviewers was decided through an interagency process involving at least 2 international and 2 national institutions with important involvement in SP issues.

k. **Training:** ISPA assessment team members and national stakeholders supporting the assessment received a training or information material on the ISPA tool at the beginning of the assessment.

l. **Standardization:** The assessment process followed the ISPA tool implementation guidelines.

(II)   ISPA quality assurance for the TORs for the Assessment Team

The TORs state the main goals, activities and responsibilities of team members and participant institutions during the implementation of the ISPA assessment. In close consultation with the requesting government, the TORs should be jointly prepared by the the government-leading agency and the ISPA agency leading the particular application of the IPSA tool (typically the DP agency that received the government request or proposed the assessment to the government). T

The TORs should include at least:

- **Background**: Brief description of the country´s SP context and status, including the main policies, programs administrative arrangements in place. In particular, it should provide information on the particular motivation to carry out the ISPA assessment and any specific government needs or interest in the exercise. The TORs need to confirm that there was an initial inception meeting with key national counterparts and that the ISPA tool was well understood and there was genuine interest for its application. Also the TORs may inform about the process that was implemented to inform other ISPA agencies about the interest of conducting a particular assessment.

- **Objective:** To prepare an assessment of the given system, program or delivery mechanisms in the chosen country using the ISPA tool (mention any particular government needs and interests or areas of focus if applicable) as an input to drafting a country report that serves as a base for policy dialogue and identification of possible change interventions / reform options.

- **Scope/coverage:** When possible the TOR need to be clear about the programs/ schemes to be evaluated. Also, the levels of the government to be assessed should be clearly defined: central (national) government, including autonomous agencies, and/or local (sub-national) governments. List of relevant stakeholders that should participate and to which to seek involvement/endorsement.

- **Implementation arrangements:** This section must describe the ISPA assessment implementation arrangements, including the roles and responsibilities of the governmental leading agency, international agencies, assessment team, assessment team leader, and the steering committee.

- **Team composition:** Consistently with the ISPA principles, the assessment team (AT) should be composed of qualified staff in the subject matter and shall have the support and participation of the government focal point(s). It is desirable that the AT is composed of at least two ISPA agencies. Before carrying out the assessment the AT should have access to the training materials on the particular tools offered by the Coordination Team.

- **Financing of the assessment:** Projected costs involved. The TORs should include who will cover the costs of the assessment (government officials and/or consultants' time, travel, logistics, materials, incidentals, costs for workshops and consultation meetings). Costs may vary depending on the scope and nature of the assessment, the predicted ease of obtaining information, the extent of travel involved (size and structure of the country), the existence of language barriers, the need for consultants, and whether deeper fieldwork will be required.

- **Process and timelines (the process has to be described/summarized)**: The ToRs should set targets and milestones with specific tentative dates, etc. while allowing enough flexibility for unforeseeable tasks and delays and provide extra time for filling information gaps.

(III)   ISPA quality assurance for the Country Report

The country report should detail the following:

- **Compliance with the implementation guidelines**: The assessment process that is briefly described in the report needs to show evidence that the general guidance for the implementation of ISPA tools were followed by the assessment team.

- **Executive summary**: There is a draft report containing an executive summary of key findings.

- **Assessment criteria**: The assessment report applies the standardized criteria and assessment methodology defined in the ISPA tool

- **Methodology and information sources**: The report describes methodology for the preparation of the report, including information and data sources and related gaps, interviews, constraints, how contradictions between different data sources have been dealt with, methodology to conduct focus groups, etc.

- **ISPA tool adaptation**: The report contains an explanation of any modifications/ adaptations of the ISPA tool and justification for any changes (in particular of the questionnaire, criteria or assessment methodology) and it defines the scope of the assessment (e.g. selection or focus on specific SP programmes, administration levels etc.)

- **QA arrangements**: Description of the management and quality assurance arrangements in the report.

- **External review mechanism:** A peer review mechanism (tbd: internal in ISPA partner organizations or external consultants) of a mínimum of two experts for the respective assessed SP issue but did not participate in the assessment team will be tasked to review the country report with the perspective of appropriate application of the above mentioned lenses and the resulting policy options (long term and short term).

- **Reference and links to other ISPA tools**: The report refers to / discusses potential utility (or not) of other ISPA tools

- **Internal validity:** The report is internally coherent and does not include contradictory messages.

- **External validity:** The report is consistent with related other key authoritative sources and documents

- **Thorough:** The report takes into account all available and credible sources of information and evidence

- **Plausible:** Findings are backed with sound arguments and sufficient evidence

Endorsement of the ISPA Country Reports

The ISPA Coordination Team will formally endorse Final ISPA country reports that fulfil the above criteria by means of:

- Issuing a statement to the lead agency that the report is the end result of a ISPA assessment process that has met the ISPA quality assurance criteria;

- Authorizing the use of the ISPA logo on the report's front page – while displaying on the ISPA website the exact requirements for obtaining this stamp/logo.

- Prominently marking reports that have obtained process endorsement

- on the ISPA website hyperlinks of published report

(IV)   ISPA quality assurance for tool development (content and process)

- **Interagency development of the tool**: The tool is developed through a working group that is open for participation to all ISPA agencies as well as additional specialized agencies pertinent for the subject matter of the tool (a minimum of three agencies should participate). One or two agencies are leading the tool development.

- **Structure**: ISPA tool contain the following elements:

- **A "What matters guidance note"** that explains the overall logic of the tool, in particular the questionnaire and assessment methodology, provides information on the conceptual background and how to use the different parts of the tool

- **A questionnaire** (data collection tool) for the collection of the necessary quantitative and qualitative data needed to carry out the assessment

- **An assessment methodology** that defines key performance criteria for carrying out the assessment and provides key indicators or benchmarks in table format to assess the system/programme/branch/delivery or administrative mechanism along these criteria

- A **country assessment report outline** that provides a standardized structures that country reports should follow

- **Coherence with other ISPA tools**: Tool development should ensure coherence and consistency with existing ISPA tools in terms of definition and use of key terminology in particular as regards the "key areas" and "assessment criteria".

- **Good practices**: Tools should be based on good practices and refer to these in the "What matters guidance note" to explain and justify the approach laid out in the tool.

- **Piloting:** A zero-draft of the tool should be piloted in a minimum of two countries before a final first version of the tool is published. The pilot should serve to refine both the process of ISPA tool application and the technical content of the tool. The pilot should be open to all working group members for participation.

- **Review and approval**: Once the final version of the tool is agreed in the working group, the tool is circulated for comments to the Working Group members and approved by the ISPA Executive Group.