

Concept note: ISPA Quality Assurance Protocols

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Objectives of ISPA quality assurance (QA) processes:

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 to ensure:

1. Ensure high quality of the methodological framework of the tools.
2. Ensure that ISPA assessments follow a standard process and methodology thus allowing for comparability of results over time.
3. Ensure that ISPA assessment and country reports are technically sound thus ensuring confidence in the findings.

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 technical soundness of the report and endorsement of the partner agencies providing technical assistance to implementing government agencies. **In addition it is planned to work in (iv) a QA protocol for tool development.**

Different forms to apply ISPA tools:

1. Self-assessment: Government decides to complete the assessment on its own. In this case the assessment tool is "open source" and can be fully country-led without the involvement of any international agency. In this case ISPA coordination desk does not hold any responsibility for the quality and the content of the report.
2. Demand-driven: Governments interested in carrying out an ISPA assessment can request support of international agencies. In this case, a government will contact an agency or the UN resident coordinator to support or carry out an ISPA assessment. This request is transmitted to the UN Country Team and to the ISPA Coordination Team (Washington and Geneva desks) that channels the request and helps to coordinate national stakeholders' and development partners' participation and engagement for an interagency and multi-sector implementation of the particular ISPA tool.
3. Supply driven: An international agency proposes an ISPA tool to a Government and supports the implementation. Again, the agency initiating this process should invite national stakeholders and other agencies to participate in the implementation. The government remains in the lead for the entire process.

ISPA QA Checklist

(I) 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 government-leading agency and the ISPA agency leading the particular application of the IPISA 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.

(II) ISPA quality assurance check list – process

- The process of producing the ISPA assessment satisfies all of the following criteria:
- **National ownership:** An inception meeting with key national counterparts ensured that the ISPA tool was well understood and there was genuine interest for its application
- **Interagency:** Development partners were invited to participate in the ISPA assessment process through the ISPA secretariat
- **Formation of the assessment team:** The composition of the ISPA assessment team and the reviewers was decided through an interagency process involving at least 3 international and 3 national/government actors
- **Training:** Ideally, ISPA assessment team members and national stakeholders supporting the assessment received a training or at least received information material on the ISPA tool prior to the assessment
- **Participation:** At least two multi-stakeholder workshops 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 workshop.
- **Multi-stakeholder:** The list of stakeholders invited to the workshops was agreed through an interagency process involving at least 3 international and 3 national actors.
- **Timing:** In a supply driven assessments, basic information and data are collected prior to interviews with key national stakeholders.
- **Information:** The draft report containing an executive summary of key findings was circulated to stakeholders a minimum of three days before the workshop. In addition to participating in the workshop, all agencies should have the opportunity to also provide feedback and comments on the draft report and filled-in assessment tables in writing and the revised report will take these written comments into consideration.
- **Standardization:** The assessment process followed the ISPA tool implementation guidelines

(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 national and international 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.
- **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
- **Circulation:**
 - V_1 of the country report was submitted to the three agreed peer reviewers
 - V_1 of the country report (including the executive summary) was circulated to the national stakeholders a minimum of one week before the deadline for the submission of comments.
 - A revised final draft (V_1.1.) was forwarded again to peer reviewers including a table showing the response to all comments provided by them as well as the comments and changes made national stakeholders.

Endorsement of ISPA 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
 - in the assessment database,
 - on the status list of ISPA assessments (finalized).

(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 (overview of findings) 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 standardized structures that country reports should follow
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- **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 SPIAC-B members and approved by the Executive Group.

ISPA principles

i. ISPA tools should be led by qualified staff in the subject matter under the leadership of the government (country ownership).

ii. ISPA tools should be adapted to national circumstances, objectives and interpretation.

Each SP system operates in a different social, demographic, economic, cultural and political environment and needs to address the resulting specific country context. Careful consideration should be given in each ISPA tool application as to if and how the assessment tool needs to be adapted to the country context. In particular specificities in the design of the existing SP system, policymaking process or administrative system of the country should be considered, as well as the priorities and needs expressed in the country request for ISPA application.

iii. The implementation of ISPA tools should be based on broad stakeholder participation to ensure wide ownership as well as encourage interagency cooperation

ISPA tools under the leadership of the relevant SP government institution(s), should involve in all steps of the implementation process all relevant stakeholders engaged in SP and poverty reduction efforts: ministry in charge of the specific SP component to be assessed, other relevant ministries and agencies, development partners (DP), social partners, civil society organizations -CSO-, academia, etc. The tools aim to facilitate improved cooperation not just among national institutions but also between different development partners and the tool application should be interagency, i.e. open to all interested international organizations.

iv. The implementation of ISPA tools should be adequately planned:

The implementation of any ISPA tool needs to be adequately planned, allocating sufficient time, as well as financial and human resources for collecting relevant information and undertaking the assessment. The team appointed to carry out the assessment should have a sound understanding of the main features of the SP issue being evaluated.

In the planning of ISPA tools implementation, the assessment team should at least:

- Agree on the Terms of Reference (TORs).
- Ensure adequate timing and resources for the implementation of the task (including both human and monetary resources). Although ISPA tools are meant to provide rapid assessments, depending on the country context, data availability, complexity of the SP system, nature of the national dialogue and policy processes, the application of each ISPA tool may take different times.
- When needed, receive adequate training from the ISPA Coordination Team in the purpose, content, assessment criteria and modus operandi of the ISPA tool to be used, prior to the data collection and assessment phases.

v. ISPA tools should be implemented periodically and can be complemented by other specialized ISPA tools

It is desired that the ISPA assessments are conducted periodically (for example, every three to five years) to allow tracking developments over time. In addition, if the assessment carried out identifies areas of the SP system that may require more detailed analysis and the use of other ISPA specialized tools may be useful to address or further examine weaknesses identified during the ISPA assessment.