Social Welfare Information System SWIS (Social Card) in the service of improving social and child protection in Montenegro

Ida Kolinović, PhD, social worker, Independent Advisor
Vesna Vujošević, electrical engineer, Head of the Department
Biljana Bulatović, electronics engineer, Independent Advisor

IT Department
Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare of Montenegro

ida.kolinovic@mrs.gov.me
vesna.vujosevic@mrs.gov.me
biljana.bulatovic@mrs.gov.me

Executive Summary - The Social Welfare Information System - SWIS (Social Card) is the capital project of the Government of Montenegro. It enabled the social and child protection reform enforcement, aimed at providing quality social protection to the poor and socially vulnerable. SWIS has been operational since January 2015 in all Social Welfare Centres and today it includes almost all business processes in social and child protection (cash transfers, services, e-registers, domestic violence database, placement institutions, etc.). Given that a significant period has passed since the introduction of this complex Information System, it was important to hear the opinion of professionals from Social Welfare Centres about its relevance, usefulness, its contribution to their professional engagement and to a fairer social and child protection system. This paper presents the survey results.

Key Words:

Information System, benefits and bottlenecks, social and child protection, Social Welfare Centres

Introduction

Digital revolution imposed the need to modernize the social and child protection system [1]. New technological environment has affected the work of professionals and created new opportunities for addressing social welfare challenges [2]. The key elements of the digital transformation of the social protection system include not only technologies, but also people, i.e. (potential) users of the System. The Social Welfare Information System in Montenegro is presented below, as well as results of the Survey on the experience and satisfaction of the system users.

Integrated Social Welfare Information System (ISWIS) - Social Card is the capital project of the Government of Montenegro, implemented with UNDP's support 12 May 2012 to 31 December 2023 (approx. project value EUR 3,854,138.00). This project is the backbone of the social and child protection system reform, aimed at providing social protection of the highest quality to the poor and socially vulnerable, through both cash transfers and social and child protection services. It has supported the preparation of the new legal framework, enhancement of institutional and human resource capacities, and establishment of the information and communication infrastructure and the complex Information System itself. The System has been implemented at 35 physical sites in Montenegro and supports interoperability (automated data exchange) with nine national institutions (through 18 web services). A lot of effort and hard work have been invested in this complex, long-term project, by all employees in the social and child protection sector, UNDP, the Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare and many other national authorities with which data are exchanged in an automated manner. The system has been further expanded and improved since 2015 (when SWIS was put into operation in all Social Welfare Centres) until today. Nowadays, it includes key business processes in social and child protection: cash transfers (19 types of cash transfers, as well as 11 transfers within veteran and disability protection), case management with procedures (social and child protection services), a unique electronic database for domestic violence, seven key public institutions for placement of beneficiaries, the Institute for Social and Child Protection, e-registers and a Business Intelligence module [3]. Given that a significant period has passed since SWIS was first introduced in Social Welfare Centres, it was important to learn about the experiences, opinions and views of professionals on benefits and bottlenecks of SWIS in the social and child protection system, which has been the goal of the survey presented below.

Survey on Social Welfare Centres Professional Workers Users' Experience regarding SWIS

The survey was carried out in January 2023 with the goal to learn about benefits and bottlenecks of the Social Welfare Information System of Montenegro, from the perspective of those who use it the most in their daily work. A questionnaire with 31 questions was used to obtain relevant data. It was completed by 110 professionals at Social Welfare Centres from all over Montenegro. Participation in the Survey was voluntary and anonymous. The purpose of the Survey was presented to all respondents, and the questionnaire was distributed online via a link.

The sample included 110 professionals employed at Social Welfare Centres all over Montenegro. More than three quarters of respondents were women (78.2%) and about a fifth were men (21.8%). Computer skills were rated as "excellent" and "very good" by more than half of the respondents (54.6%), "good" by 32.7%, average by 12.7%, while none of the respondents assessed their computer skills as "bad". About two-fifths of respondents (38.2%) use a computer daily for private purposes, more than one-quarter several times a week (27.3%), 8.2% several times a month, 2.7% several times a year, less than a fifth do not use a computer for private purposes (18.2%), and 5.5% did not respond.

More than four-fifths (82%) of respondents have worked at their Social Welfare Centres for more than five years, which is significant from the point of comparing the situation before and after the implementation of SWIS (Graph 1).
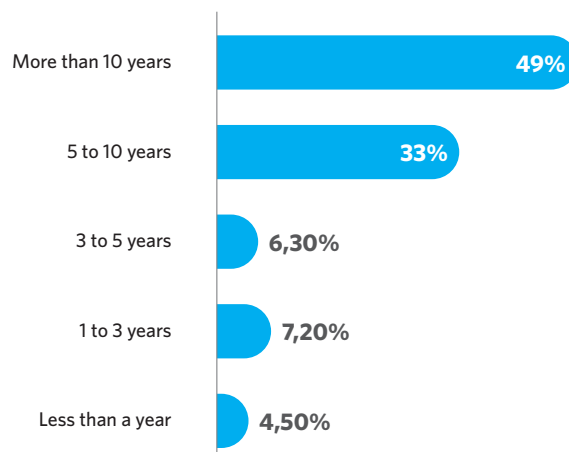

Graph 1. Structure of respondents by their years of service at SWCs

The survey involved SWC professionals on different job positions, with some employees covering several positions at the same time: supervisors 6.4%, lawyers 19.1%, SWC professionals for cash transfers 21.8%, case managers 23.6%, managers 20%, reception staff and others 27.3% (Graph 2). More than a third of respondents (35.5%) stated that they participated in the development of the Social Welfare Information System. This percentage includes those who have been working at the Social Welfare Centres for more than five years, but mostly those who have been working there for more than ten years.

Graph 2. Structure of respondents by their job positions

More than four-fifths of respondents are of the opinion that the Information System has ensured transparency, while a large share of them, 72.7%, believe that SWIS has ensured compliance with laws and secondary legislation (Graph 3). It is important to mention the fact that more than three quarters (76.4%) state that SWIS has prevented or reduced the possibility of making errors while they work. About five-sixths believe that it has made the oversight of operations of different offices easier (83.7%). Operations of different offices are overseen by managers, so it is worth noting that the managers, who participated in this research, overwhelmingly say that SWIS has made the oversight of operations of different offices significantly easier (91%).
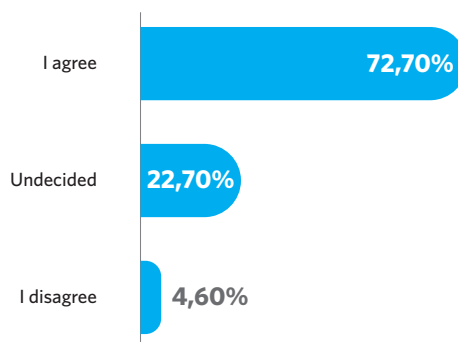
Graph 3. SWIS has insured compliance with laws and secondary legislation

According to the opinion of more than half of the respondents, SWIS has improved provision of assistance and support to beneficiaries of social and child protection (62.7%) (Graph 4). More than half of respondents (60.9%) believe that SWIS has facilitated better and faster access to social and child protection services, and about five-sixths (83.6%) believe that it has enabled better and faster access to cash transfers.
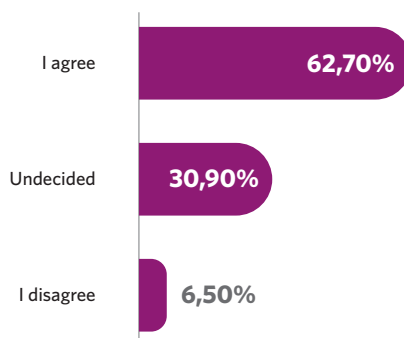
Graph 4. SWIS has improved provision of assistance and support to beneficiaries of social and child protection

More than half of respondents point out that the SWIS has significantly relieved the work of employees at the Social Welfare Centres (64.5%) (Graph 5). If we look at the respondents who have been working at those Centres for more than five years, 51% of them believe that SWIS has significantly relieved their work at the Social Welfare Centres.

About two-thirds of respondents believe that SWIS has shortened the time of handling documents (65.4%), made it easier to track actions taken in different cases (84.5%), as well as the status of cases, history and documentation related to a beneficiary (86.4%).

I agree — **64,50%**

Undecided — **23,00%**
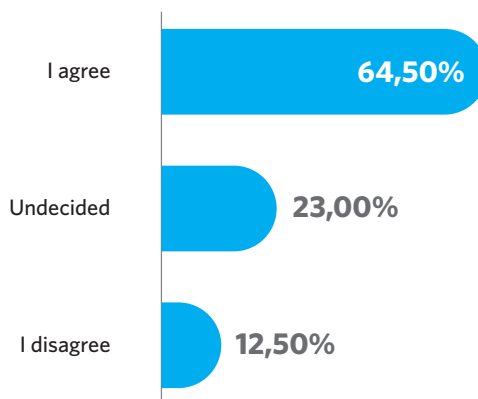
I disagree — **12,50%**
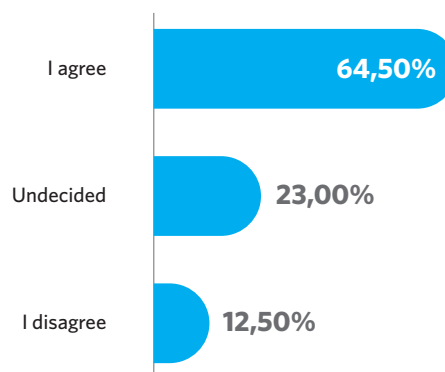
Graph 5. SWIS has significantly facilitated the work of employees at Social Welfare

About five-sixths (83.6%) say that SWIS has ensured greater individual responsibility in their work, 90% say that using SWIS has made it easier to review data and information about each individual beneficiary, more than two-thirds (68.1%) that it has contributed to a better quality of staff performance.

Graphs 6 and 7 show that a large number of respondents believe that the Social Welfare Information System has improved the entire system of social and child protection (71.9%), and about four-sixths are of the opinion that SWIS has ensured the adequacy of social benefits and fairness (65.4%).
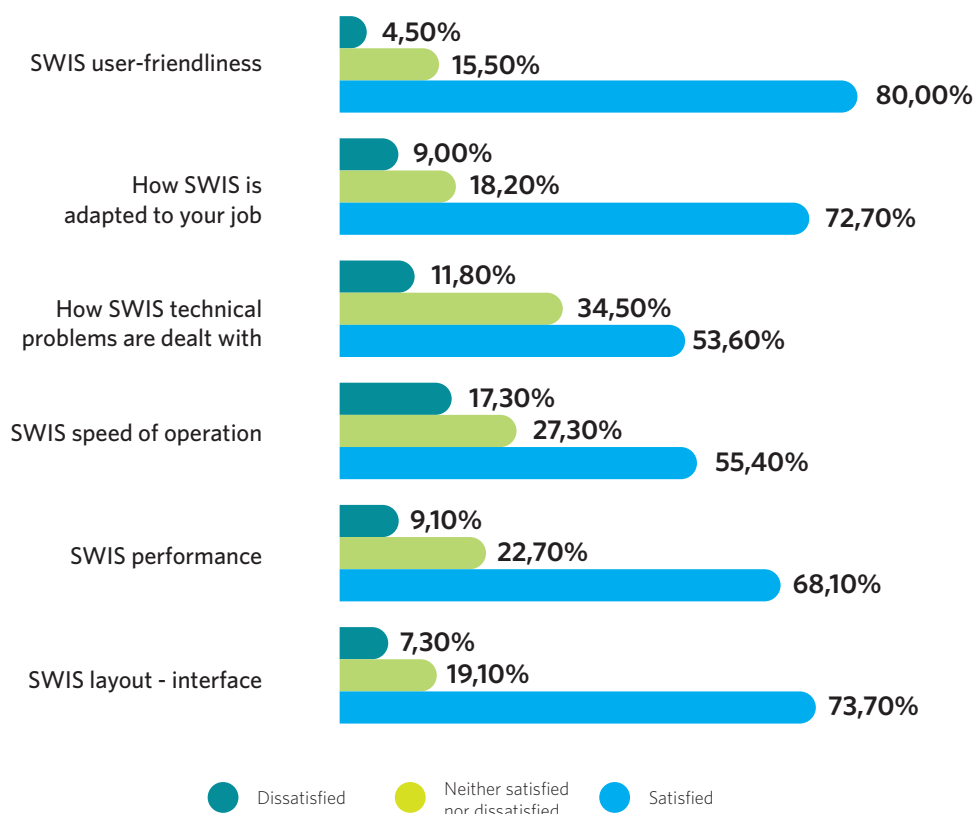
I agree — **71,90%**

Undecided — **20,00%**

I disagree — **8,20%**
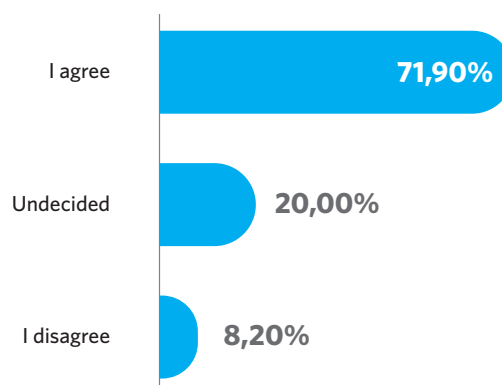
Graph 6. SWIS has improved the entire system of social and child protection

I agree **64,50%**

Undecided **23,00%**

I disagree **12,50%**

Graph 7. SWIS has ensured the adequacy of social benefits and fairness

Graph 8 clearly shows that four-fifths of professionals (80%) at Social Welfare Centres are satisfied with the System's user-friendliness, about three-quarters with its interface (73.7%) and how SWIS is adapted to their work at Social Work Centres (72.7%), more than two-thirds are satisfied with its performance (68.1%), and more than half with the speed at which SWIS operates (55.4%) and technical problems are solved (53.6%).

SWIS user-friendliness — **4,50%** / **15,50%** / **80,00%**

How SWIS is adapted to your job — **9,00%** / **18,20%** / **72,70%**

How SWIS technical problems are dealt with — **11,80%** / **34,50%** / **53,60%**

SWIS speed of operation — **17,30%** / **27,30%** / **55,40%**

SWIS performance — **9,10%** / **22,70%** / **68,10%**

SWIS layout - interface — **7,30%** / **19,10%** / **73,70%**

● Dissatisfied   ● Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied   ● Satisfied

Graph 8. Staff's level of satisfaction

More than half of respondents cannot imagine their future work at Social Welfare Centres without SWIS (59%) (Graph 9). If these respondents are observed by their years of service at SWCs, then a conclusion can be drawn that 61.1% of SWC professionals who have been working for more than five years, and 50% of those who have been working for less than five years, cannot imagine their work at the centre without the Social Welfare Information System. With regard to different positions at the centres, 86% of lawyers, 71% of SWC professionals for cash transfers, 69% of managers, 43% of supervisors, 31% of case managers from the Survey cannot imagine their work at SWCs without this IS.

18%   **23%**   **59%**

● No   ● Yes   ● I don't know
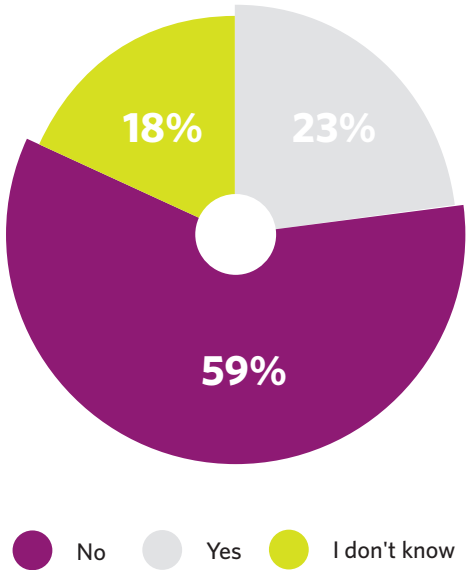
Graph 9. Can you imagine your future work at the Social Welfare Centre without SWIS?

Discussion and conclusion

More than 90% of CSW professionals from Social Welfare Centres believe that the Social Welfare Information System has enabled better and faster access to cash transfers, easier tracking of operations of different offices, as well as of documentation, data on beneficiaries and handling of cases. More than two-thirds are of the opinion that SWIS has improved the provision of assistance and support to the beneficiaries of social and child protection, that it has ensured transparency and compliance with laws and secondary legislation, and prevented or reduced the possibility of making errors. In this context, it is worth noting that the procedures in SWIS were set in accordance with laws and regulations, with numerous controls and notifications.
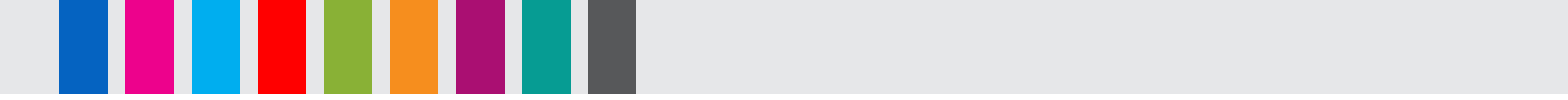
Around four-sixths of respondents are of the opinion that SWIS has ensured the adequacy of social benefits and fairness. In this context, it is worth mentioning that SWIS has actually contributed to the reduction of the "inclusion error" and eliminated many people who are not entitled to cash transfers. About three quarters of respondents are satisfied SWIS has been adapted to their job at the Social Welfare Centres, which was probably fostered by some form of involvement of a significant number of SWC professionals in SWIS development, i.e. involvement of those with most work experience (more than 5 and 10 years of experience). Although around half of the respondents rate their computer skills as "very good" or "excellent", a significantly higher number (80%) say that they are satisfied with the user-friendliness of SWISS, which indicates that the System was particularly designed to facilitate and improve the work of professionals at SWCs.

If viewed from the perspective of jobs/positions at Social Welfare Centres, lawyers and professionals for cash transfers could least imagine their future work at SWCs without

SWIS, while case managers could imagine it the most. It should be noted that case management is a very complex procedure in social protection, which SWCs did not previously conduct without an information system, because it was introduced in parallel with the System's implementation. Employees often believe that such a complex process was imposed on them by SWIS, and not by the relevant Rules of Procedure with prescribed forms. All procedures are set up in SWIS to guide a SWC professional to each subsequent step (with automatic recording of the start and end date of the task) that, thanks to the System, cannot be skipped, which among other things ensures compliance with laws and rules of procedure.

A conclusion can be drawn that employees at Social Welfare Centres in Montenegro are highly satisfied with the Social Welfare Information System. This Survey constitutes a significant part of the evaluation of results of this complex project. The Integrated Social Welfare Information System (ISWIS) is a project that serves as a model in terms of functionality and integration, and is recognized as such in EU progress reports. In short, the following key results have been accomplished through the project: optimization of budget allocations for social and child protection through improved targeting of cash transfers; improved access to cash transfers and social and child protection services; improved quality and monitoring of the provision of social and child protection services; reformed and modernized social and child protection sector; availability of data and statistics, transparency, quality of work, mechanism to track handling of cases; reform of the legal and institutional framework and continuous capacity building. Major resources have been invested in this complex, long-term project: time, enormous effort and work of all employees in the social and child protection sector, from UNDP, the Ministry of Labour

and Social Welfare and many other national authorities that data are exchanged with in an automated manner. The Social Card - SWIS Project has been extended through the "e-Social" Project (implementation period 30 October 2022 to 31 December 2027), which is extremely important for continuation of the social and child protection system reform, with the overall aim of achieving greater satisfaction of citizens with social and child protection in Montenegro. Through a long-term contract (implementation and maintenance) until 31 December 2027, in addition to the development/ upgrade and maintenance of the application software (additional interoperability, e-services, portal, enhanced ICT security), the project will also procure additional server equipment for the central location, license extension, regular replacement supply of computer equipment (computers, monitors, printers , scanners...) for all Social Welfare Centres and public institutions for placement operating within social and child protection.

Literature

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ABSTRACT

The Social Welfare Information System - SWIS (Social Card) is the capital project of the Montenegrin Government. It enabled enforcement of the social and child protection system reform, aimed at providing quality social protection to the poor and socially vulnerable. SWIS has been operational in all Social Welfare Centres since January 2015 and now includes almost all business processes in social and child protection (cash transfers, social services, e-registers, database for domestic violence, placement institutions, etc.). Given that a significant period has passed since the introduction of this complex software tool, it was important to hear the opinion of SWC professionals about its relevance, usefulness and its contribution to their professional work and to a fairer system of social and child protection. This article introduces results of the Survey.

SOCIAL WELFARE INFORMATION SYSTEM - SWIS (SOCIAL CARD) IN THE SERVICE OF IMPROVING SOCIAL AND CHILD PROTECTION IN MONTENEGRO

Ida Kolinovic, Vesna Vujosevic, Biljana Bulatovic