Targeting and distribution in complex emergencies: Participatory management of humanitarian food assistance

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Abstract

The extensive literature on community participation in the targeting and management of humanitarian food assistance suggests that participatory approaches work best in slow-onset emergencies with no conflict or displacement. Yet the policies of many agencies—and compliance with Sphere minimum standards—require that the recipient community participate in decisions about the assistance they receive including targeting, regardless of the causes of the emergency. This paper analyzes current practice in the targeting and management of humanitarian food assistance in complex emergencies, the constraints to recipient communities’ participation, and the possibilities for participatory approaches to improve targeting.

Access and security considerations, limited staff time and capacity, and other constraints have long meant that the actual oversight of food aid distributions in complex emergencies is left in the hands of local leaders at the village or camp level. Introduced institutions include Food Relief Committees, or other specially-organized bodies to deal with targeting and distribution questions. Differences in the accountability and legitimacy of these leaders and committees, together with post-distribution dynamics over which agencies have little control, account for much of the way in food assistance is actually distributed and utilized. But much of the process of food aid targeting remains opaque to recipients, who are often not aware of their entitlements or the process of determining who is entitled. The paper concludes with a number of practical suggestions to improve participation in targeting in complex emergencies.

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Introduction

Targeting in complex emergencies: the policy and programming dilemma

The literature on participation in the targeting and management of humanitarian food assistance has long suggested that community-based or participatory approaches to targeting work best in slow-onset emergencies, under circumstances where there is a strong tradition of local governance, with no conflict, displacement or marginalized minorities (Taylor and Seaman, 2004; Mathys, 2004; Jaspars, 2000; Jaspars and Jeremy, 1999). These conditions describe a situation that is very different from a complex emergency, where by definition there is conflict and very frequently displacement, where minority groups are highly likely to be discriminated against or forced to flee, and where local governance may not only be weak, it is likely to be a party to or directly undermined by the conflict.

Yet policies on programming practices such as targeting, both at the level of individual agencies and the agreed upon inter-agency standards of the humanitarian community, tend to treat all emergency response in much the same way. Many agencies’ policies stipulate that, at a minimum, recipient communities should be involved in decisions about the targeting of food assistance, without differentiating causal factors in an emergency. 1 Compliance with Sphere Minimum Standards in Disaster Response, require that

1 Although participation is a much broader concept than just “involvement in decisions” affecting people’s lives, for the purposes of this paper, this will be the working definition. For example, the World Food Programme policy on participation states, “Assistance programs are designed and implemented on the basis of broad-based participation in order to ensure that program participants (including recipients, national and local governments, civil-society organizations and other partners) contribute their knowledge, skills and resources to processes that influence their lives” (WFP, 2003a,b, p. 1).
the recipient community participate in decisions about the assistance they receive, also making no distinctions based on the causes of the emergency (Sphere, 2004). The Sphere common standard 1 on participation notes, “The disaster-affected population actively participates in the assessment, design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the assistance programme” (Sphere, 2004, p. 28). Common standard 4 on targeting makes much the same point. And food aid management standard 3 on distribution reads, “The method of food distribution is responsive, transparent, equitable and appropriate to local conditions. … Recipients of food aid are identified and targeted on the basis of need, by means of an assessment carried out through consultation with stakeholders, including community groups” (Sphere, 2004, p. 168). The IFRC/NGO code of conduct has similar stipulations about the participation of the recipient community (IFRC, 1994), as do the Standards of Accountability of the Humanitarian Accountability Partnership—International (HAP-I 2003).

In brief, contemporary program guidance related to the targeting of humanitarian assistance mandates that decisions about targeting (including assessment and program choice, in addition to selecting actual recipients) make no exception for the case of complex emergencies despite generally accepted knowledge about the circumstances under which participatory targeting has proven most successful and those under which it has not. It was to address this programmatic and policy dilemma that the current study was designed. Yet, in the process of addressing this relatively straightforward question—and a seemingly straightforward definition of participation—several additional questions arose that are of perhaps greater importance to humanitarian policy and practice: Do “participatory targeting and distribution” practices actually contribute to improved representation of marginalized or excluded groups in a complex emergency? Does a participatory or “community-based” approach to targeting in complex emergencies enhance the potential for protection? Can humanitarian information systems—particularly those operating in acute crises—take on board the information to judge the political economy of participation and decision making in communities in extremis? These questions are ultimately of greater importance than the apparent disjunction between the normative standards and program management practices that initially defined the research.

To address these questions, this paper addresses the original policy and practice dilemma, focusing on the operational and management aspects of community-based targeting. It first reviews current practices, and then analyzes field results for the main mechanisms suggested for participation (according to the definition in footnote 2 above). A second paper considers the political economy of participation in complex emergencies in greater detail.

**Food aid and complex emergencies**

The Inter Agency Standing Committee defines complex emergencies as “a humanitarian crisis in a country, region or society where there is total or considerable breakdown of authority resulting from internal or external conflict and which requires an international response that goes beyond the mandate or capacity of any single agency and/or the ongoing United Nations country program” (OCHA 1999). This typically involves internal conflict in “fragile” or failed states, and often the focus is on non-state actors as belligerents (or state and non-state actors in the case of counter-insurgency warfare). The nature and characteristics of conflict and complex emergencies have altered dramatically in the post-cold war era, and have further altered in many ways with the onset of the global war on terrorism (Keen, 2008; Weiss, 2007).

Nevertheless, food aid continues to be the dominant response to such crises, despite declining overall quantities and criticism of past approaches (Barrett and Maxwell, 2005). While much attention to food security crises in the recent past has focused on the high price of food, most of the actual humanitarian food assistance continues to be provided for complex emergencies. Out of nearly six million metric tons of food aid provided worldwide in 2008, about 60% was for humanitarian assistance, and about two-thirds of the total amount was for countries in complex emergencies.2 Food aid once again made up more than 50% of total CAP appeal in 2008 and 2009, as it had done between 2000 and 2005. Of twelve countries in the 2009 CAP appeal, all were in complex emergencies. The point is that despite many recent changes, food aid remains the largest single category of humanitarian response world wide—and the largest proportion of humanitarian food aid deliveries are made under complex emergency conditions.

There is, of course, a serious debate over whether in-kind food aid is the most appropriate response to acute food insecurity in emergencies, but this paper is not intended to address that issue.3

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2 Some 94 countries received humanitarian food aid in 2008, of which 27 countries were in some form of CPE (WFP Interfais data base 2009). Not all food aid for these countries was delivered under complex emergency conditions: for example Sudan was the second largest recipient at 490 thousand metric tons – of this, Darfur received over 75% of the total and almost all of Darfur was under complex emergency conditions, but other areas of the country were not.

3 The reader interested in this question is referred to several other sources that directly address this question, including Harvey (2007) Gentilini (2007), Barrett and Maxwell (2005), or Maxwell, Barrett and Lenz (2007).
This paper is particularly focused on the improved targeting of in-kind food aid under complex emergency conditions, and improving the participation of the recipient community in the targeting of such food aid. Many of the findings have implications for other forms of humanitarian assistance, whether in-kind or cash.

Framework and methods for the study

This study reviewed the policies and field procedures of humanitarian agencies involved in the provision of food assistance. This included the World Food Programme (WFP) and many of its partners, as well as agencies not affiliated with WFP. As such, it was broadly representative of contemporary humanitarian food aid agencies. The goal of the study was to investigate whether and how the participation of community groups contributes to effective food aid targeting in complex emergencies. The study investigated two areas: one was the program cycle and the way in which humanitarian assistance is managed in complex emergencies; the other was the nature of participation in complex emergencies taking (Fig. 1). The study was not an evaluation of targeting methods, although some critical examination of targeting was necessary in order to understand the constraints on community participation.

Research questions

Research questions were clustered by the two main domains of the study as depicted in Fig. 1.

Operational Domain

(1) How is targeting currently done in the context of complex emergency?
(2) What role can participatory targeting and distribution (CBTD) processes play in ensuring that food assistance reaches those most in need of assistance in complex emergencies?

Community Participation Domain

(1) Can participatory targeting and distribution contribute to improved representation of poor, marginalized or excluded groups in a complex emergency?
(2) How can a community-based approach to targeting in complex emergencies enhance the potential for protection, and conversely, how does it exacerbate the potential for conflict or fuel existing tensions and conflict?

Methods

The intent was to conduct five different country case studies, including Sudan, Somalia, Colombia, Afghanistan and Sri Lanka. The methods proceeded in three phases: desk review; individual country case studies; collective review of all case studies and development of program guidance. A detailed qualitative research protocol was developed and given ethical approval by Tufts University, forming the basis for interviewing in all the cases. The research was conducted in collaboration with the UN World Food Programme who have subsequently committed to field-testing the program guidance. The interviews included WFP field staff; partner agencies and other non-partner humanitarian agencies involved in humanitarian food assistance; national policy makers; local and community leaders; and both recipient and non-recipient communities and groups caught in complex emergencies.

The targeting of food aid: six key questions

Targeting is defined as ensuring that assistance reaches people who need it, when and where they need it, in an appropriate form, in appropriate quantities and through effective modalities – and conversely does not flow to people who do not need it (Barrett and Maxwell, 2005). In an era of increasingly scarce resources, the targeting of humanitarian assistance has become a more salient issue, but the practice of targeting presents management trade-offs that are never fully resolvable. The most commonly thought-of element of targeting is answering the question of who requires assistance – the assumption usually being that if these groups are included, everyone else should be excluded. Hence much analysis of targeting is focused on the question of “who?” Of nearly equal importance, in a situation of a broad-scale emergency or of several competing crises, is the question of geographic targeting, or where the targeted groups are physically located, or the question of “where?” A third critical element of targeting, overlooked in many contexts is the question of “when?” Several recent reviews have concluded that if the timeliness of food aid deliveries had been improved, much of the observed targeting error would have disappeared (Maxwell et al., 2006).

Often overlooked however, is the question about the type of assistance (“what?” questions). Perhaps that is because the type of intervention is not really up for question—either because of organizational mandates or donor preference. But even if food aid is the response, there are still questions about modality, ration scales and composition of ration—and changes over time. Equally critical to the more operational issues raised above are the objectives of the program (“why?” questions). These may vary from the objectives of the overall operation (protecting life, reducing malnutrition, etc.) to the objectives of the targeting (maximizing the usefulness of an inadequate level of resources, maximizing the number of people reached, etc.).

Lastly, if the other questions have been answered, the intervening agency must define what kind of targeting will be done (“how?” questions). Generally, there are three broad approaches or methods: administrative targeting, in which criteria are set by decision-makers ideally based on assessments and actual targeting done according to indicators that represent these criteria; self-targeting, in which it is left to the discretion of the individual whether to participate or not; or community-based targeting, in which the recipient community prioritizes criteria and the members of the community who fit the criteria. Any targeting system must address all these questions. The fieldwork oriented at the program cycle side of the study framework was guided by these questions.

Findings of the research

The main findings include the current targeting practices in complex emergencies, as well as a number of themes including

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4 Security and access problems restricted the last two to phone interviews only. On the ground research was conducted in Colombia, Southern Sudan, Darfur and Somalia. Detailed descriptions of the case studies can be found online at: http://fic.tufts.edu.

5 This question is typically overlooked by needs assessments, and is instead the subject of response analysis.
the effectiveness of targeting and targeting errors, operational constraints to targeting, and the post distribution dynamics that determine who eventually receives the assistance. Brief descriptions of case studies are provided in Boxes 1–4. For detailed case study reports, see footnote 4.

Box 1. Colombia

- Colombia has been caught up in conflict over the last 60 years in an increasingly complex fight for control over economic resources. One of the consequences has been the displacement of between 1.7 and 3.8 million Colombians nationwide. This displacement is often limited to small numbers of individuals at a time, who often end up in or around the country’s larger cities having lost their livelihoods—and often living in fear of reprisal. Food aid is one of the forms of assistance being provided to displaced people. The targeting of food aid is mostly determined by criteria based on geography, displacement status and institutional factors linked to partner agency presence and access to displaced people. Community-based targeting methods are only possible at the programme implementation stage when community leaders and community-based organizations identify individuals who fit the pre-determined targeting criteria set. This means that participation is limited to identification of recipients, based mostly on nutritional or age criteria, or eligibility for other government programs. This eligibility factor and corrupt leadership in some communities are the main factors contributing to exclusion.

Box 2. Southern Sudan

- Southern Sudan was in a civil war from 1983 to 2005. During the war, several major famines led to massive food aid operations, the remnants of which continue to the present. During the war, much of this food was delivered by air drops, with the actual targeting of assistance on the ground left to traditional authorities. In the post-war era, the food aid program is shifting to accommodate the large flow of refugees and displaced people returning home. Food aid targeting has been subject to numerous constraints in Southern Sudan in addition to the conflict and displacement. These include diversion or taxation of food, limited information systems or analytical capacity, limited logistical capacity, limited infrastructure and vast distances, and the slow speed of donor responses. During the latter phases of the war, targeting largely took place through the Chieftaincy system, which proved sufficiently accountable for the most part to ensure that assistance got to vulnerable people—with the exception of internally displaced people, particularly those displaced away from their own Chiefs or traditional leaders. Other mechanisms—relief committees in particular—did not promote participation as well. In the post-war era, targeting has become more administrative in nature.

Box 3. Somalia

- Somalia has been in a state of conflict since the late 1980s and has not had an effective central government since 1991. The conflict was initially over control of resources and clan identity, but over time has become increasingly influenced by both regional rivalries (Ethiopia/Eritrea) and international politics (the global war on terror). Food aid has been a significant component of humanitarian assistance throughout this period, but security and access constraints have long meant that the actual oversight of food aid is left in the hands of local leaders. There have been allegations of widespread diversion of food aid by militias and other powerful actors, and widespread practices of the redistribution of food aid at the community level. By 2008, there was a renewed emphasis on working through local or traditional leaders to manage food aid in Somalia, and agencies increasingly relied on local leadership to target food aid within the community. But there are big differences in the accountability and legitimacy of local leadership—varying from clan elders and religious leaders (in non-displaced rural communities) who provide for some checks and balances, to “gate keepers” in IDP camps who effectively control information, access, and resources.

Box 4. Darfur

- The Darfur conflict is now in its seventh year. Security and protection threats and restricted access remain major challenges to the humanitarian community. The peace process has not led to a durable peace in Darfur, and security for humanitarian agencies deteriorated significantly after the partial signing of the Darfur Peace Agreement in 2006. With the expulsion and dissolution of 16 agencies in March 2009, the situation appeared to become more precarious than ever. Given information and access constraints, food needs and general humanitarian needs have often been conflated—after 2005, food aid ration cards had effectively become the identity card of displaced people, with obvious consequences for those excluded from registration. In displaced camps, the traditional functions of leaders have shifted to that of a coordinator with the agencies, with a different type of power and authority. A new institution introduced is the Food Relief Committee (FRC), which has its own systems and rules, and which is intended to promote representation and participation in food distribution. FRCS have also become the means of challenging the power and authority over food distribution from traditional leaders—making them a contested arena of power in the camps. There is very little household targeting of food aid—the accepted basis of entitlement of food assistance in Darfur is based on group status (IDP, host/resident, rural), not need (food insecurity).

Current targeting practices in complex emergencies

Current practices observed ranged across a variety of approaches. The salient practices include the use (or not) of
assessments in targeting: the emphasis on administrative (group) targeting (rather than individual households); the role of local leadership; and targeting objectives.

Targeting by group identity—rather than other vulnerability criteria—is the most common form of administrative targeting. Not surprisingly, the most common group to be targeted in complex emergencies is internally displaced persons (IDPs). In many cases, targeting of one type of assistance was in some way linked to the targeting of another—without regard for whether the same criteria applied or not. For example in Colombia, one group of food aid recipients were selected because they were already included in a government housing program for IDPs—which in effect meant that those not selected for housing were presumed not to be food insecure. In Darfur, a food aid ration card is the only real form of IDP identification, and therefore if not included in the registration for food aid, accessing other forms of assistance is difficult.

When group targeting is the norm, significant error can result. In Southern Sudan, a major current focus is on returnees (Bailey and Harrigan 2009), even though in some cases, those who never left or who were displaced locally may be more food insecure. In Darfur, since the 2005 re-registration process, there has been very little further assessment for targeting purposes among IDP populations—anyone who was inadvertently skipped in 2005 has slim chances of ever being included. Some assessment has occurred in the event of new displacement or other causes of food insecurity—resulting in new groups being included. And in some cases, food assistance has been demanded by groups simply for permitting access via their area or to prevent attacks on other recipient communities. All of these targeting practices have implications for impartiality.

Targeting decisions are not made on the basis of assessment information. This is partially because once a registration has been done (as in 2005 in Darfur), the registration determines food aid allocations and may continue to target the same registered people for many years regardless of assessment information. It is also partly because assessment information rarely gives information that allows targeting below the district or livelihood zone level (e.g. in Somalia). In Somalia, it was left up to a very small number of food monitors to determine which villages would get food within a particular livelihood zone and which would not. Security considerations were often paramount.

Targeting objectives differed significantly depending on the nature of the crisis and the timing of the response. Reducing exclusion error is almost always the objective in an acute humanitarian crisis i.e. ensuring as many members as possible of the target group receive assistance. This was certainly the case at the height of the SPLA war in Southern Sudan and the early phase of the Darfur response in 2004. As crises become more protracted, when aid becomes a significant resource in war economies, then reducing inclusion error or diversion becomes more important (reducing inclusion of groups who are no in need of assistance)–a much more salient concern in Somalia or Darfur in 2008–09.

Mechanisms for participation in targeting

In the definition that guided the study there are two different activities: setting criteria and selecting those who fit them (“who?”); and three different mechanisms at the local level: traditional leaders, relief committees and local administration (“how?”).

A fourth mechanism (not explicitly mentioned in the definition) would be targeting and distribution through community-based organizations. All of these vary considerably by context, and contextual factors are far more important than anything inherent in each of the three approaches in judging the extent to which any of these promote participation or result in outcomes that represent the views of the recipient community. The two most commonly encountered mechanisms—traditional leaders and relief committees—are discussed briefly below.

Traditional leaders and institutions

The selection of formal recipients of food at agency distribution, and the informal sharing of food after the distribution is often organized by elders and traditional leaders. This was particularly prevalent in Southern Sudan and among non-displaced communities in Somalia. In some cases, this can be quite well organized and in other cases can be quite a haphazard process. In Southern Sudan, particularly during the SPLA war when substantial quantities were delivered by air-drops and there was limited agency presence on the ground, significant effort went into ensuring that the most localized leadership – the GoI leaders – were the ones most actively involved in ensuring the targeting of food assistance, after other forms of “participatory” targeting, particularly relief committees, were discredited (Harrigan, 1998; Jaspars and Jeremy, 1999; Deng, 2002). Likewise, in Somalia among rural non-displaced groups, traditional leaders were the main means of identifying those who received food at distributions, and also of organizing subsequent redistribution. In other cases, particularly post-conflict Southern Sudan, civil authorities play a much greater role in organizing targeting and distribution procedures, but this tends to be based on administrative targeting practices.

In situations of protracted displacement, local institutions have evolved and forms of governance more attuned to the realities of displacement. This was particularly notable in Darfur, where many of the traditional leaders were killed or went into exile and where traditional sheikhs have been replaced by younger leaders with the same title, but who may speak English, are more able to negotiate with the humanitarian agencies, and better able to manage the camp situation. They may also have close links with rebel movements. In their home villages, sheikhs would have known all the government departments, and were responsible for civil administration duties such as tax collection, and even had the power to arrest criminals, to sort out local disputes, and issue fines. In the camp situation, they play a more important role in communications between the agencies and the people.

Relief committees

Relief committees have been widely used in non-conflict settings, and increasingly in complex emergencies as well. Significant effort has gone into instituting Food Relief Committees (FRCs) in IDP camps and mixed host/IDP settings in Darfur, and among targeted recipients in Colombia. As a rule, FRCs are intended to be democratically elected, with equal gender representation, and to adhere to other criteria of participation (the right of recall, public forum meetings, transparency, accountability, etc.). Few examples were found in this study where these criteria were all met in complex emergencies.

For the most part, their role was limited to assisting in distributions, information sharing with the community and ensuring continuity of operations in the event that operational agency staff could not reach a location due to insecurity (i.e. their main tasks were not about targeting). In some cases, they functioned as a complaints mechanism, but given that the most common complaint related to targeting and distribution, there was insufficient segregation of duties to function effectively as such. Nevertheless, simply the fact that formally constituted body existed as a sort of check on the power of local leaders has been, in a certain way, a forum for participation even if not necessarily in terms of targeting. Other groups that claimed to function like relief committees (most notably IDP...
“camp committees” in Somalia) often appeared to be little more than a mechanism for controlling populations and diverting resources. Where FRCs are introduced, there is a significant question about timing – or when such an institution can or should be introduced in a complex emergency? No examples of functioning relief committees were found in the “acute” phase of emergencies – indeed they were introduced in camps in Darfur only in 2007 and 2008 – three years after the worst of the displacement crisis. However, local tribal leaders helped with implementing the distribution or counting the affected population in the acute stages, and they exerted considerable power in determining who received ration cards. The “camp committees” in IDP camps in Somalia were sometimes functioning as traditional leadership, and in other cases were in a gate-keeping role.

While these mechanisms function in complex emergencies and do play a significant role in sanctioning assessments and in managing distribution, there is limited evidence that they enhance participation in actual targeting decisions, with the exception of the early period of the Darfur crisis when local leaders had control over distribution of ration cards. They sometimes (perhaps inadvertently) serve as a forum for participation in other areas, for example, providing a means of communication and information sharing with their constituencies.

These observations have important discussions/implications for changes/shifts in local governance – related both to the complex emergency context, and to the imposition of significant influence of humanitarian agencies. These are explored further in a separate paper.

Effectiveness of targeting and targeting errors

Preventing exclusion error (prioritizing the humanitarian imperative) is often the first concern during displacement or an acute crisis of some other sort. But exclusion can occur in a variety of ways: by selecting the wrong groups of recipients, as the result of unaccountable or unrepresentative FRCs or local leaders, poor geographic targeting, the late arrival of assistance, or the provision of an inappropriate kind of assistance.

Inclusion errors on the other hand may be the result of poor targeting, redistribution, and more worryingly, corruption and diversion.

The potential for excluding politically marginalized groups is always a concern, because the focus of assessments is often on economic aspects of vulnerability, and is often less focused on incorporating political vulnerability—the extent to which people are marginalized or excluded based on their identity or their affiliation, rather than (or in addition to) their food security status. But, with the exception of IDP status, the lack of agreed-upon criteria prevents political vulnerability from entering targeting decisions for the most part.

The consequences of poor targeting in complex emergencies are many. Targeting within a community may create conflict if some people are left out – the field teams witnessed numerous examples of fighting over the haphazard nature of distribution. Targeting one community and not its neighbor, particularly when their status seems the same to the excluded village can lead to conflict and raiding or threats to safe passage. On the other hand, targeting everyone just to prevent violence undermines agency perspectives of impartiality—and impact on food insecurity.

Providing inadequate rations (under-coverage) for IDPs or other marginalized groups sometimes forces people into dangerous coping strategies. For example IDPs in Afgooye, just outside the Somali capital of Mogadishu, had to return to the city to find casual labor or other means of earning income because rations in the camps are inadequate or, as seemed more likely, if food is being diverted (a clear link of targeting error and protection concerns). But assessing these coping strategies or alternative livelihoods pursued – and the implications of personal safety of these livelihood options – is often beyond the capacity of an intervening agency. Where livelihood strategies extend into areas unreachable by humanitarian agencies, assessment becomes much more difficult – a situation that occurs frequently in complex emergencies.

There is a virtually constant concern in complex emergencies with assistance being diverted or looted, which of course is a form of both exclusion and inclusion error. Food aid is a resource of significant value in extremely resource-poor and violent contexts. It is not surprising that prevention of the looting of food aid is a major concern in several of the case studies. This diversion may be a result of outright banditry on the roads – as has been increasingly frequent in Darfur since 2006, or it might be done by “gatekeepers” who control access and nominally “represent” food aid recipients in IDP camps in Somalia, or through a system locally known as “vaccination” in Colombia, put in place by the different warring parties that control an area. However, it can also be done by community leaders—as was suspected to be the case in Darfur in 2004/05, leading to the major re-registration exercise in 2005.

Judging the extent of targeting error is difficult, in part because complex emergencies are extremely difficult contexts for good monitoring, in part because people have a legitimate fear of providing real information, and in part because food is often the only form of assistance that people receive—meaning, for example, that food often turns up on the market even if the food aid itself is well-targeted. Calculated estimates run in the 10–20% range for both inclusion and exclusion error (WFP, 2006), but these figures are almost by definition underestimates for exclusion, because not all populations can be reached in the surveys in complex emergencies that collect the information used for such global calculations. Specific cases of targeting error noted by the field team show error rates of 40% or higher in some cases (e.g. Maxwell and Burns, 2008), but these were not from a representative sampling exercise.

Operational constraints

Numerous constraints to the targeting and delivery of food aid arise in complex emergencies.

Insecurity and access

As the security of humanitarian personnel has deteriorated in recent complex emergencies, access to provide assistance has become more difficult (Stoddard et al., 2006). For UN agencies, compliance with MOSS standards for staff is a constraint on movement, flexibility and access. But more importantly, acute insecurity for recipient communities makes access for assessment and distribution very difficult. The safe passage of humanitarian assistance has always been a constraint – in complex emergencies, aid is often one of the most valuable resources around, making it even more likely to be diverted. Violence during distribution is not unusual, and communities targeted for food assistance may also be targeted for attack following distribution. Other elements of insecurity include piracy and looting. Agencies have developed methods for coping with insecurity, including the requirement for transporters to post a bond and focusing on making distributions safer. The insecurity also leads to a shortage of skilled staff and reliable partners, a major constraint to operations.

6 Minimum Operating Standards for Security—UN security regulations for staff safety.

7 There is no quantitative data on this, but voluminous qualitative evidence from the case studies suggests that when insecurity is the greatest, the threat of diversion is the greatest, and the number of staff to supervise and monitor is the lowest.
Challenges to impartiality

Under circumstances where humanitarian agencies have to deal with local power brokers or warlords in the absence of government institutions, or where states may be one of the belligerents in a conflict, impartiality may be very difficult to uphold.

In the most severe cases humanitarian agencies may have to work largely by “remote control” (working through partners or others who have access)—or in the case of Colombia, rather “invisibly” (working through partners who do not record the names of recipients in order to protect them) making management of resources more difficult. Working through local partner organizations, while holding many advantages for access, assessment and participation, may further complicate impartiality. Humanitarian agencies may face limited programming options—and in fact may sometimes not be capable of pursuing what might be viewed as optimal responses—for many of the other reasons mentioned here.

Limited information and analysis

Reliable information is often lacking in complex emergencies. Sampling procedures and limited access make it difficult to disaggregate data to determine the vulnerability of local groups. The lack of population figures constrains targeting throughout the system, but is of particular concern where there is large-scale movement of IDPs. Even where food security information systems exist, complex emergencies are contexts that are awash in rumors. Recipient communities often know who is most at risk, but know little about programming objectives, principles or intentions of agencies. Over time, humanitarian agencies have found ways to improve assessments, providing one important kind of information—but as noted, assessment processes themselves face extreme constraints in situations of high insecurity and limited access, and there is often limited monitoring. Several notable analytical frameworks—particularly the Integrated Food Security and Humanitarian Phase Classification (FAO, 2006)–have been developed under complex emergency situations, so it is not as if this problem is being ignored. Nevertheless, even where it was developed in Somalia, the IPC is best at analyzing food insecurity under non-conflict situations, and has only recently begun to incorporate an analysis of displacement. This contrasts with the system set up in Colombia where there are three separate systems for recording displacement, which uses IDP movement (both place of origin and host communities) as a first method of targeting their assistance.

Mistrust

Mistrust is high in complex emergencies—between belligerents obviously, but also within or among agencies, between agencies and communities, or between agencies and local administration. This complicates the targeting of food aid, particularly in situations where agencies cannot reach the recipient community and has to rely on some other mechanism. Communities often mistrust the motives of agencies conducting assessments—fearing that any assessment will result in a decrease in levels of assistance once an acute crisis has passed. This clearly undermines the basis for participation in targeting.

Assumptions

Targeting practices are based on the assumption that food aid is consumed by the person or household who receives it from a humanitarian agency. In fact, this is often not the case. The phenomenon of post-distribution dynamics is discussed in greater detail below, but the assumption that targeting “recipients” is synonymous with targeting the actual “consumers” is flawed, and failure to comprehend this is a significant constraint to good targeting. The very language of targeting—and the presumption of selecting “beneficiaries”—belie this assumption.

Post-distribution dynamics

In theory, food aid is targeted at those groups deemed to be most food insecure or vulnerable. Better targeting is presumed to be the best way to improve impact on food security and nutritional status. However, in most general food distributions observed, food aid is often shared among a much larger group of “beneficiaries” than those planned by humanitarian agencies. Sometimes this “sharing” may be a form of coercion or “taxation,” but in many cases it was found to be a voluntary action that represents a very different perception of vulnerability from that of outside humanitarian agencies on the question of targeting. In some cases, sharing food was a deliberate strategy to prevent violence over targeting criteria. In many of the cases studied, the near unanimous view was that free assistance from external sources should be for everyone. This view was especially common in Somalia (where sharing is linked to the clan system), and in Southern Sudan (where it is linked to a very different perception of vulnerability, based less on current food security status and more on the preservation of social networks). This was also true in Colombia where some food assistance recipients felt selection criteria were unfair and found ways of redistributing the food. Sometimes this redistribution is semi-official and overseen by village or clan leaders; in some cases it seems to function more at the level of individuals and households. At times redistribution is quite chaotically managed, and even violent; and at other times it is quite well managed. But redistribution is frequently ignored in reporting and post-distribution monitoring.

This confirms the findings of other studies (e.g. Narbeth, 2001; Jaspars and Jeremy, 1999) that re-distribution is common. Both these studies concluded that targeting on the basis of externally determined socio-economic criteria was largely not possible. Narbeth (2001) and Harragain (1998) recommended working with the traditional leadership system as an effective system for ensuring that resources are distributed according to local perceptions of vulnerability. But this is a context-specific conclusion; Archibald and Richards (2002) found that working with traditional leaders in Sierra Leone reinforced the very grievances that had led to the civil war in the first place.

At one level, understanding post-distribution dynamics is the real key to understanding “community participation” in targeting. Where it is practiced, virtually everyone defends this kind of community sharing of external assistance—including those who would, at least in the short term, benefit the most from a targeting approach more closely linked to current food insecurity status. At face value, this redistribution is a significant challenge to common understandings of impartiality and needs-based allocation of resources of maximizing impact on food insecurity and malnutrition. When viewed from the perspective of the recipient community, however, it represents a very different perspective of who is vulnerable and why. That is to say, if the perspective of the recipient community is seriously taken into consideration (i.e. community-based targeting), understanding local perceptions of “who is vulnerable?” may be more important than agency perceptions about impartiality. Ideally there would be a dialogue between agency and community about this question (and indeed existing program guidance on community-based targeting emphasizes this dialogue). Unfortunately, there is rarely adequate time or access to enable such dialogue in complex emergencies. Our findings are far from conclusive, however, and the fact remains that this form of redistribution also provides a major opportunity for “elite capture” and resource diversion, which in turn requires a judgment about leadership and checks and balances.
Discussion: implications for targeting in complex emergencies

Reviewing the six questions of targeting from the introduction highlights several important implications for policy and practice in the targeting of food aid and managing humanitarian assistance more broadly. This paper concludes with some practical means of improving participatory approaches. A second paper will deal with questions of governance and the political economy of participation.

Addressing targeting questions

The assumption behind the study was that there would be clear differences between the results of community-based approaches to targeting and administrative or approaches to targeting. In fact, the differences in results were not clear, and many targeting practices were an amalgamation of both approaches.

Fundamental questions about targeting posed at the outset include “who?”, “where?”, “when?”, “what?”, “how?” and “why?” Assessment—and participatory approaches to assessment—are important in answering the questions of “what?” “where?” “when?” and “why?” As noted, traditional notions about community-based or participatory targeting are really about answering the “who?” question implicit in targeting (and of course, participatory or community-based approaches are one way of addressing the question of “how?”). With community participation in assessment and the questions implicit in assessment, the issue of “who?” to be made in targeting decisions is less contentious. This has several implications for practice. First, the link between the practice of targeting and the rest of the program cycle—particularly assessment but other elements as well—needs to be re-established. Second, if assessment, and the information generated, is driven completely by external concerns, there is little evidence that simply attaching some “community procedures” for addressing “who?” questions at the end of the process will either improve participation or reduce targeting error. Participatory approaches to assessment are as important as participatory approaches to targeting and distribution, if the views of the recipient community are to be taken seriously.

Practical measures to improve participation

Several practices notably improve participation. The first is to increase the amount of contact time and trust between the humanitarian agency and the recipient community. Where populations are displaced and or security constraints limit contact time (for example, in acute phases of complex emergencies, during active displacement of civilians) some of the issues discussed above may simply not be applicable. However, most of the complex emergencies investigated result in protracted displacement or protracted reliance on food assistance. Under these circumstances, increased contact time and the development of improved trust have been demonstrated to be possible.

The second is to clarify—and agree on—the objectives. Clear examples were noted where participatory processes at the recipient community or group level improved targeting, but much depends on the clarity of objectives and how well these are known. If the criteria for targeting are understood and agreed, and the task is to identify who fits those criteria, community self-identification processes (sometimes organized by recipients themselves) work more effectively than an administrative system—even in cases of acute displacement: for example, community groups know who is and not genuinely displaced (see Frize, 2008; Maxwell and Burns, 2008 for several examples). Often however, there is disagreement or simply lack of clarity over the criteria for targeting, and this is where more universal sharing of assistance may be the expected norm. In situations with no displacement, participation often functions best through traditional mechanisms (Jaspar and Maxwell, 2008; Young and Maxwell, 2009).

Third, given that much of what happens locally depends on local leaders, it is critical that agencies understand local governance and leadership. While governance is explored in greater detail in a separate paper, the somewhat more idiosyncratic role of individual leaders also needs to be understood and incorporated. Many cases were observed in which individual leaders—sometimes within formal governance structures, sometimes outside them—played critical roles in ensuring representation and participation in targeting procedures. Humanitarian agencies can only make the most of this phenomenon when their managers and procedures are sufficiently flexible to incorporate and enable this kind of leadership—a situation that is often the exception rather than the rule, and a challenge to improved participation in complex emergencies.

Very frequently, neither the objectives of targeting nor the objectives of participation were clearly understood by agency staff or recipient communities. With regard to targeting: is the objective to reduce exclusion error (and hence prioritize the humanitarian imperative)? Is the objective to cut waste and corruption by minimizing inclusion error and improve the efficient utilization of program resources such as food aid? Or is it simply driven by a resource shortfall (real or anticipated)? All of these are no doubt included, but for effective targeting, one of them is the primary objective. Often in acute crisis, the humanitarian imperative is the priority—just getting food to acutely food insecure people (and these situations often involve severe logistical constraints). Prioritizing impartiality and the best means of achieving it (targeting) may be a secondary priority. If so, this should be clarified. As crises become protracted, objectives (at least implicitly) change, but targeting decisions made in the acute phase of an emergency can have long-lasting effects. Lack of clarity is a constraint to being able to achieve any of these objectives. But lack of dialogue with recipient community leaders and representatives make them virtually impossible to achieve in any participatory manner.

Much of the process of food aid targeting and distribution remains opaque to recipients at the most local level. Recipients are often not aware of their entitlements or the processes by which it was determined who is entitled. Redistribution infrequently takes place in an organized or supervised way, and sometimes is so ad hoc or disorganized that it further confuses recipients, and results in fighting or makes distributions vulnerable to looting. In addition to these factors, the lack of good monitoring makes it extremely difficult to assess impact or targeting error. Particularly where there is little accountability between community leaders and members (as in camps controlled by armed gatekeepers), genuinely participatory processes may not be possible, and the focus for improving targeting should be on other measures. These include making information about entitlements publicly available, and strengthening complaints mechanisms. Under these circumstances, transparency in information is critical—informing all stakeholders of the purpose of the food aid; the quantity to be delivered; and critically, for whom it is intended and why.

While targeting mechanisms for food aid distribution in complex emergencies vary, relatively few have genuinely participatory mechanisms. Where present, relief committee structures are often more for the purpose of helping with distribution or ensuring continuity of operations, rather than improving community participation per se. In many cases studied, the rationale for targeting is unclear to recipient communities; and the logic of community sharing is not clear to outside agencies. The international humanitarian community may have to learn to live with some “cognitive dissonance” around the logic of food aid-sharing, because while aid-sharing may reflect the wishes of the recipient community, it is clearly at odds with attempts to target assistance to maximize...
(short-term) impact. Where sharing is known to be a pervasive practice, it has to be recognized and dealt with. There are several ways of doing this. One way is to improve geographic targeting down to the level of a village or other localized unit, provide more resources to the most affected communities, and simply accept that within the community, there will be sharing (and hence less impact on the most food insecure) or that everyone within these geographical or population unit are entitled to food aid. Another way—particularly where the risk of exclusion of vulnerable groups is extreme—is to provide cooked food to ensure that food aid effectively reaches the most vulnerable (Jaspars, 2000). Both of these choices depend on good local information, in particular on local governance, as the choices are context-dependent. Relying on geographic targeting must ensure that this approach will not exacerbate conflict between communities or population groups. The many problems outlined here notwithstanding, food aid targeting and delivery systems can be made more participatory, and more participatory systems can reduce error and improve targeting practices.

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