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Targeting humanitarian assistance in refugee operations: a qualitative exploration of costs and benefits in three country case studies

Final Report

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Acknowledgements

Since the start of this project in late 2023, humanitarian budgets have been under increased scrutiny, and the financial resources to protect refugees have substantially decreased. Both UNHCR and WFP protect and provide life-saving humanitarian assistance to people displaced by conflict and other disasters. Yet, given the increasing demand for assistance and dwindling budgets, aid may no longer be available for everybody based on refugee status. Targeting humanitarian assistance to those most in need is an alternative to the provision of blanket assistance also in refugee contexts, yet it comes with potential costs and opportunities that should be explored. The debate on the costs and benefits of targeting social assistance is longstanding. Arguments in favour or against targeting are sometimes driven more by ideology than empirical evidence. This is because evidence on the costs of targeting is scarce, even more so in a humanitarian context. This study contributes to the debate on the costs and benefits of targeting in a humanitarian context.

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This study offers a rich account of the costs and benefits of targeting of humanitarian assistance for refugees based on three country case studies. When we reached out to nine potential case study countries, we received an enthusiastic response from country offices in Colombia, Mauritania and Rwanda. We would like to thank the UNHCR and WFP focal points in these countries for their support in organising the missions, welcoming us in the country and getting us in touch with their colleagues. We thank our interlocuters from UNHCR, WFP – at both country and field office level - and partner organizations for taking the time to sit with us and answer all our questions regarding the targeting processes in the respective countries. We also gained many insights from the Focus Group Discussions with different refugee groups and would like to thank the participants for their openness. Finally, the field work was supported by Maurice Nierere in Rwanda and Dr. Yacoub Coulibaly in Mauritania. In Maastricht, Eimear Mc Phillips and Guillem Claveria I Boix provided research assistance.

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Executive Summary

According to the 2025 Global Humanitarian Overview Report, approximately 300 million people will require humanitarian assistance in 2025 (UNHCR, 2024). The increasing demand for humanitarian support as a result of increasing conflict and worsening effects of climate change means that blanket assistance in refugee contexts may not be possible anymore. Focusing on those most in need can help protect consumption among the most vulnerable, improve the economic efficiency of humanitarian assistance and create budget space for other programming that is tailored to the diverse needs of displaced populations. However, this process of focusing assistance on the most vulnerable is not cost-free; technical policy changes require significant person-hour inputs across agencies, while the mandate of agencies means that savings must be evaluated in light of potential exclusion errors. This study, commissioned by the UNHCR-WFP Joint Programme Excellence and Targeting Hub, explores qualitatively the costs and benefits of targeting mechanisms in three country case studies and understands the design and operational factors that affect the feasibility of targeting humanitarian and basic needs assistance. More specifically, we explore the following three research questions:

1. What are the costs and benefits – both foreseen and unforeseen - of different targeting methodologies and which parties bear the cost or reap the benefit?
2. How can WFP and UNHCR apply the analysis of the costs and added value of targeting to make programmatic and operational decisions? Is sufficient and suitable data available to perform relevant analysis in case study locations?
3. What are the policy recommendations for targeting humanitarian and basic needs assistance?

The study's primary intended audience is WFP, UNHCR, and other policymakers and practitioners in the humanitarian and development sectors, including those working on strengthening shock-responsive and adaptive national social protection systems. Original primary data was collected from a range of different stakeholders in Colombia, Mauritania, and Rwanda. The analysis is based on the insights from 57 Key Informant Interviews (KII) and 10 Focus Group Discussions (FGD) with 65 beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries.

The report uses a case study approach to explore the research questions. In the absence of a methodology and body of data that would enable universally generalisable research, case studies allow to draw out insights from diverse country contexts. However, the approach means findings should be interpreted cautiously when taken outside the confines of a given country context.

In all three case study countries, the move from blanket to targeted assistance required financial outlays for additional data collection, staff involvement, and the challenges associated with capturing dynamic household welfare. The three case studies are illustrative for the start-up costs of targeting. The initial set-up costs for the different targeting methodologies in Colombia, Rwanda, and Mauritania include the costs of collecting and analysing data, designing the targeting approach and criteria, and community consultations. Across the case studies, understanding, compiling, and collating the additional staff time, responsibilities or other costs was difficult and often not fully visible to the respondents making the evaluation of the policy design difficult, potentially undermining programme accountability.

In all three countries, large household survey or census data have been used to inform the targeting methodology and define targeting weights. Leveraging existing data collection exercises, such as the Joint Post Distribution Monitoring (JPDM) can reduce some of the costs. Concern was expressed,

though, that piggybacking on existing exercises to reduce cost may mean that data is less granular or available less frequently. The timing and frequency of surveys that are used in generating indicator weights were also perceived as a potential source of targeting error. The use of a single snapshot and the infrequent reclassification do not capture the dynamic nature of household welfare. In all three case study countries, interlocutors believed that the analysis informing the vulnerability scores and eligibility criteria was econometrically sound. However, there was discussion on the distortion effects of the inclusion of normative or protection-related criteria in the targeting process. In Rwanda, the presumed vulnerability of women and girls led to inconsistencies that were difficult to explain and reconcile with the observed reality in the camps. Further concern was expressed that the use of UNHCR's proprietary proGres system, which records socio-demographic information, to implement categorisation means that socio-economic variables, which are expected to be significantly associated with welfare, cannot be used in classification.

The three country case studies are illustrative of different levels of cooperation between humanitarian actors and integration with national systems. Joint targeting efforts were suggested to result in cost savings by reducing duplication of efforts, data sharing and streamlining targeting processes. In Mauritania, stakeholders (Social Registry, WFP, UNHCR, UNHCR-WFP Joint Hub) developed a joint approach reflecting the different mandates. The integration of refugee households into the national Social Registry facilitated cost savings by leveraging existing data collection and targeting processes. The latter would not have been possible if WFP and UNHCR had not been aligned in their approach to the inclusion of refugees (UNHCR & WFP, 2024). In Rwanda, both UNHCR and WFP jointly contribute to meeting the basic needs of the refugees in the five camps but maintain different roles and responsibilities in line with their mandates. In Rwanda, the implementation of a joint needs-based and protection-sensitive targeting approach by WFP and UNHCR helped to reduce the number of beneficiaries, but the costs of this coordination were perceived as high given the continued need for dialogue and communication of eligibility criteria and rationale. In the end, differences in mandates and financial constraints led to a different implementation of targeting.

Interlocutors in all case study locations spoke extensively of the cost of exclusion errors as a primary and significant cost associated with targeting. This concern was raised as relevant in a number of different dimensions. The fear of exclusion errors meant that significant technical and inter-departmental and inter-agency coordination time was expended on refining criteria, but also in creating override protection-based criteria to ensure inclusion. This was reportedly not just costly in terms of time input, but also limited the number of households assigned to groups that received no benefits. Others raised exclusion errors as an unmeasurable cost against the mandate of the organisation(s) involved in targeting, and that exclusion errors should negatively weigh on the money saved through a reduced beneficiary pool if those excluded are excluded erroneously.

FGD respondents in all three country case studies mentioned the opportunity cost of participation in the process. Respondents in all country case studies mentioned the opportunity cost of collecting benefits. Appeals-specific costs were mentioned in both Rwanda and Mauritania with specific reference to the appeals process. In Mauritania, women indicated that they could not appeal given the uncertainty around the time taken to resolution and the absence of suitable childcare.

Other costs and benefits of targeting that cannot be measured financially include social cohesion, community trust, and the perceived fairness of the targeting process. In Mauritania, FGD respondents noted that they did not perceive substantial differences between the material circumstances of households in different categories. The involvement of community leaders in the selection of eligibility criteria and the appeals process was the subject of concern by some participants. Respondents in Colombia believed that those receiving assistance were not those most in need, but

they were unable to highlight the mechanism through which these errors arose. In Rwanda, the introduction of targeting led to other non-financial costs. The sudden cut of assistance for the least vulnerable category caused stress and uncertainty about their livelihoods.

A primary benefit of targeting mentioned throughout interviews was political economy positioning. In both Rwanda and Colombia, interlocutors noted that the donor landscape explicitly required the implementation of targeting. It was often noted in interviews that the reduction in universal General Food Assistance (GFA) was an important step towards more self-reliance and economic integration of displaced populations, provided that there is an enabling environment for livelihood generation.

By understanding the trade-offs, WFP and UNHCR can make informed decisions about the allocation of resources, the design of targeting methodologies, and the implementation of targeting processes. Yet, given the lack of reliable data on the staff related costs or the targeting performance, assessing whether benefits exceed the costs is challenging. The analysis can be further used to identify areas where cost efficiencies can be gained, such as through joint targeting efforts or the integration of targeting processes with national social protection systems.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS BASED ON THE STUDY FINDINGS:

1. The right data at the right time

Invest in regular, representative, granular household data collection to monitor and evaluate programme outcomes and targeting performance. Country offices can piggyback on existing data collection exercises and share costs, for example, by collaborating with national governments and extend household surveys to refugees and migrants, or with humanitarian partners that regularly collect data, such as WFP. From the outset align the data captured in registration systems to the econometrically specified targeting variables to avoid overfitting models. Where joint targeting is implemented between UNHCR and WFP, ensure safe and streamlined access to databases between agencies; a similar recommendation exists with third party data holders, including governments.

2. Cooperation between WFP and UNHCR (and with other partners)

Good cooperation between humanitarian partners can save costs related to targeting processes and implementation while providing an easily accessible platform with a common understanding of vulnerability. It requires agreement on programme objectives and the rationale for targeting. In other words, expectations need to be managed from the beginning of the cooperation. It also includes agreement on the roles and responsibilities of each partner during implementation, and equally important, what happens at the end of the project or in the case of unexpected unilateral funding shortages.

3. Improving cost and benefit visibility in the data landscape

For a robust analysis of the costs and benefits of targeting a different study design is required. Most importantly, it requires a counterfactual. The counterfactual could be the situation before the introduction of targeting, or the direct comparison between the targeted and non-targeted version of an assistance programme. In both cases, data collection has to start before the introduction of targeting to establish the baseline situation. Data to be collected include detailed time use data and an inventory of other financial outlays connected with the programme. The same data would then be collected during the design and implementation phase. Alternatively, in a pilot setting, both targeted and non-targeted programme variations can be tested and compared.

Contents

1. Introduction

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1. Introduction

The persistent legacy of previous conflict and the outbreak of fresh conflict, natural disasters and persistent fragility has led to an increase of humanitarian needs. According to the 2025 Global Humanitarian Overview Report, approximately 300 million people will require humanitarian assistance in 2025.[1] As of May 2024, over 120 million individuals were estimated to have been forcibly displaced worldwide due to persecution, conflict, generalized violence, or other human rights violations—, representing an increase for the twelfth consecutive year.[2] In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic has played a multi-pronged role, forcing agencies to do more with less and often changing the way in which assistance was delivered to comply with restrictions. Changes to lives and livelihoods as a result of the pandemic restrictions may have increased the number of households and individuals in poverty and increased the number of dimensions in which they are deprived – including in a humanitarian context. This places an additional burden on budgets for humanitarian actors, while governments have simultaneously contracted spending on overseas development.

The evolution of many humanitarian crises from short-term to protracted, long-term situations has required humanitarian spending to meet an evolving array of objectives in the humanitarian-development nexus. In 2022, 83 percent of people needing humanitarian relief were in countries grappling with protracted crises, signifying a departure from the initial notion of temporary relief. With complex and protracted crises becoming increasingly prevalent, 75 percent of those in need face at least two risk dimensions, including conflict, climate, and socioeconomic vulnerabilities (Development Initiatives, 2023). The persistence of crises, structural vulnerabilities, and insufficient government support have compelled humanitarian efforts to address healthcare, food security, and education as ongoing measures to reduce vulnerability and shield populations from future shocks (Bennett, 2015).

Yet, the increasing number of draws on the humanitarian purse as a result of conflict and worsening effects of climate change means that blanket assistance may no longer be sustainable. Alterations to programmes to accrue a greater share of benefits to those most in need can help protect consumption among the most vulnerable, improve the economic efficiency of transfers and create budget space for other programming tailored to the diverse needs of displaced households. This study, commissioned by the UNHCR-WFP Joint Programme Excellence and Targeting Hub, explores qualitatively the costs and benefits of targeting mechanisms in three countries to understand the design and operational factors that affect the feasibility of targeting humanitarian and basic needs assistance.[3] We explore three research questions through analysis of three country case studies:

1. What are the costs and benefits, both foreseen and unforeseen, of different targeting methodologies and which parties bear the cost or reaps the benefit?
2. How can WFP and UNHCR apply the analysis of the costs and added value of targeting to make programmatic and operational decisions? Is sufficient and suitable data available to perform relevant analysis in case study locations?
3. What are the policy recommendations for targeting humanitarian and basic needs assistance?

[1] UNHCR, 2024. Global Humanitarian Overview 2025. Accessed via: https://www.unocha.org/events/global-humanitarian-overview-2025

[2] UNHCR, 2024. Global trends report. Accessed via: https://www.unhcr.org/global-trends

[3] The study objectives and research questions have undergone some modifications between the final report and the inception report.

The analysis in this study applies an exploratory case study approach and uses qualitative data collected in the three case study countries (Colombia, Mauritania and Rwanda) and the review of documents. Due to the diverse context of the case studies, conclusions have to be drawn cautiously. While there is a rich literature on the costs and benefits of targeting, accounts of the actual costs and benefits of targeting versus universal or blanket assistance are rare, even more so in a humanitarian context. Measuring the costs (and benefits) of targeting is challenging as most costs are hidden in programme budgets or simply not measurable, such as the social or political costs. Grosh et al. (2022) posit that the administrative costs of any social assistance programme are small in comparison to the total programme costs and the costs related to needs-based targeting are a subset of this small proportion. Based on a review of the available evidence, administrative costs are estimated from a low 0.4% of total programme costs up to 22% for in-kind programmes depending on programme design and country context (Grosh et al., 2022). However, none of these accounts directly compare a targeted with a non-targeted version of a programme. Even less evidence is available for other costs such as transaction costs or social costs that are related to programme implementation.

This study contributes to the scant literature on the costs of targeting by offering a rich account from three case studies representing different humanitarian and institutional contexts. Original primary data was collected from a range of different stakeholders involved in the design and implementation of targeting methods and also from the affected population. In total, the study uses the insights from 57 Key Informant Interviews (KII) and 10 Focus Group Discussions (FGD) with 65 beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries.

The study aims to inform policy development and programmatic decisions regarding the targeting of humanitarian assistance. The study's primary intended audience is WFP, UNHCR, and other policymakers and practitioners in the humanitarian and development sectors, including those working on strengthening shock-responsive and adaptive national social protection systems.

The remainder of this report is structured as follows: the next section provides the conceptual framework for the study. It introduces the concepts of targeting and prioritization in a humanitarian context, provides an overview of the main targeting methods and reviews the costs and benefits related to targeting. Section 3 briefly describes the data and methodology for this study. Sections 4, 5 and 6 contain the three country case studies. Each country case includes a short introduction to the context and the targeting approach. This is followed by the analysis of costs and benefits based on the analysis of the primary data collected for this study. Section 7 discusses the findings in line with the research questions and Section 8 concludes.

2. Targeting Assistance in a Humanitarian Context

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2. Targeting assistance in a humanitarian context

2.1 Targeting and prioritization

In the context of finite – and shrinking – social and humanitarian budgets, the vertical and horizontal efficiency[4] of programmes aimed at ensuring basic needs can be maximized by allocating the greatest share of benefits to those individuals or households that are most in need of support. In the context of widening unmet humanitarian needs, blanket (or universal) assistance, whether in the form of cash or in-kind becomes the exception rather than the norm, compelling humanitarian organizations to make tough decisions on the ground as to whom to support (Gigliarano & Verme, 2017).

"[Targeting] is the process by which populations are selected for assistance, informed by needs assessments and programme objectives" (WFP, 2021:6). It is a means of increasing programme efficiency by increasing the benefit that the poor can get within a fixed programme budget (Coady and Skoufias, 2004). Yet, targeting assistance in contexts of protracted conflict, displacement, or recurrent climate shocks presents a formidable technical and political challenge for development and humanitarian programs. The complexities involve navigating trade-offs that extend beyond economic considerations, encompassing risks of exclusion and protection concerns. This is particularly prescient in a humanitarian context where beneficiaries are often governed by frameworks that can render them entirely dependent on assistance (Sabates-Wheeler & Szyp, 2022).

Targeting often involves a multifaceted approach aimed at identifying and selecting eligible recipients. Institutions exhibit diverse targeting cultures, some emphasizing data-driven methods and others prioritizing protection- or community-driven approaches. Even within a single institution, the chosen method may vary across different contexts. Various factors influence the selection of appropriate targeting methods, including operational context, response phase, political and community acceptance, alignment with national social protection systems, institutional capacity, methodological preferences, and the quality of existing data (UNHCR, 2022). Continuous monitoring and analysis of results, coupled with the examination of inclusion and exclusion errors, are essential for refining and adapting targeting to ensure assistance reaches those in greatest need. Throughout the process, clear communication and appeal mechanisms play a vital role in maintaining programme quality and accountability to affected individuals (UNHCR & WFP, 2020).

One of the first steps of targeting is assessing vulnerability. The broad concept of vulnerability necessitates a contextual definition, based on programme objectives and individuals' specific risks. Vulnerability can be understood through various lenses, such as poverty, protection risks, or food insecurity. Government-led social assistance programmes are often guided by a (monetary) poverty-reduction objective, which is reflected in respective eligibility criteria and outcome measures. In the humanitarian context, the broader concept of vulnerability is applied that goes beyond immediate basic needs. In recent years, WFP and UNHCR have worked together to develop the UNHCR-WFP Joint Analytical Framework (JAF), which allows for a shared understanding of vulnerability in the context of delivering basic-needs assistance. The needs assessments are based on the combined measurement of food consumption (Food Consumption Score - FCS), economic capacity (Economic Capacity to Meet Essential Needs - ECMEN), and negative coping strategies (Livelihood Coping Strategies Index for

[4] Horizontal efficiency: everybody in the target group is covered (no exclusion error); vertical efficiency: only the target group is covered (no inclusion error).

Essential Needs - LCS-EN). It provides a comprehensive assessment of a household's ability to meet their basic needs (UNHCR & WFP, 2023a:4). **In addition, agencies may need to prioritize when funding limitations prevent fulfilling all the needs of the targeted population, a scenario commonly encountered in humanitarian operations.** "… the process of prioritization should ensure that the most vulnerable people within the targeted population are prioritized for assistance" (WFP, 2021:7). The choice of a prioritization strategy is contingent on factors such as the context, resource gaps, duration of expected funding shortfalls, and the availability of other support programs. Typically, prioritization options fall into three categories: (1) reducing the amount of food or cash assistance per beneficiary while maintaining the total number of recipients, (2) decreasing the number of beneficiaries while keeping assistance value constant, (3) or a combination of both (UNHCR & WFP, 2020). It is crucial to differentiate between targeting and prioritization when communicating with affected individuals, partners, and donors. However, while targeting and prioritization are distinct, their programmatic steps share similarities, encompassing assessment, analysis, decision-making on methodology and eligibility criteria, validation, selection of eligible households, programme implementation, and monitoring (UNHCR & WFP, 2020).

Targeting is an integral aspect of both WFP and UNHCR activities. In 2018, UNHCR and WFP jointly established key principles and a collaborative process for targeting assistance to meet the food and other basic needs of forcibly displaced people and stateless people. This partnership recognizes the complementarity of food assistance and assistance for other basic needs, considering them as a multi-sector package. The outlined principles focus on protection, livelihoods, and solutions outcomes, anchored in a rights-based approach. Collaboration involves coordination with governments and partners to collectively determine the appropriate approach, eligibility criteria, and implementation methods for targeting assistance in each context (UNHCR & WFP, 2020). The operationalization of targeting procedures relies on different methods that vary in terms of complexity, as well as data and human-resource requirements.

2.2 Targeting methods

There are different methods for targeting (and prioritization) of humanitarian and social assistance. All aim to identify the groups most in need of support taking into account factors such as the country context, available financial resources, the administrative capacity, the degree of poverty and inequality, the political economy and, last but not least, the programme goals. There is neither a blueprint of a method that works everywhere nor is there a perfect targeting method. The challenge is to find a method which is acceptable and affordable and which strikes the balance between keeping both exclusion and inclusion errors as limited as possible.

The main distinction is between methods that rely on self-targeting, categorical targeting or welfare-based measures (Grosh et al., 2022). Table 1 summarizes the main targeting methods relevant in a humanitarian context along with their strengths and weaknesses. Often, different methods are combined (hybrid targeting). For example, geographical targeting is combined with a proxy-means test or eligibility is further limited to specific categorical groups, such as children.

Table 1. Overview of selected targeting methods[5]

Method	Eligibility criteria	Strengths	Weaknesses	Appropriate context
Self-targeting	Open to all, but design encourages only the poorest to participate	Relatively low costs of administration	Opportunity costs; social costs; potential for high exclusion errors	Crisis situation; chronic poverty; lower administrative capacity; conditional programmes such as cash or food for assets;
Categorical targeting				
Geographical location	Areas/communities most in need or hit hardest by a shock	Simple and relatively low costs of administration; easy to communicate;	Inaccuracy (exclusion and inclusion errors)	Vulnerable groups located in specific areas; limited administrative capacity;
Household level	Characteristic of the household such as age, sex of the head; household size; household dependency ratio;	Simple and relatively low costs of administration; easy to communicate;	Inaccuracy (exclusion and inclusion errors)	Characteristics strongly correlated with vulnerability; limited administrative capacity;
Individual level	Individual characteristics such as sex, age, disability status	Simple and relatively low costs of administration; easy to communicate;	Inaccuracy (inclusion and exclusion errors)	Characteristics strongly correlated with vulnerability; limited administrative capacity;
Welfare-based targeting				
Community-based targeting	Community leader or local community decision	Benefits from information on the local level; low administrative costs	Risk of capture by local elites; may reinforce power structures and exclusion at the community level; difficult to monitor	Strong community structures; small benefits; limited administrative capacity; mainly rural areas;
Proxy means-testing	Empirically derived multidimensional proxy index of characteristics correlated with poverty	Alternative to means-testing in cases of informality, seasonality, in-kind earnings; captures multidimensional aspects of poverty	Administratively demanding; does not respond to sudden changes in welfare; potential for inaccuracies; difficult to communicate	Availability of reliable household level data; large benefit or multiple programs; high administrative capacity;
Score card	Multisector vulnerability score with indicators and weights jointly determined by stakeholders	Does not require econometric specialist; buy-in from partners;	Administratively costly; selection of indicators not transparent; difficult to validate; difficult to communicate	Small populations or availability of household registry/multisector vulnerability data.

Source: based on Gassmann & Timár (2020), Grosh et al. (2022), and UNHCR & WFP (2020).

[5] Other targeting methods not included in this overview due to limited relevance in the humanitarian context are means-testing (both verified or not verified), affluence testing and random draw (lottery).

2.3 Costs of targeting

While targeting assistance to those most in need sounds rather appealing from a theoretical perspective, in practice targeting comes at a cost. Needs assessments, registration procedures, keeping a database of participants and complaint mechanisms pertains to all humanitarian programs, yet identifying those most in need and further prioritizing who should receive assistance involves both additional process- and impact-related costs. The chosen targeting method may also affect the extent of the costs. Generally, applying blanket methods requires less administrative capacity compared to more complex targeting methods and related eligibility criteria.

Process-related costs

According to the UNHCR and WFP Joint Targeting Guidelines (UNHCR & WFP, 2020), programme targeting involves nine steps from registration of the population as the first step to monitoring of the outcomes as the final step. The WFP operational guidelines (WFP, 2021) refer to four main tasks: 1) assess the needs, 2) choose the right method, 3) select the beneficiaries, and 4) monitor. Table 2 lists the nine targeting steps from the Joint Guidelines and the expected process-related costs. These steps are often implemented in chronological order, but activities may also be implemented simultaneously or in a different order. Targeting is a continuous process. Changes in socio-economic contexts or covariate shocks may require adaptations to the targeting system. Regular feedback loops based on monitoring outcomes help improving and fine tuning the targeting system over time (WFP, 2021). However, these steps should be preceded by a discussion on the programme objectives and the rationale for moving from a blanket to a targeted approach. Answering these questions first can subsequently inform the assessment, analysis and selection of the targeting method.

The additional costs of targeting and prioritization are related to the needs assessment[6], the identification of the targeting method and respective eligibility criteria, and the selection and verification of beneficiaries. Other programme costs, such as registration, communication, complaint and feedback mechanisms, and programme monitoring and evaluation are incurred irrespective of whether a programme is offered as blanket assistance or whether it is targeting or prioritizing the most vulnerable group. The marginal costs of targeting and prioritization depend on the respective humanitarian context and the selected targeting method. More complex targeting methods may require more staff time to verify an applicant's eligibility, engage with the community or deal with grievances. It might also lead to higher monitoring and evaluation costs if additional data are needed to assess targeting effectiveness and efficiency. Measuring the administrative costs incurred by targeting is difficult (Grosh et al 2022), because relevant costs are often assigned to different cost centres (WFP 2021).

[6] Needs assessments and context analyses are a component of humanitarian planning more generally and are often used to inform the targeting strategy. However, the data may not always be sufficient or detailed enough requiring more information and additional analyses. This can entail expanding the sample or the questionnaire which would lead to targeting-specific costs.

Table 2. Steps in the targeting process

Step programme cycle		Cost	Blanket	Targeted
1.	Registration	UNHCR manifest-based household registry	✓	✓
		Expanded household registry		✓
2.	Assessment & analysis	Collection of granular, representative household data with targeting specific variables		✓
		Data to identify whether there is variation in capacity to meet essential needs		✓
3.	Deciding whether targeting/prioritization is appropriate	Programme/political discussions	✓	✓
		Community engagement		✓
		Review of international norms & best practice	✓	✓
4.	Selecting the targeting/prioritization methodology	Assessment of feasibility of each targeting method in terms of human and physical capacity		✓
5.	Defining eligibility criteria	Analysis of relationship between targeting and prioritization variables against poverty/consumption		✓
6.	Validating targeting/prioritization method & criteria	Simulation of benefit distribution on datasets, checking distributional outcomes		✓
		Community, programme, political discussions and validation exercises	✓	✓
7.	Communication, appeals & feedback mechanism	Community broadcast, e.g. radio, plays, written communication	✓	✓
		Appeals desks/staff		✓
		Complaint & feedback hotlines	✓	✓
8.	Identification/implementation	Census activity, e.g. for proxy means testing		✓
		Document/other status verification exercise	✓	✓
		Transfer/in-kind distributions	✓	✓
9.	Monitoring & evaluation	Routine large N data collection & analysis	✓	✓
		Analysis of programme outcomes/impact	✓	✓

Source: based on UNHCR & WFP (2020), WFP (2021).

Impact-related costs

Impact-related costs are costs that affect directly or indirectly the programmatic outcomes and impacts. This category of costs includes targeting errors, whether due to design or implementation, and the costs incurred by programme participants.

There is no such thing as perfect targeting. Assessing the real needs of individuals and households is difficult, both in development and humanitarian contexts. Even though targeting assistance to those most in need is in theory the most effective and efficient policy option to reduce the poverty gap, there is no single criteria that can properly rank the population from most to least vulnerable. Targeting errors occur due to the inclusion of participants that are not vulnerable (inclusion errors) or because of the exclusion of participants that require support (exclusion errors). Exclusion errors undermine the horizontal efficiency of social and humanitarian assistance and reduce the poverty-reduction potential of the programme. Inclusion errors result in the leakage of support to those not in need and reduce the vertical programme efficiency.

Targeting errors can be the result of programme design or implementation. For example, selecting beneficiaries based on their geographical location leads by design to both exclusion and inclusion errors. Not all beneficiaries are in need of support in the targeted location, which causes inclusion errors by design. In the non-targeted locations, equally vulnerable individuals are excluded from assistance, which results in exclusion errors by design. Design errors can be estimated ex-ante if data from step 2 (eventually in combination with registration data from step 1) are available. Comparing different targeting methods during step 4 (Table 2) supports the selection of the most effective and efficient targeting method taking into account the different trade-offs between inclusion and exclusion errors. Prioritization can further increase design exclusion errors (WFP, 2021).

Implementation-related targeting errors occur due to the wrongful inclusion or exclusion of participants. Individuals that meet the eligibility criteria might be excluded from the programme for various reasons. There might have been an administrative mistake or eligible participants have not come forward to claim their benefits. If non-eligible participants are included in the program, they are incorrectly enrolled in the program, resulting in inclusion errors (WFP, 2021).

The targeting performance of any social or humanitarian assistance programme should be assessed from both sides. It is important to understand whether exclusion and inclusion errors are due to eligibility criteria or whether they have occurred during programme implementation (Gassmann & Timár, 2020). There is always a trade-off between costs and programme efficiency, and the aim to reduce inclusion errors tends to increase exclusion errors (Coady et al., 2004).

Targeting costs may also arise for programme participants. Beneficiaries may incur pecuniary and non-pecuniary costs in a targeted system. Depending on the needs assessment and targeting method, programme applicants may have to answer additional questionnaires, submit documentation as evidence of their eligibility. This might not only induce actual costs related to obtaining relevant documents, but also put applicants at the risk of data privacy breaches. The time required for the application process or(repeated) travels to the registration office during the application process may result in foregone income, or costs associated with travel. These transaction costs "…can reduce the value of participating in programs and sometimes exclude people altogether" (Grosh et al., 2022:120). If this results in reduced programme take-up, programme objectives may not be reached.

Table 3. Social costs borne by programme participants

	Blanket	Targeted
Travel to verification site	✓	✓
Costs accessing registration site, e.g. translation cost, companion	✓	✓
Foregone income during onboarding	✓	✓
Data privacy costs		✓
Cost of obtaining verification evidence		✓
Behavioural alterations to improve chances of eligibility		✓
Feelings of shame		✓
Community stigma		✓
Community perception of misallocation		✓

Source: own elaboration

Welfare-based targeting methods can induce feelings of shame and stigmatization of participants and jealousy by non-beneficiaries (Roelen, 2019; Grosh et al., 2022). Sen (1995) argues that any system that requires people to be identified as poor will inevitably have impacts on their self-respect and how society sees them. Community perceptions of the legitimacy of the targeting process may induce community tensions. These social costs are hard to measure. They may also negatively affect the take-up rate among eligible participants, which results in reduced programme effectiveness. The individual costs are summarized in Table 3.

2.4 Benefits of targeting

The benefits of targeting and prioritization derive from increased programme effectiveness and efficiency. Focusing the resources on those who need them most ensures that support reaches those most in need. It helps achieving maximum coverage of the poor and prevents benefits from being captured by the non-poor. Even though the total administrative costs might be higher in targeted programs compared to blanket assistance, the extra efforts may lead to lower exclusion and inclusion errors.

At the core of the targeting argument is the notion of efficiency. There are two commonly assessed measures of efficiency: vertical and horizontal efficiency (Atkinson, 1995). Vertical efficiency refers to the poverty reducing efficiency of a transfer – the extent to which transfers reduce the poverty gap (or headcount). Horizontal efficiency refers to the extent to which the (needs of the) poor have been covered by the transfers (Atkinson, 1995). Given a fixed budget, the intention of targeting is to accrue a greater proportion of transfers to households at the poorest end of the consumption distribution and therefore improve transfer efficiency.[7]

Effectiveness asks whether targeting is more cost effective compared to blanket assistance in achieving a given outcome. In humanitarian settings, effectiveness of programmes is governed by

[7] The same logic holds for vulnerability.

external and internal minimum standards, including SPHERE humanitarian standards and WFP corporate indicators. Common outcome indicators can include Food Consumption Score, Household Hunger Score, Dietary Diversity Score, Economic Capacity to Meet Essential Needs (ECMEN) and its sub-components the Minimum Expenditure Basket and Minimum Food Basket.

Even though standard political economy models argue that targeting will eventually reduce popular support for social programs (Sen 1995; Gelbach & Pritchett, 2002), ensuring that the financial resources are allocated to those most in need may also garner political support (Schüring & Gassmann, 2016). Given the dependence of international organizations such as UNHCR and WFP on financial donor support, evidence that assistance reaches those most in need may contribute to the financial sustainability of their programs.

Targeting support to those most in need may also generate social welfare gains. Assuming that the marginal return of giving a dollar to a poor person is the same as giving it to a less poor person underestimates the social value of the program. Hence, the social returns for assistance targeted and prioritized to those most in need are likely higher compared to blanket assistance (Barrientos et al., 2022). Moreover, the multiplier effects of social and humanitarian cash transfers are also expected to be higher in targeted programs given that the poor have a higher marginal propensity to consume (Gassmann, et al., 2023).

The introduction of targeting in humanitarian settings, and particularly refugee camps, can have strategic advantages at both a very local and broader political-economy environment. Refugee camps are often protracted settings, with many refugee households residing in the camps for multiple decades. In the absence of durable solutions, refugees remain under the mandate of UNHCR, receiving assistance to meet their essential food and habitation needs. While maintaining their protected legal status is essential to reflect their *political* vulnerability, the fact that the label "refugee" confers on-going provision of blanket assistance does not necessarily reflect the level of their (unmeasured) actual social and economic position within camps and in the wider context of host communities. Within camps, the unrecognised heterogeneity of refugees may result in inefficient use of resources; pro-poor redistributive programming would require that transfers accrue to the poorest with respect to a measure of welfare. In the context of high competition for limited resources, a failure to recognise the within-population heterogeneity may reduce the inclination of donors to provision resources. Externally, refugee camps are often located in regions characterised by harsh climactic conditions and widespread poverty often with a wide disparity between the assistance delivered to refugee and host community which might not be proportionate to their relative (unmeasured) welfare levels. On-going disparity in provision may lead to tensions between national policymakers, host communities, refugees and UN agencies which may jeopardize the potential alignment or integration of assistance systems for a durable solution.

2.5 Costs versus benefits

The extent to which the costs of targeting exceed the benefits remains an empirical question. Targeting is never perfect. There are trade-offs between costs and benefits and policy makers need to ask themselves how much imperfection they can tolerate. Higher targeting costs may be acceptable if they lead to sufficiently better targeting (Coady et.al. 2004). However, targeting effectiveness depends on country context and implementation. Or, in the words of van de Walle (1998:232): "People routinely underestimate how difficult it is to target the poor".

3. Data and Methodology

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3. Data and Methodology

3.1 Case study approach

This exploratory study employs a case study approach in three countries: Colombia, Mauritania, and Rwanda. The case study approach is appropriate for several reasons. First, collecting data on targeting costs cannot rely on a standardised method. Hence, in-depth engagement with involved staff at country level is required (and, where relevant, sub-country office level). Second, qualitative data collection with affected populations (both beneficiaries and applicants) is essential to understand the real (often unobserved) costs of targeting, particularly the non-pecuniary costs.

This study draws on different sources following an interactive process. No single consolidated source of information exists that would allow assessing the costs (and benefits) of targeting and prioritization. 'The study relies primarily on qualitative data . This primary qualitative data collection process is essential to the Activities Based Costing-Ingredients approach (ABC-I) and allows identifying the costs of selecting programme beneficiaries. Together with Country Office staff, the UNU-MERIT team identified the processes and activities that were involved in targeting or prioritization of the programme under review. At the distribution locations, the team spoke with implementing partners and with beneficiaries and those who applied to be beneficiaries to elicit transaction costs, social costs, and community perceptions of targeting.

The case study approach introduces several limitations. Case studies are not intended to be analysed between cases. The axis of analysis is rather between time periods within a case (for example, a transition from blanket assistance to targeted assistance). Cases are intended to provide an illustrative example that can be used to enrich the conceptual work. Hence, our cases vary with respect to geography and country context, the targeting methodology and differences in implementation strategy. Despite these limitations, this approach is appropriate given that no targeting approach is implemented identically, and contextual factors are expected to play a role.

The selection of case studies is guided by both conceptual and pragmatic factors. Nine countries[8] were initially listed as potential case studies based on the presence of both WFP and UNHCR, the size of the forcibly displaced population, the type of assistance provided and whether humanitarian aid is targeted. Ideally, a recent change from blanket to targeted assistance took place (or vice versa).

Given the broad scope of the study, there is no *a priori* reason to conduct the analysis through a particular lens – i.e. within a region or within a method. In addition, the case study locations need to be feasible for data collection, with an enabling environment that permits data collection among beneficiaries without posing a risk to participants or researchers. However, most importantly, the data collection methodology requires the availability and willingness of Country (Sub-) Office staff to make their staff available and be willing to extensively engage with the methodology. Hence, the team reached out to all nine countries. Three countries responded positively (Colombia, Mauritania, Rwanda). Within each country, data collection activities, including primary data collection and secondary data collation, were carried out during field missions by the UNU-MERIT team.

[8] Mauritania, Uganda, Colombia, Rwanda, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco , Niger, South Sudan.

Table 4. Countries selected as case studies

Country	Targeted population	Targeting method	Type of assistance	Number of beneficiaries	Observations
Mauritania	Malian refugees	Refugee status, geographic (camp and surroundings), scorecard (with community consultations)	Inclusion in national social safety net (Tekavoul, Inaya); basic needs assistance (UNHCR); food and cash assistance (WFP)	14,012 households (in/around Mbera, 2022)	Connection with and inclusion in national social protection programmes; Since 2018 UNHCR and WFP undertook a shift from blanket to vulnerability-based assistance to prioritise the most vulnerable refugees for food and other basic needs assistance[9]
Colombia	Venezuelan migrants and Colombians returnees + host communities	Scorecard, time of arrival	Multipurpose cash assistance (WFP)	1,436,576 (people)[10]	Benefit received for six months. Methodology created on the onset of the crisis (2018) and refined on a regular basis. Donor requested time of arrival to be included as an exclusion criteria.
Rwanda	Burundian and Congolese refugees	Refugee status, geographic (camps), community-based validation of eligibility criteria, and categorical (PSN)	Cash assistance (WFP), non-food cash assistance (UNHCR)[11]	113,000 people (in camps in 2023)	Mix of different targeting methods. In 2021, change from blanket to targeted food assistance.[4]

Source: own elaboration based on various data sources (see footnotes).

[9] https://wfp-unhcr-hub.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/UNHCR-WFP-Joint-Targeting-for-Refugees-in-Bassikounou-Mauritania.pdf

[10] WFP Summary report on the evaluation of the country strategic plan for Colombia (2021–2024)

[11] 4thJOINT UNHCR/WFPPOST DISTRIBUTIONMONITORINGFOR REFUGEES IN RWANDA

3.2 Data collection and analysis

This study relies on qualitative data collected in the three case study countries. The primary data is supplemented with information from secondary sources, such as programme and monitoring data, programme reports and academic literature (where available). The first case study (Rwanda) served as a test case for the process to enable further refinement in subsequent cases. At that stage, the tools and methodology were subject to Ethical Approval.

In order to get estimates of the administrative costs of targeting, an Excel-based data collection tool has been developed to support the Activity-Based Costing Ingredients (ABC-I) method, asking senior programme officers during Key Informant Interviews (KII) to identify the different steps and staff capacity that were used for the design and implementation of the respective targeting approach. KIIs with other staff at country office and sub-office level and with various stakeholders were used to supplement the information and provide more insights into the costs and benefits of targeting and prioritization of humanitarian assistance. Focus-group discussions (FGDs) with beneficiaries were held to understand the not strictly financial costs associated with targeting. The questions focused on identifying the opportunity costs of compliance with targeting, the direct and indirect costs of gathering or verifying documentation, as well as understanding and eliciting the social costs, thereby identifying those factors that might prevent the intended programme outcomes from being observed (see the Annex for more details and the tools).

Table 5 provides a summary of the interlocutors by type of stakeholder and the tool they were exposed to. Senior programme officers and programme officers are affiliated with either UNHCR or WFP and are based at the country level offices or at sub-offices of the two organizations. In total, the team held 57 KIIs, of which 31 with staff from WFP and 14 with staff from UNHCR. The ABC-I tool was used in 8 interviews; in each country with at least two key informants. In Rwanda, the team interviewed three humanitarian or implementing partners, two in Colombia and seven in Mauritania. FGDs were held with beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries in all three countries. In Mauritania, the six FGDs were evenly split among the three vulnerability categories and included in total 37 refugees. In Columbia, 28 participants joined the FGDs.

Table 5. Summary of primary data collection

Stakeholder	Tool	Rwanda	Colombia	Mauritania
WFP	KII	8	15	8
UNHCR	KII	10		4
Partners (Government, humanitarian actors, other)	KII	3	2	7
Beneficiaries	FGD	**	2	2
Non beneficiaries	FGD	**	2	4*

Note: *Two FGDs with vulnerability category 2 and category 3 each. **Transcripts of FGDs had to stay in Rwanda according to new Cyber Security Law. KII refers to the number of interviews per organisation and country. Some of the interviews were attended by more than one person.

KIIs and FGDs were audio-recorded after participants had given their consent. The KIIs were held in English, Spanish, or French. FGDs were held in the local language of the participants. All recordings were then first transcribed and subsequently translated into English. The English transcripts were coded and analysed in line with the research questions.

3.3 Limitations

An exploratory case study approach is well suited to study the costs and benefits of targeting humanitarian assistance. Yet even though this study analyses three different cases it does not allow a comparison across the cases. The humanitarian context, the institutional history, and the targeting methods in the three countries are rather different. This is particularly true for Colombia, which represents quite a different context compared to Rwanda and Mauritania. The composition of the forcibly displaced population is much more diverse in terms of tenure in the host country and economic capacity. Contrary to Rwanda and Mauritania, WFP and UNHCR mainly operate on their own. Hence, we cannot directly compare the findings, nor are they a priori generalizable.

The study encountered several other challenges in the field. The Excel-based ABC-I tool proved to be particularly challenging. In all countries, some time has passed since humanitarian assistance moved from blanket to targeted or prioritized assistance. In some cases, the responsible staff have already rotated to other countries. Recall bias of the current staff was another problem. While the KII approach facilitated the discussion and also reminded interlocutors of potential steps in the targeting process, recollecting the actual staff capacity allocated to the process, and in particular to each step, proved to be difficult. The Rwanda test case was illustrative. The initial idea of ABC-I is that participants list the different activities without prompting by the interviewer. Yet, that led to steps being missed, circular arguments and/or the lack of chronology. The team then decided to guide the ABC-I interlocutors by referring to the different steps involved in the design and implementation of targeting and prioritization. Although this facilitated a more structured discussion, other problems remained, such as identifying who was involved at what stage and for how much time.

Even though the case study countries have been selected based on the willingness of the country teams to participate in this study, and the timing of the field missions has been planned in close collaboration with the country teams, the availability of (senior) programme officers remained an issue. In some countries, it was challenging for country office staff to find time to work with the team and complete the ABC-I tool and share the necessary information.

The team initially envisaged to support the qualitative analysis with secondary data, such as ledger data, data from registration systems and/or JPDM data. Given the challenges of obtaining these data from the different country teams, this aim had to be abandoned in the end.

Finally, Rwanda proved a challenge on its own. It was the only country where ethical approval from the Rwanda National Ethics Committee (RNEC) had to be obtained prior to the field work. This was eventually granted, though not in time for the FGDs. A local researcher sub-contracted by UNU-MERIT supported the RNEC application and implemented the FGDs once ethical approval was received. However, due to a new Law on Cyber Security, no qualitative data could leave the country. Hence, it was not possible to get access to the transcripts, and, hence, the Rwandan FGDs are not included in this study.

4. Colombia

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4. Colombia – the non-camp setting

4.1 Context

Colombia, consistent with many countries in the region, has a complex history of being both a country of origin and destination country for refugees and migrants. The majority of Colombia's recent history with migration is with Venezuela. At the beginning of 2024, there were an estimated 2.8 million Venezuelans in Colombia, with many spread over Colombia's vast territory. Economic collapse, political instability and widespread persecution in neighbouring Venezuela have precipitated large-scale movement out of the former Petrostate for a number of years. Colombia is also a significant transit country, occupying a position at the foot of the Darian Gap, the strip of land that links south and central America and is a key – and deadly – destination for refugees and migrants embarking on a long journey towards the United States. Lately, Colombia has witnessed people arriving from as far as Asia and Africa to begin their journey to North America through the Darian gap.

Unlike other case studies reviewed in this study, refugees and migrants[12] in Colombia are not required to reside in camps, and have a materially different relationship with the host state. Many were, in the recent past, able to obtain a temporary residence permit that enables households to access government health and education services, for example, on the same footing as Colombian citizens. However, despite this provision, many refugees and migrants in Colombia reside in unofficial housing in both urban and rural areas and remain excluded from the formal labour market and government assistance.

Many of the respondents reported that their households were mixed-nationality households. This dual or mixed identity was perceived by some participants as facilitating easier access to government or state benefits. However, dual or mixed identity was not universally reported as a facilitating characteristic. The FGDs revealed that Colombian returnees do not necessarily return to places with which they had previous economic or social ties, placing them largely in a similar position as Venezuelans with no previous connection to Colombia.

4.2 Targeting process

With support from the USAID Bureau of Humanitarian Affairs (USAID/BHA), WFP provides emergency cash transfers to refugees and migrants with a stated intention to stay in Colombia. Transfers are provided to eligible households for a period of six months, and on condition of non-competition. Households are ineligible to receive the WFP transfers in the event that they have received similar transfers in the past. Eligibility is further determined on the basis of a score calculated at the end of a household survey in a process that takes weights from a regression-based approach conducted periodically and applies them to household inputs to the survey.

[12] While during interviews with staff from UNHCR the migrants were (often) described as *bona fide* refugees under the 1951 Refugee Convention, in all other documents and conversations, the term migrant was used. UNHCR's website refers to refugees and migrants. This study does not take a position on the matter.

Programme eligibility

WFP Colombia uses a scorecard targeting approach to target cash and voucher assistance for migrant assistance across all regions. Datasets with a large number of observations are used to regress the scorecard criteria against the intended outcome, a proxy measure for the latent concept of vulnerability. This process is initially a one-off analysis and subsequently updated when there is new assessment data (every two years). The weights from this logistic regression are nominally used to set the weights used in the scorecard process. There were concerns expressed by interlocutors at WFP Colombia about potential reversed causality in the regression-based process that underlies the selection of criteria and the specification of weights. This was exemplified through the use of food security as both dependent and independent variable in the logistic regression equation used to determine the factor weights used subsequently in the scorecard.

The calculation of the household factor weights is conducted periodically at Country Office level, with assistance from the Regional Bureau in Panama as well, on occasions, from HQ in Rome. Assessments are carried out on datasets consisting of a survey of refugees and migrants which is representative at departmental level. However, during key informant interviews, it was revealed that there are both protection and political overrides which alter the weights assigned to specific categories. This non-technical influence modifies a pure PMT targeting process to a more hybrid process combining the PMT and scorecard approach, which can also be understand as a process of targeting-cum-prioritization. For example, the weight assigned to the number of years a migrant has been in Colombia was modified to ensure that recently arrived migrant would be eligible for emergency assistance.

Eligibility based on the score does not exclusively guarantee inclusion in the programme: there are extensive deduplication processes, in addition to quotas per set area. However, key informants noted that there were a number of econometric challenges with the approach, at least initially. This included, but is not limited to, the fact that different models were not fitted for urban and rural areas which leads to weights assigned to variables that are inconsistent with their actual relationship with the outcome in rural and urban areas. Piped access to water was an example given: in urban areas like Bogota, piped access to water is universal and therefore not a measure of deprivation, while in rural areas it may be applicable to up to half the population. A second issue raised was related to the dataset used to determine weights: the population is highly mobile and may reside in difficult to reach and survey areas and the representativeness of the survey of the full population of migrants may therefore be called into question. More broadly, the circumstances – and domicile – of the targeted population changes rapidly, leading to low confidence about the time period over which the results are valid.

Outreach and registration

Households are referred to the scorecard survey through both self-referral help desks or through a house-to-house limited census approach. Due to the non-camp context, in some areas, potential beneficiaries come to community focal points or community centres to register and have their eligibility assessed. In other areas, there is a house-to-house process of identifying eligible households through a census-like process in specifically identified and highly vulnerable areas which are known or thought to house significant proportions of migrants. Respondents in Riohacha (FGD2) noted that a community representative proactively visited likely eligible households to inform them of the details of the programme. In Medellin, some participants noted that enumerators were present in a marketplace or other public place informing those attending the market about the programme and

encouraging those that would like to benefit to complete the survey, while other respondents noted that immigration authorities provided assistance and information, encouraging people to complete the (eligibility) survey (FGD2). FGD respondents noted that the survey was not notably onerous, and did not require extensive supporting documentation.

4.3 Costs of targeting

Process-related costs

Table 6 provides estimates of staff input for some of the activities implemented as part of the targeting process. This information is based on the recollection of our key informants and should be interpreted with caution. The rows shaded in light blue identify activities for which we can assume that they might not have needed in a situation of blanket assistance.

An appeals process was raised during key informant interviews with programme teams in WFP Colombia as an element of a targeting process that might be expected to be present, but that is absent from the current design in Colombia. Appeals processes are typically implemented to correct exclusion errors through self-identification, that is, households coming forward to appeal the exclusion decision. This was neither expressed as a cost nor benefit. The absence of an appeals mechanism was perceived as justified as a result of programme design; an interlocutor from the WFP Colombia country office noted that the costs of a dedicated appeals mechanism was unlikely to be justified in the light of the short assistance window (limited to six monthly transfers). It was suggested that the 'appeals' mechanism available to persons denied assistance was to reapply for assistance if they felt that their households' circumstances made them eligible.

During an interview with an interlocutor involved with complaints and feedback mechanisms (CFM) at WFP Colombia, it was noted that poor coordination undermines the value of a CFM mechanism; eligibility scores are calculated by WFP Colombia, but the contact service point is not aware of an individual household's score and can therefore offer limited insight as part of a CFM process. Households could be ineligible for a number of reasons, including not meeting eligibility criteria, deduplication exclusion or because the regional quota had been met. In the absence of this knowledge, households would be inclined to apply multiple times. Key informants at the country office (programme staff) noted that data were not reported to be routinely collated or available on the number of repeat applicants. Hence, it is not possible to assess whether the current approach of multiple applications is more (or less) cost-efficient than the installation of a proper appeals mechanism.

Interlocutors throughout the system highlighted that extensive staff involvement was a significant cost of targeting. While in some instances, specific roles were created to support the targeting process, the majority of work was conducted by adding to existing staff portfolios. At an overall operating budget level, a key informant from the budget and programming unit indicated that the costs of targeting – whether in staff role or capital terms, were not uniquely identifiable. The interlocutor further noted that it is difficult to do further analysis of budgets submitted by implementing partners to assess the extent to which individual components of targeting implementation were consistent between implementing partners. This led to a widespread sentiment among interlocutors interviewed that the true cost of targeting was not available as a decision-making metric, nor in many respects identifiable.

Table 6. Colombia: estimated staff input

Activity	Number of actions recorded	Approximate period	Number of persons involved	Approximate time commitment
Needs assessment and developing the criteria – including survey design, data collection, cleaning and analysis	12	Jun 2019 – Jun 2020	14	*no estimate possible*
Analysis & beneficiary identification	1	Jan 2020 – Jul 2022	1	30% of time
Targeting task force	1	2021	13	1.5 hours per month
Scorecard review (GIFMM data)	4	Feb-22	9	2 weeks for all 9 involved
Piloting helpdesk	10	Apr-22	22	*no estimate possible*
Develop scorecard questionnaire	3	Jun-Aug 2022		*no estimate possible*
Oversight of help desk targeting	1	Aug 2022 – date	2	2 days per month
Analysis & beneficiary identification	1	Jan 2022 – date	1	80% of time
Scorecard review (WFP Needs Assessment Data 2022 data)	2	Jul – Sep 2023	4	20% for programme officer, 70% for JPO, 30% for GS5, 30% for GS8
Eligibility verification	8	Jul-Sep 2024	7	10-20% for three months

Source: own elaboration based on ABC-I and KII.

Impact-related costs

Consistent with our other country case studies, targeting errors were raised as a prescient issue when considering the cost of targeting. Yet, the context of Colombia means that the calculation of targeting errors is not possible. Consistent with most contexts, when persons cross the border from Venezuela, information is collected from individuals in UNHCR's proGres system.[13] However, thereafter refugees and migrants are free to move within the country, and anecdotally avail themselves of this freedom. While some households are able to access the formal rental market, many find themselves residing in informal settlements either in rural, peri-urban or urban areas.

[13] ProGres is UNHCR's registration and case management system (www.unhcr.org/registration-guidance/chapter3/registration-tools/).

There is little information on the actual distribution of refugees and migrants around the country. Surveying them in the manner of Joint Post-Distribution Monitoring or Joint Assessment Missions as in encamped contexts is difficult. Hence, exclusion (or inclusion) errors are non-calculable. Given that the tuning of the PMT model used to calculate the score does not use a fully representative dataset of the refugee and migrant population in Colombia also implies targeting errors by design. Biases in the estimated weights introduce the risk of a mis-allocation of a household. Given that we have normative reason to believe that those excluded from the survey are those living in remote or informal settlements, the consequences of this may be significant for the most vulnerable households, though it remains difficult to estimate this value.

Other inefficiencies not strictly related to targeting are due to the design of the programme. The short duration of transfers, in conjunction with the lower-than-minimum food basket (MFB) transfer value means that, at the end of the six transfers, households most likely remain vulnerable. Given that households are not permitted to re-enter the programme, and given the non-trivial probability that a household falls to its pre-transfer vulnerability, **it is likely that programme design induces a second layer of exclusion error** from the programme.

FGD respondents in Riohacha noted a perception that those receiving assistance were not necessarily the most at-need, though were unable to highlight the mechanism through which these targeting errors arose. Evidence from primary qualitative research further suggests that households frequently benefited from assistance on multiple occasions, despite strict de-duplication processes, with some interlocutors noting that this may be the result of complex households that are not well captured by surveys or registration processes. Moreover, despite a less-than-MFB transfer, and despite the widespread deprivation in which many migrant households reside, the transfers were often used as strategic investments into cottage micro-industries (Medellin FGD1, Riohacha FGD1, FGD2) rather than as income supplement facilitating spending on a basket of goods through both price and income effects. This might be the result of the confluence of two factors: first, the known limited duration of transfers creating an imperative to maximise the returns from transfers over the longest period of time through investment in income-generating activities as opposed to prioritizing immediate consumption; second, the difficulty experienced by refugees and migrants, including dual identity households, in accessing the formal labour market. Respondents in both Riohacha and Medellin had reported using the transfers to begin or sustain small-scale income-generating activities.

There was concern expressed at several levels about the opacity of the targeting system, to both (potential) beneficiaries and to sub-national offices. Targeting criteria and their associated weights are determined through a process of quantitative regression analysis, with interlocutors reporting that this is done with significant involvement from technical experts from the WFP Regional Bureau in Panama and Headquarters. It was reported by respondents in the WFP Colombia country office that this process was difficult to convey meaningfully to field offices or applicants.

Beyond the criteria, there was concern expressed about process-related delays and unclarities among participants. In addition to the consternation caused to applicants, this induces inefficiencies in the process. In an interview with staff related to CFM at WFP Colombia, **it was noted that approximately one-third of eligible and registered beneficiaries failed to collect their transfers.**[14] This was reported to be the function of two factors: time lags between registration and dispersal, and difficulties in contacting beneficiaries.

[14] Note that it is not clear to what period/year the interlocutor was referring to.

The programme enrolment process involves a survey being administered by implementing partners, with the results analysed, scores calculated and eligibility determined by WFP Colombia alongside a process of deduplication. Responsibility then falls on implementing partners to communicate decisions and register eligible beneficiaries. However, implementing partners are given a monthly cap in their area. To overcome this issue, implementing partners reportedly created unofficial waiting lists, of which WFP were unaware. The result was that households reported to be required to wait a significant period of time for eligibility determination, including eligible households. These factors were compounded by WFP being unable to communicate decisions to unsuccessful applicants due to the pressure of ensuring eligible households were informed in time. The lengthy waiting times – reported to be up to six months in the initial period – meant households were left in limbo with respect to their eligibility status in the face of significant economic precarity. This was said to lead to households moving locations between the time of the initial survey and the decision being communicated, or becoming uncontactable. Households were often reported to be living in temporary housing without a permanent address and without the resources to sustain a mobile telephone contract leading to frequently changing telephone numbers.

A related but distinct issue is the condition set by the donor to change the weight of certain variables. There was concern expressed by policymakers within WFP that decision-making based on specific priorities, without prejudice to its necessity, induces the chance of exclusion error. Staff expressed concern that length of tenure in Colombia was not a reliable or significant determinant of a person's economic well-being. On the contrary, there was sentiment expressed during focus group discussions that those who had resided longer in the country were in fact at a *disadvantage* as newer arrivals could access arrivals centres in which consolidated service information is available, while those with longer residence in Colombia were required to assemble information *ad hoc*. This opinion was expressed by staff who reported being involved in the statistical analysis that underlies the targeting, and by staff in field offices. However, no regression output was available as proof.

The Colombian context presents a significant obstacle to monitor the true rate of targeting errors across the theoretically eligible universe of migrants. Within *representative* datasets it is possible to estimate a rate, but given the remote, marginalized, informal nature of many of the migrants, there may be reason to believe that the errors at the margins are more significant from a protection and pro-poor approach. Staff reported that efforts to calculate the exclusion rate were not made reliably or robustly, despite the circulation of percentage estimates.

Consistent with other country case studies, most staff responded that exclusion errors were a primary cost. From a poverty-efficiency perspective, an inclusion error is also a cost – it is a transfer that could have been provided to a more vulnerable household - but during the majority of interviews with programme staff, inclusion errors were hardly proffered as costs. An interview with staff in the WFP Colombia Country Office did raise inclusion errors as a significant concern for the office. Yet, much of the concern expressed in the interview could easily be applied to non-targeted programmes and is partly attuned to the political economy of the humanitarian funding atmosphere in Colombia.

During interviews with Field Office staff, the opacity of the system was raised as a factor that led to a cost for staff and applicants. Implementing partners are responsible for the delivery of the household survey in either method of targeting, but the calculation of the score is conducted at Country Office level (along with de-duplication exercises). However, the reason for non-enrolment in the programme is not made clear to implementing partners nor to applicants. Non-enrolment could be because of their (in)eligibility, but it could also be because of the de-duplication exercise, or because the quota has been met in that particular region for beneficiaries. In the absence of this knowledge, households reportedly applied routinely.

Given the personal time and efforts on the part of the beneficiaries in attending help desks to be considered for targeting, frequent application might be an indicator for the presence of exclusion errors. While implementing partners make eligibility assessments as efficient as possible, this is still a significant time investment that may reduce the ability of the applicant – often a woman – to supply labour in the job market, or supply domestic labour. FGD Respondents reported both direct costs and opportunity costs to participating in assistance. In Riohacha, participants reported needing to pay up to 6,000 COP (~1.45 USD) to travel to distribution centres. Other respondents reported opportunity cost in the form of foregone income while attending distribution sites; employment in the formal sector in which paid time off might be granted is rare, and income generating activities require respondents' daily attendance.

Other primary costs borne by applicants were identified by an interview with staff involved in CFM at WFP Colombia. Given the co-habitation of migrants targeted by the programme with non-displaced Colombian nationals not targeted for the programme, a systematic census-style survey is not always feasible and therefore community representatives adopted an information dissemination role to facilitate awareness and uptake of the survey. These representatives were reported to expect payment for this service, creating a pseudo tax on survey participants.

Given the cost in terms of both time, direct and opportunity cost of application, there may be a cost to the assumed benefits of having no appeals mechanism for applicants. This was said by an interlocutor involved in the CFM process at WFP Colombia in part to be due to a limited interest in tracking exclusion errors. This is at least in part due to the assumption that there would persistently be insufficient funding for all households, throughout time, and therefore the resolution of an exclusion error at one point in time would not provide effective correction of an exclusion error.

It was noted during KIIs with UNHCR and WFP country offices that there is a discrepancy between the definitional and identification strategies employed by the national social protection agency, WFP and UNHCR with respect to latent vulnerability. The targeting system used by WFP Colombia to identify beneficiaries is bespoke to WFP; other agencies do not necessarily use this system. Moreover, key informants in the social protection unit at WFP Colombia noted that the targeting criteria used by the national social protection system were not consistent with WFP's criteria and that this might lead to differential household assignment into poor or non-poor categories. This difference was said to be the result of the different mandates of the organisations involved. To the knowledge of key informants interviewed, no analysis of the distributional impact of national, WFP and UNHCR transfers had been conducted, and that the current data landscape is unlikely to be able to facilitate this analysis. The impossibility of linking data across different systems (for example, proGres with JPDM data or with national household surveys) is not only an obstacle for eligibility assessments but also for outcome monitoring. However, it was noted that the different transfer targeting processes might result in distributional inefficiency and inconsistency, undermining a core economic argument for targeting.

4.4 Benefits of targeting

Consistent with other case studies, interlocutors reported that the benefit of targeting is that it enables transfers to be given. The humanitarian political economy in Colombia would not permit non-targeted transfers and broader budget constraints would mean that untargeted transfers would likely be less generous or perhaps entirely unfeasible. However, as noted in at least one interview from the social protection unit in WFP Colombia, the potential benefits from targeting are not fully realized because the targeting is insufficiently stringent. In the same interview, it was mentioned that the

potential benefit of narrowing coverage through targeting was that it would enable an increase in the 'depth' or value of transfers, in line with a commonly reported theoretical argument on targeting. However, the same interlocutor reported that this benefit was not materialized on this occasion as the implementation of targeting coincided with a reduction in the value of transfers.

Partial alignment or consistency with national social protection systems was mentioned during at least one key informant interview at WFP Colombia as a tangential benefit of targeting. The targeting processes are different, though it was noted that the targeted processes would likely identify similar people, there is no guarantee that the two sets of criteria would map the same latent concept of vulnerability onto the population. While harmonisation of the humanitarian targeting system and the targeting process used by the national social protection system was not an explicitly stated objective, creating a coherent pipeline between humanitarian and government programmes was stated as an objective during an interview with a representative of the social protection unit. However, the same interlocutor noted that this dual approach also created process-related inefficiencies. Speaking more broadly, an interlocutor from WFP Colombia working in CFM noted that funding for WFP's policy portfolios in the country was dependent on their alignment with the position of the government of Colombia on key issues. This highlights the importance to the sustainability of programming in WFP's on-going Country Strategic Plan (CSP) of alignment with the government of Colombia.

Improvements in the data landscape due to the transition to targeting was highlighted as at least a tangential benefit of targeting. Targeting processes often rely on census or survey data, and sometimes social registries are created as part of the process. A social registry, it was reported by an interlocutor in the social protection department in WFP Colombia, would assist in giving greater visibility to the situation of otherwise hard to see households in the national data landscape, including intersectional vulnerabilities. However, the same interlocutor noted that a fragmented national and humanitarian targeting system does not allow potential synergies to be unlocked by cross-referencing data between national and UN systems. The same interlocutor cautioned that there cannot be blind reliance on the national system, as there are significant gaps in the coverage and visibility of marginalized groups including, *inter alia,* indigenous groups and those living without a permanent address.

Beneficiaries in all FGDs across all locations spoke of benefits of specific targeting mechanisms, rather than of targeting *per se*. The proactiveness of implementing partners was reported to increase perceived accessibility of the application process; while it was generally reported that the application process was uncomplicated and transparent, it remains essential to reduce (perceived) barriers to application. The proactiveness and important governance role played by community leaders was also spotlighted, particularly for those households that might have special needs, or might not have a telephone. The at-home survey method of beneficiary identification was specifically highlighted as a positive as many respondents worked in cottage industries or small businesses which would make attending third locations difficult.

5. Rwanda

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5. Rwanda – from blanket to targeted assistance

5.1 Context

Forced displacement has been a consistent and core theme woven through the chapters of Rwanda's contemporary history from the mid-twentieth century onwards. At various points through its history, Rwandans have been internally displaced due to colonial-era forced labour and ethnic cleansing in the immediate transition to independence while more than two million Rwandans sought refuge in neighbouring countries as a result of the ethnic violence that culminated in the 1994 genocide (Cottyn, 2018). Rwanda's post genocide history has been marked by return and integration of Rwandan refugees and the commencement of Rwanda's history as a significant refugee hosting country, as conflict, fragility and natural disasters in neighbouring Democratic Republic of the Congo and Burundi caused widespread displacement (Cottyn, 2018; Fajth et al., 2019). Rwanda's five refugee camps[15] have since played host to approximately 120,000 refugees (data available only from 2024) and they are considered to be in protracted displacement.

In 2021, both WFP and UNHCR, in conjunction with the UNHCR-WFP Joint Hub, opted to implement a needs-based and protection-sensitive approach to their humanitarian assistance programmes in Rwanda. This was in response to the complexity of refugee camp economics and heterogenous levels of vulnerability within households at a given moment in time (recognizing the variability of vulnerability within households between time periods), and in response to long-term draw-down in funding available to WFP's operations in Rwanda. As a complement, the transition to a targeted approach further supports the ambition of the Government of Rwanda – as part of their commitment to the Global Compact on Refugees and in line with their National Transformation Strategy and the UN SDG agenda – to support the socio-economic inclusion of refugees.

For WFP, this applies to the General Food Assistance (GFA) to meet the food security and nutrition needs of refugees in the five refugee camps across Rwanda. While it was originally intended that UNHCR would adopt the targeting for their assistance programmes (non-food items), we are given to understand that this was not implemented.

5.2 Targeting process

Consistent with other encamped displacement settings, the targeting approach broadly follows an econometric approach using a dataset with a large number of observations (in this case, the Joint Post-Distribution Monitoring (JPDM) dataset) to analyse vulnerability across a number of dimensions. This vulnerability framework includes the economic capacity to meet essential needs, use of livelihood coping strategies and food consumption score. On the basis of their score in these predetermined vulnerability dimensions, households in the 2020 JPDM were allocated to one of three groups: highly vulnerable, moderately vulnerable and least vulnerable.

A profiling exercise was conducted which identified sociodemographic variables associated with each of the three vulnerability categories, variables found in UNHCR's proGres database. The eligibility criteria identified include: high dependency ratio, single-headed household with child under five years of age, female-headed single-headed household, household head with no education,

[15] There used to be six camps, but one of the camps was closed in 2022.

household with eight or more members, households with two or more female children. In addition, given the protection mandate of UNHCR, two further criteria were added: household with one or more person living with a disability or chronically ill household member, and household member at risk based on UNHCR classification.

Highly vulnerable households are those meeting one or more protection criteria, or two socio-demographic criteria, or one socio-demographic criteria without any male of working capacity. In addition to the technical approach, the criteria were validated with the country teams, MINEMA and communities to ensure vulnerability reflected perceptions of vulnerability among affected populations. An appeals process is in place to enable households to challenge their decision, and on-going targeting is facilitated by changes being recorded in proGres when households report a change to their household situation that might warrant their inclusion in the programme.

5.3 Costs of targeting

Process-related costs

Table 7 provides an overview of the different activities that have been carried out as part of the targeting process and the estimated number of staff involved. Even though many activities are still ongoing, getting estimates of the actual staff commitment was not possible. Some the listed activities are programme-generic, meaning that they do not depend on whether the programme is targeted or not. Those activities that can be linked to targeting are shaded in light blue.

While it was clear that there were both time and financial costs related to targeting, the length of time elapsed between the beginning and end of the process means that some of these significant costs are not often immediately recalled or recognized. Interlocutors from WFP and UNHCR Rwanda were asked to explain their perceptions and understanding of the costs of targeting. It was clear from our discussions that there was no process in place that fully captured the costs of targeting, both in terms of capital costs or in terms of staff commitment.

Some particular components of targeting, often those for which there was monetary outlay, were recognized as a cost. However, these were not raised immediately and took some probing. For example, it was reported that there were, for example, joint missions and a multi-day workshop with multiple stakeholders at the beginning of the process. Moreover, in the absence of further documentation, a several cost aspects are not fully capturable; some smaller elements may be forgotten, but there were also likely costs involved on the part of attending or co-organising stakeholders that have since been lost as institutional memory fades.

There were other elements which were easily recognizable as a cost – and for which budget line items are available – but were not fully recognized or ascribable unequivocally as a targeting cost. For example, the JPDM survey which is used as part of on-going validation and used in the initial assessment for the readiness of targeting was, by some, recognized as a cost related to targeting, though not fully. Post distribution monitoring is a regular part of WFP's activities and therefore while it is essential to the targeting process, it was not immediately and fully ascribable to the process.

While interlocutors often spoke freely of heavy staff involvement, this was not often recognized as a *cost* – interlocutors in the country offices often referred to involvement as simply part of their duties. Nevertheless, people involved in the process that were interviewed were able to reflect on

significant time commitments for several aspects of targeting. However, due to no common reporting or recording process for time specifically related to targeting, this relies entirely on recall.

Table 7. Rwanda: estimated staff input

	Number of actions recorded	Approximate period	Number of persons involved	Approximate time commitment
Developing the criteria – single time period	10	Dec 2020-May 2021	22	40 person months
Community consultations on targeting exercise – single time period	3	Dec 2020-May 2021	10	*no estimate possible*
Design & implement communication strategy	6	Dec 2020-May 2021	12	6 person months
Implement criteria – on-going activity	6	May 2021 - to date	25	*no estimate possible*
Appeals – on-going activity	6	May 2021 - to date	32	*no estimate possible*
On-going refinement of targeting criteria – on-going item	15	May 2021 - to date	19	*no estimate possible*
JPDM 2022	8	2022	13	*no estimate possible*

Source: own elaboration based an ABC-I and KIIs.

In addition, given the length of time elapsed since the commencement of targeting much of the time commitment or activities suffer from recall bias or potentially telescoping. It is likely that activities have been omitted, and persons involved that are unavailable to give their own direct input do not have their full involvement included adequately. Concerns about cost of targeting in terms of staff costs were located in a discussion on the trade-offs associated with programme budgeting by an interlocutor (T0004). The respondent noted that the benefit value is set (crudely), in a significant part, by considering the overall programme budget and subtracting fixed and other programme costs with the remainder available for transfers. The logic of targeting, as presented by the interlocutor, is that reducing the number of beneficiaries over which the remainder must be shared increases the length of time over which transfers can be paid. The interlocutor was concerned that in the presence of rising costs of elements such as fuel and food, whether the costs of targeting and subsequent appeals did not offset the benefits of a reduced beneficiary pool, or even exceed the benefit (T0006).

Conversations with budget and programming highlights that there is no consistent or regular overview of the full costs of targeting. The costs of time commitments are – similar to interlocutors' recollections – covered by standard staff costs. While there is identification of direct costs related to the implementation of programmes (including targeted programmes) identified in the implementation plan, for example specific staff grades or consultants, or the need for specific office, travel and transportation costs, this is not disaggregated by targeting-specific activities. Activities like the JPDM were cited as examples where disaggregated costs are available – enumerators, vehicles etc – but during this conversation, the time of analysts to create statistics and draft reports out of the data was not included . Based on information shared by the UNHCR-WFP Joint Hub, the contributions of the Joint Hub were nontrivial. In late 2020 and early 2021, several missions took place for knowledge sharing activities related to targeting, consultations on the extended JPDM and the

collection of qualitative data. The UNHCR-WFP Joint Hub team continued to support the Rwandan country offices with analysis, learning activities and the analysis of JPDM data in 2021 and 2022. The Joint Hub also funded a team member (Country Coordinator) to stay in the country and coordinate the joint UNHCR and WFP targeting process for 17 months (UNHCR & WFP, 2023b).

Individual recipients of a programme are represented as costs – the transfer allocated to them is a cost that is used to calculate the ability of a budget to cover the potential outlay. Therefore, a reduction in the number of beneficiaries is automatically viewed as a reduction in costs (similarly, a reduction in the transfer per household would be viewed as a reduction in costs). However, without the associated costs of staff time reflected in the budget division, the true cost of targeting cannot be fully recognized in the current set up.

Impact-related costs

Inclusion errors were rarely considered as a cost; common economic logic would suggest that an inclusion error is a cost (when operating with a poverty aversion parameter) as that inclusion error could be better spent elsewhere. Three reasons were identified throughout interviews. First, widespread, multi-dimensional fragility, poverty and exclusion mean that it is difficult to say that no households require social protection to meet institutional, national and international development standards. Second, transfers that do not fully meet the Minimum Expenditure Basket mean that while inclusion errors are errors with respect to targeting criteria, they are not inclusion errors against a poverty benchmark. Third, uncertainty in the ability of the socio-demographic and protection targeting criteria to adequately capture the complex reality of (seasonal) income and consumption patterns among individuals means that inclusion (and exclusion) status is measured with a degree of error and is static and does not capture the inter-temporal fluctuations. In other words, an inclusion error may not stay an inclusion error for very long.

Exclusion errors were widely regarded as a cost of targeting. This is a natural extension of the above, but viewed through a humanitarian and - with respect to UNHCR - protection lens has a particular cause of concern for the two organisations involved. Those excluded, in the context of refugee camps, are likely to suffer the adverse consequences of spatial isolation and dislocation from social networks as a result of the displacement and encampment process. A person's capacity for self-reliance is likely to be mediated by displacement-specific contexts. However, there was no evidence made available to the UNU-MERIT team that suggested that there had been specific analysis conducted to rebuke or support claims that the scale-down of transfer values or the reduction in beneficiary numbers had been directly linked to adverse outcomes with respect to food security or nutrition indicators.

The very stringent criteria used in targeting resulted in a high proportion of households classified as high vulnerability (without prejudice to the accuracy of the measure in capturing latent vulnerability), either directly or as a result of the appeals processes. Not surprisingly, key informants (T0006 & T0007) noted a degree of scepticism that the introduction of targeting led to material savings. The exclusion of highly vulnerable persons – as a result of exclusion error in administration of the programme or through econometric challenges in adequately identifying and capturing underlying vulnerability – in conjunction with other camp-specific challenges means that targeting may increase vulnerability in the medium to long term.

This challenged the perceived benefit of targeting reported (see later section) as a means of stimulating the resilience of those with a high propensity to self-reliance. A key informant (T0007) expressed concern that the context of the camps and the *de facto* and *de jure* regulatory landscape

governing refugees at least partially undermined targeting logic. The camps, according to the key informant, are characterized by poor market access, uneven access to land tenure, and limited space for livelihood activities. The respondent noted that without access to established and secure livelihoods, most camp residents would be in positions of extreme vulnerability, implying high costs of exclusion errors and therefore suggesting that universal programme coverage is more suitable to the context (T0007). Food security was mentioned by the same interlocutor as a cross-cutting concern in the camps due to poor market access and limited access to land, so the withdrawal of assistance to vulnerable (from a food security dimension) yet not eligible households according to the targeting criteria (which considers a broader range of variables) may induce coping strategy reliance in order to meet basic needs (T0007).

There was a perception that removing households from assistance was an overall hindrance to small refugee-run businesses in the camps. During a key informant interview (T0003), it was noted that the withdrawal of assistance could lead to increased reliance on purchases on credit at smallholder traders. These small businesses may, in turn, be unable to continue to trade if overleveraged in credit to customers, leading to a loss of income for the owner's household (T0003). More broadly, concern was expressed (T0007) that with a widespread absence of livelihood opportunities in the camp, there is a limited market-based economy which was said to suppress the growth of businesses in the camp. Debt was further presented as a risk to households removed from assistance (T0003) as a form of coping strategy, with concern expressed that this may increase reliance on loan sharks or other forms of predatory lending. This also affected better-off refugees who run businesses and were selling to other refugees on credit.

There was broader discontent among interlocutors with the targeting criteria and their ability to identify economic deprivation among the target population. There was a perception that criteria were arbitrary and that the use of protection norms – such as the presumed *a priori* vulnerability of women and girls – has led to inconsistencies that are difficult to explain, and difficult to reconcile with the observed reality in the camps. While it was indicated that analysis did show that overall female headed-households, for example, exhibited greater vulnerability, the use of these criteria as binary inclusion criteria was perceived to overstate their role in determining vulnerability.

Concern was further expressed that the use of sociodemographic factors could lead to perverse incentives to change fertility intentions (particularly female children), for married couples to ostensibly separate to create a female-headed household, or for parents to leave children in separate households (T0002). An interlocutor noted that there was concern that use of family size as a proxy for vulnerability did not reflect previous best practice identified by other agencies, or the sentiment of communities, that larger households had an ability to mobilise resources that are not available to smaller households (T0004). It was further noted that this approach disadvantaged small households containing, for example, students, engaged in lifecycle appropriate activities like education or training which are not often remunerative (T0004).

Key informants routinely stated that use of socioeconomic data would facilitate a more meaningful determination of vulnerability, though informants noted that this would come at a greater data cost. Targeting using sociodemographic data is facilitated by proGres, UNHCR's proprietary registration system while socioeconomic data require either a significant expansion to proGres, or a new tailor-made system (T0001, T0002, T0003, T0004). It was further noted that this would require intense inter-agency cooperation between agencies with different mandates, which could increase cost and complexity.

Respondents involved in the appeals process noted that there was a very high spike in the number of appeals to be recategorized initially, though this number has fallen significantly over time. Interlocutors mentioned nevertheless that reported waiting times for appeals were kept to a minimum, but an interlocutor (T0004) noted that the entire process of submitting an appeal to receiving assistance (if successful) can take up to two months.

Despite these positive aspects, concern was raised about the costs induced by the appeals process on the part of both applicants and staff involved in the appeals process. An interlocutor noted that applicants seeking an appeal would typically need to provide some documentation or proof of extenuating circumstance (a medical certificate indicating unfitness to work, for example); the process of collating and providing this information is likely to generate opportunity costs and may imply administration or translation costs (T0004). The same interlocutor noted that staff time was a significant cost in this process, requiring multiple stages in the process. However, it was reported that there was significant interest in self-reliance programmes, though this was not matched by an increase in supply; this, over time, may lead to frustrations.

5.4 Benefits of targeting

The targeting process was viewed as a technically and politically successful exercise. This was suggested to be the result of broader pressure on budgets from rising costs among programme implementation line items (fuel and food-input costs), as well as a general reduction in funds available to long-standing refugee crises in the Great Lakes Region, meaning that targeting and prioritization becomes a desirable policy alternative.

A commonly held and reported view was that targeting was good as it recognized that there is heterogeneity in consumption patterns as well as in levels of self-reliance capacity. The draw-down of the distribution pool meant that those that have the capacity were then forced to build their own livelihoods independent of aid. This perception that certain households had relevant capacity for self-reliance was commonly held by interlocutors throughout both the UN but also partner agencies or other organisations in the space. This notwithstanding, in many of the same interviews interlocutors noted that there was insufficient capacity in livelihood programmes to absorb increased demand.

The introduction of targeting was also thought to assist with the political economy of refugee assistance in the Great Lakes region. Interlocutors spoke of donor fatigue in the Great Lakes region more broadly, as well as specifically for Rwanda and that budgets for blanket assistance to protracted refugee populations was becoming more difficult to secure.

Donor fatigue was reported by an interlocutor to create conflicting pressures and incentives. The push to pursue livelihoods and self-reliance-oriented programming on the one hand is undermined by the incentive refugee households have to underinvest in savings in order to maintain their access to (targeted) cash assistance while diminishing cash assistance can reduce the shock-resilience of households (T0003). The same interlocutor described this as creating a pressure for (disconnected) programmes emphasising self-reliance which are undermined by households' inability to meet basic needs. This was described as at least partially related to mandate division; while cash assistance was under the protection unit, livelihood assistance was under the development unit. On the one hand there is pressure to graduate people from basic needs assistance so they can enter livelihoods support programmes. Yet while the government works with organisations, including UNHCR, to establish a strategy for supporting self-reliance and livelihoods, basic needs programming is not sufficiently oriented to supporting people leaving basic needs with the tools that will help them connect to

livelihoods programming. The rationale for targeting was the idea to graduate people out of basic needs, but the actual process did not support this strategy. The development unit was reported to interface and align with the government's livelihood strategy and while cash assistance was supposed to align with this strategy, the targeting criteria was reported to misalign and disconnect the two programmes (T0003).

There was a widespread perception that the targeting aligned with the government's strategy of self-reliance through promoting (by necessity) a transition among households removed from assistance. Interlocutors spoke of a perceived pressure to innovate assistance and transition to more market-based assistance with a complementary pressure to create inter-agency life-cycle or displacement-cycle specific programmes (T0005). However, the interlocutor offered that this inter-agency cooperation is made difficult by unaligned targeting criteria between programmes and agencies. For example, UNHCR were reported to emphasise ensuring that additional assistance extended, rather than duplicated, the beneficiary pool however there is no shared database in which agencies can compare eligible beneficiaries, leading to additional staff time commitment to reconcile lists (T0004).

Interlocutors reported that the removal of people from assistance enabled the greater or longer provision of assistance to those who 'truly' needed it. However, evidence demonstrates that relatively few households or individuals were excluded from assistance by being placed in the highest vulnerability category, or partially removed from assistance by being placed in the middle category meant that the absolute number of households partially or fully removed from assistance was relatively small. Therefore the savings accrued from a beneficiary population represents a very small proportion of the total monthly transfers. This is further evidenced by continuing cuts to the proportion of the Minimum Food Basket (or Minimum Expenditure Basket) that the monthly transfers represent; the saving is not enough to outpace wider budget drawdowns.

6. Mauritania

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6. Mauritania – integration with national systems

6.1 Context

For the past 14 years, Mauritania has hosted significant populations of refugees fleeing across Mauritania and Mali's extensive shared border. Until recently, most Malian refugees in Mauritania primarily resided in M'bera refugee camp, perched atop a plateau in the Sahara close to the border. Shifting dynamics in the conflict in Mali in 2023 led to further widespread displacement, from previously unaffected regions, with many more people fleeing into Mauritania. While M'bera continues to host a significant refugee population, various sources (conflictingly) suggest that many refugees, particularly those recently arrived, now live outside the camps in rural areas in Bassikounou, the department hosting M'bera. Until approximately 2020, all registered refugees were provided with assistance by UNHCR and WFP – in close collaboration with the Government of the Islamic Republic of Mauritania - to meet their food security and nutrition needs, multi-sectoral needs and shelter needs.

Significant changes to the assistance provision in the camps occurred after approximately 2020/2021. With financial support from the World Bank, refugee households in the M'bera refugee camp were included in the National Social Registry. This registry is used to allocate various national social assistance programmes (among others, *Tekavoul and El Mouna*) to poor Mauritanian households, and is now expanded to include poor refugee households living in the M'bera camp. In 2024, the social registry included more than 305,000 households.[16] Mauritanian households in the Social Registry are targeted to receive *Tekavoul* on the basis of a small vector of variables that proxy household wellbeing.

In order to enable the inclusion of refugees in the provision of *Tekavoul and two other social protection programmes*[17], it was first necessary to categorise refugee households in a similar fashion as Mauritanian households. However, the targeting approach implemented for refugee households goes a step further, categorizing households into three categories, rather than two, and with a different array of humanitarian programmes accessible for the different categories. The Government of the Islamic Republic of Mauritania, while committed to upholding their commitments made under international covenants to find sustainable and durable solutions to refugee well-being, and UN partners, recognize that there is significant heterogeneity in the economic well-being and self-reliance potential of refugee households.

Refugees in Mauritania have the *de jure* right to movement and employment in the country beyond the confines of the camp. However, during transect walks it was widely discussed that the remoteness of the border from economic centres of Mauritania (primarily Nouadhibou and Nouakchott) as well as linguistic and ethnic discrimination means many refugees remain in and around the camps and largely employed in the informal sector. Moreover, the harsh climate in the Sahara means agriculture-based self-reliance activities are limited, while insecurity in the border region, and vast distances to nearby market downs beyond Bassikounou generally limit the viability of large-scale commercial opportunities, a sentiment reflected in the focus group discussions.

[16] https://www.worldbank.org/en/programs/sahel-adaptive-social-protection-program-trust-fund/country-work/mauritania

[17] While Tekavoul is likely the most important programme, refugees have also been included in Inaya (health insurance) and El Mouna (lean season support).

6.2 Targeting approach

A first round of data collection – a census-style process – was conducted in the M'bera camp by enumerators employed by the Social Registry with financial support from the World Bank in 2021. On the basis of this, households were categorized into one of three categories. Interlocutors noted that the process originally commenced before the outbreak of COVID-19 but was mothballed as the changes to lives and livelihoods as a result of pandemic-control measures rapidly changed the dimensions and extent of vulnerability. In recognition of the number of new arrivals to M'bera in the intervening period as a result of resurgent violence in neighbouring regions of Mali, a second 'top-up' round of targeting was conducted in 2022/2023, registering new arrivals into the Social Registry and assigning them a category.

The 2023 retargeting round was not reported to re-categorise households surveyed in 2021, focusing exclusively on new arrivals. Households that arrive in the camp between targeting rounds are allocated into the most vulnerable category for an initial period of six months, referred to as a stabilization period. However, there is at present no continuous targeting (or appeals) process and therefore categories are static through time. There is a similar process in place for refugees that have self-settled outside the M'bera camp, though this process falls outside of the scope of this report. In the future, it is expected that continuous targeting will be implemented. This will allow continuously adjusting current residents' category and enrolling new arrivals into the category system.

Households categorized in 2021 have not yet encountered a retargeting exercise, and nor has there been an appeals process after the initial 2021 appeals window despite using dimensions that would be expected to show variability through time. Similarly, a household arriving shortly after the initial targeting exercise in 2021 would have to remain in the six months stabilization process – and therefore the highest vulnerability category – until the 2023 retargeting exercise in 2023.

The targeting approach for encamped refugees is a variant of the quantitative scorecard approach employed by the Social Registry in Mauritania in determining eligibility among Mauritanian citizens for national social assistance programmes. The regression approach underlying the national PMT is not shared or known outside *Taazour*[18], including among interlocutors spoken to as part of this project. For the identification of eligible refugees a scorecard was developed with support from the UNHCR-WFP Joint Hub using an index based on a census-type dataset. Protection-related indicators are used in addition to socio-economic variables meaning the targeting process is not entirely econometrically driven. Moreover, community leadership was reported to be involved in the beneficiary selection process through validation of beneficiary lists.

The vulnerability dimensions are: food consumption, years of education and school attendance (children), dependency, persons living with a disability or chronic illness, engagement in livelihood activities, gender differences between working age householders. Households are surveyed using a tool that captures values on a battery of socio-economic variables, including the specific variables used in the scorecard. Categorisation is then made on the basis of the score calculated, with households informed by letter thereafter, and information provided on the consequences of this categorization in both the letters and during community-led dissemination exercises.

[18] Taazour is the General Delegation for National Solidarity and Combating Exclusion (ami.mr/en/archives/12545).

6.3 Costs of targeting

Process-related costs

Table 8 summarizes the information provided during the KIIs regarding the estimated staff input to the targeting process in 2021 and Table 9 for the retargeting process in 2023 provided. The tables are based on documentation provided by WFP Mauritania as the skeleton framework, supplemented by information from the ABC-I process conducted in Mauritania and documentation from and interviews with the UNHCR & WFP Joint Hub (UNHCR & WFP, 2023c). It is essential to note that, for many of the activities and categories, an incomplete record was recollected by key informants. Given the short duration of the duty station for UN staff, institutional memory has been lost. There are some discrepancies between the stylistic description of the targeting process in material provided and the process described during the ABC-I process. However, it is not clear what explains the discrepancy.

Table 8. Mauritania 2021: estimated staff input

Activity	Number of actions recorded	Approximate period	Number of persons involved	Approximate time commitment
Overall support, management & oversight	5	2021 – date	7	1 person full-time; 2 persons at 20%; other staff minor time involvement
Budgeting & oversight	1	Jan-21	1	1 week
Preparation phase 2021 – tool review and documentation	1	Jan – Feb 2021	1	8-10 hours
Protection adjustments	1	2021 – date	1	Minor time commitment of head of protection unit
Data collection, including supervision mission, translation and enumeration	5	Apr-Jun 2021	2	5 days technical assistance from UNHCR-WFP Joint Hub; 49 days for enumerators
Design and technical support, including identification of categories,	4	Jun-Aug 2021	7	40 hours for 3 staff; 3-4 days for senior programme officer; technical assistance from UNHCR-WFP Joint Hub;
Awareness raising & community coordination	5	Sep-21	6	Full time for 6 persons
Dissemination & appeals	4	Oct-Nov 2021	5	25 days for appeals desk staff; 3 weeks technical assistance from UNHCR-WFP Joint Hub for full analysis of appeals data

Source: own elaboration based on WFP documentation, ABC-I and KIIs.

Table 9. Mauritania 2023: estimated staff inputs

Activity	Number of actions recorded	Approximate period	Number of persons involved	Approximate time commitment
Integral/continuous targeting updates	1	2023-2024	1	70% commitment
2023 preparation coordination	1	Apr-Jun 2023	1	2-3 hours per week
Budgeting	1	N/A	8	16.5 hours over 8 staff
Awareness raising & community coordination	1	Mar-Apr 2023	11	15 days technical assistance from UNHCR-WFP Joint Hub, 45 days for implementing partner, 6-7 days for senior programme officers, 5-6 days for programme assistants
Design & technical support	2	Aug-Dec 2024	5	10-15% for two senior programme officer, 15-20 for two programme officers
Data collection	7	Jun-Jul 2023	c.10	6 weeks technical assistance from UNHCR-WFP Joint Hub, 14 days for programme officer, 4 days for 2-3 social registry staff, 3 days for 2 WFP and 1 UNHCR staff, enumerators
Analysis & assignment	1	Aug-Sep 2023	4	30-35 days technical assistance from UNHCR-WFP Joint Hub, 2-3 days programme officer, 8-10 hours senior programme officer
Community coordination	1	Sep-23	3	20 hours technical assistance from UNHCR-WFP Joint Hub and senior programme officer
Dissemination & appeals	6	Nov-23	3	7 weeks technical assistance from UNHCR-WFP Joint Hub, 1 day for senior programme officer, 25 people involved in help desks for 3 weeks,

Source: own elaboration based on WFP documentation, ABC-I and KIIs.

A senior interlocutor within WFP Mauritania expressed concern about the time commitment involved in targeting that is not recognized widely (TM003). However, unlike in the other country case study locations, many interlocutors were reluctant to describe agency staff time in planning, coordination, analysis etc as *costs*. These were variously described as part of the normal business of programming and not an additional 'cost'. Interlocutors heavily involved in the targeting process described this as a core part of their job and therefore not a cost to recognize (T0005). This perspective does align with the treatment of targeting costs at a budgeting and planning level; there are no separate line items for targeting costs in the budgeting process currently used. Moreover, the length of time since the implementation of targeting means that there has been an institutional loss of memory, amplified by Mauritania being a two-year duty station for UN staff. This means that recollections of activities involved at the beginning were limited and therefore costs are likely underreported. However, similar to other country case studies, concern was expressed that there is no proper systematic recognition of the costs of targeting with respect to time, in particular, and that the very high costs involved are rarely associated with significant reductions in beneficiary numbers as a result of (rightful) trepidation over exclusion errors. This was viewed as likely skewing any cost effectiveness analysis.

Impact-related costs

Inclusion and exclusion errors were mentioned as costs of targeting, though less frequently than in other country case studies. This concern extended beyond the direct inclusion and exclusion concerns for core WFP and UNHCR programming. There was some concern expressed that the creation of three categories led to label-driven (rather than contemporary vulnerability analysis driven) allocation of funds.

Interlocutors reported that actors across the humanitarian space in Mauritania used the categories created by UNHCR, WFP and the Social Registry to shape their funding portfolios. This has, reportedly, led to a focus of aid spending across organisations on Category 1 households (highly vulnerable) at the expense of those households in Categories 2 and 3 (moderately and least vulnerable), though households in Category 3 were conversely more likely to receive livelihood assistance.

The onboarding process chosen for targeting in Mauritania – namely the use of a census going beyond information captured in proGres – is both time consuming and expensive. This means that there are infrequent whole-population classification exercises. Households present during the 2021 initial classification exercise have not subsequently been re-classified, with solely new arrivals being classified during the later integral targeting update. Households that have arrived since the second targeting update remain in category 1 irrespective of their latent welfare. As a result, a household's classification is related to their welfare proxy at a given moment in time.

Key informants reported that the first classification survey was conducted during Ramadan amongst a population of cultural and religious Muslims which is likely to yield biased results with respect to food security and nutrition outcomes. Notwithstanding the conduct of the survey during a period of non-representative consumption, reliance on a single snapshot of food consumption will inherently not capture the dynamics of household consumption and welfare. This dynamism is the product of relatively predictable fluctuations such as those induced by seasonality, but also fluctuations in household characteristics and welfare. While covariate fluctuations can – and are – addressed through seasonal changes to programming (for e.g. WFP provides additional in-kind assistance to a wider

beneficiary pool during the lean season and the government provides *El Mouana*), idiosyncratic changes in vulnerability through time are not captured by the current targeting system. For example, two households, which might be intuitively or normatively similar and oscillate between the two categories frequently, are separated into Categories 1 and 2 on the basis of a minor difference in their score.This allocation is then to some extent a degree of luck based on the timing of the survey.

Across all six FGDs conducted in the *M'Bera* refugee camp, respondents noted that **the criteria used to determine eligibility were not clear, and that respondents did not perceive substantial differences between the material circumstances of households in different categories** (FGDs 1-6). This was expressed as a cost by a senior interlocutor within WFP and a material risk to social cohesion (TM003). While households noted that there were different circumstances and motivations among the different cohorts of refugees arriving in seeking assistance, this was not described as manifesting as differences in outcomes that would merit distinction between categories.

Some respondents reported inconsistent or opaque information about the eligibility and appeals process, which may be the result of the information dissemination strategy which relied on block and community leaders (FGD 5). The inability to discern why similar households were allocated to different categories led to some respondents suggesting allocation was on the basis of the whims of 'powerful' persons within the camp (implying clan membership or other interpersonal networks) (FGD 5). Others in the same focus group reported that they understood the process to be 'first come, first served', implying either a misunderstanding or poor information dissemination among some households or individuals in the camps (FGD 5).

There was further concern about the process of recategorizing households as they transition from blanket assistance provided to households on the basis of refugee status in the first six months after arrival in the camp to participating in the standard (targeted) assistance package. Respondents reported that they felt that they had been categorized in this transition process without their involvement; respondents reported that they felt that their information had been passed to the categorization without a chance for them to present mitigating circumstances which might warrant inclusion in the programme, such as disability or unemployment, which in turn indicates that there is a contradiction between respondents' perceptions of who should receive assistance and actual recipients (FGD6). There was further lack of clarity on the reason for exclusion from assistance and the appeals process was reported as long, cumbersome and not productive with days spent waiting to be seen by the appeals staff due to the volume of people waiting for assistance (FGD4).

There was additionally a perception that the appeals process was unfair due to the limited time made available for complaints and the involvement of community leaders. Six days were available after both the 2021 and 2023 targeting rounds, which was considered insufficient time to handle all complaints (FGD 6). The involvement of community leaders in the appeals process was the subject of consternation by some participants in FGD 6, noting that community leaders had inadequate knowledge of the circumstances of those outside their clan or family, and therefore the process may have disadvantaged some applicants in the appeals process (FGD 6). Additionally, the appeals window is limited, and there is (to date) no further recategorization process, yet variables that are used to classify are fungible – eligibility is therefore likely to change both as a consequence of underlying changes in vulnerability but as well as the result of changes in time variant targeting criteria.

The inability to perceive meaningful differences between households in different categories led to reports by participants of sharing between beneficiary and non-beneficiary households (FGD 1, 2, 3, 4; T0003). Sharing between wealthier households to poorer households was also reported, though in addition to sharing between beneficiary or non-beneficiary households. This undermines the economic logic of targeting, or suggests the presence of imperfections in the targeting mechanism: transfers are not accruing to the poorest households. There was further potential evidence of misalignment in FGD 4 where respondents noted that beneficiaries flooded markets with goods for sale shortly before or after benefit receipt.

The marginality of transfers and the withdrawal of transfers was reported to have adverse consequences on the use of harmful coping strategies, in addition to previously referenced credit reliance. Households in category 3 (no assistance) reported being unable to consistently eat, create or maintain shelter, or receive adequate medical assistance even after negative coping strategies such as reducing food consumption or liquidating assets (FGD 4, 5) were exhausted. Male respondents reported sending wives and children to stay with family members better able to provide resources leading to both family separation and children being withdrawn from school (FGD 6).

The precarity of households in the absence of benefits was highlighted. Respondents in FGD 5 noted that they could no longer eat after the withdrawal of their benefits. During the same session, respondents noted that they felt their future economic security was not assured – their basic needs were not met and they had no assets or resources to generate income (FGD 5). The marginal value of the transfers was referred to as incompatible with meeting longer-term needs.

Return migration (to Mali) as a negative coping strategy was raised as a cost of targeting in Mauritania by staff involved with the process. Given the proximity of the camps to a long remote border region, removal of assistance has reportedly led to households or individuals returning to the conflict zone from which they fled in order to find a livelihood solution (T0005); given the protection mandate of refugee organizations this is naturally of grave concern to policymakers in the space.

The importance of food assistance – interlocutors referred specifically to in-kind food assistance – in wider food security and specifically price stability in the wider Bassikounou region was highlighted by representatives from the (Commisariat à la Sécurité Alimentaire (CSA) (T0006). The interlocutor expressed concern that food insecurity in the camp (as a result, implicitly, of the withdrawal of food assistance from some households) would affect wider food availability in Bassikounou as the number of refugees outnumbers the number of nationals by a ratio of approximately two to one.

6.4 Benefits of targeting

Targeting facilitates integration of refugees into the national social protection system in Mauritania. This core benefit was mentioned by interlocutors during the mission in November 2024, and it confirmed existing documentation and studies previously conducted by the UNHCR-WFP Joint Hub. This presents to some extent a direct financial benefit. The *Taazour* extends the *Tekavoul* programme to selected refugee households in the M'bera refugee camp, against which WFP makes a compensatory reduction in the GFA transfer provided to *Tekavoul* recipient refugee households.

Inclusion has a long-term strategic benefit to refugees and to humanitarian organisations in (partially) bridging the humanitarian-development nexus. Long-term durable solutions for refugees are, despite promising high-level efforts, often difficult to sustain politically and economically,

particularly with respect to integration into national social protection systems (see Kool & Nimeh, 2021 for an overview). Where rights-based integration does exist, this is often piecemeal, or *de jure* rights are often *de facto* inaccessible. With WFP, UNHCR and the Government of the Islamic Republic of Mauritania committed to finding durable solutions for refugees, targeting is a critical step forward in deepening integration.

As humanitarian budgets globally contract, there is a donor-specific political economy advantage to the introduction of targeting, particularly through a process that strengthens integration with national systems and is likely to reduce humanitarian aid dependency in the long-run. Capacity development among national social protection organisations was reported as a supplemental but important benefit of an integrated targeting approach (TM03, TM01), facilitating the expansion of national targeting and an overall improvement in the system.

The alignment with donor preferences and priorities both in Mauritania and more broadly, was further noted as an overall benefit of targeting (TM003). However, the same interlocutor noted that there was limited technical understanding of the process among those in the donor community pushing for targeting. The result of this was that there were insufficient resources provisioned for what was termed important and essential on-going targeting or re-targeting to account for the time variant nature of both latent vulnerability and the proxies of vulnerability used in targeting (TM003).This led to a reliance on out of data vulnerability assessments, a position described as unacceptable (TM003).

Relatedly, targeting was said to improve consistency and alignment across organisations operating in the camp or refugee space more generally in Mauritania (T0005); by creating a camp-wide vulnerability map, agencies can relatively easily accrue resources to the – *prima facie* - most vulnerable. Nevertheless, there was concern expressed that there was over-focus on category 1, leaving the other categories bereft of assistance.

Interlocutors with the CSA located the discussion in the context of fairness with the host community (T0006). While the interlocutor acknowledged that those who are territorially removed from their homeland all have a degree of vulnerability, they referenced that the host community had been open and accommodating, but that fundamentally there is competition for resources and livelihood opportunities (implicitly, national resources in the form of redistribution as well) and therefore targeting is justified on the basis that it integrates refugees with the same host community redistributive framework (T0006), a sentiment echoed by representatives from other government organisations involved in the process (T0008).

A senior interlocutor at WFP Mauritania stressed strongly the imperative held within the programme team to ensure consistent transfer values (TM003). In the face of a resource deficit, a policymaker is given the choice of reducing transfer values while maintaining full coverage, or reducing coverage to the extent necessary to be able to afford consistent transfer values. It is this latter decision taken by policymakers in Mauritania in order to provide what was described as coherent assistance, with this approach being described as inline with WFP's mandate to assist the most vulnerable rather than a charity with an obligation to give something to every person (TM003).

As in other case study locations, the implementation of targeting was described as recognizing the heterogeneity in household economic wellbeing or self-reliance propensity. This was a sentiment shared by a key informant with a senior community leader in the M'Bera camp (T0003), who acknowledged that households had differing ability and propensity to continue to maintain spending in the absence of transfers. The same interlocutor noted, though, that communities ought to have a

strong(er) role in identifying eligibility in the community. Despite this interlocutor recognizing the logic of targeting, and recognizing its relation to broad conditions in the camp, he noted that it was very hard to distinguish between households in category 1 and 2, leading to very difficult conditions and to inter-household sharing, which undermines the logic of targeting.

The implementation of targeting allowed transfer values for those who remain as beneficiaries to remain unchanged, this was mentioned as a key priority by interlocutors within WFP Mauritania. A subsidiary benefit mentioned by interlocutors involved from a technical perspective was – similar to Rwanda – that it motivated some households to avail themselves of their right to move outside of the M'Bera camp to places like Nouakchott in search of employment opportunities (T0005).

Beneficiaries in focus group discussions located the discussion on the common economic benefits of targeting in the context of marginal transfer values; despite the restriction of the beneficiary pool, the assistance provided is marginal. Conversely, transfers withdrawn are of marginal value – if a saving is defined crudely as the number of transfers withdrawn multiplied by their value – the saving is likely to be small. Assistance – said by one respondent as 500 MRU (c. $12.50 USD)- was said to be insufficient to meet both short- and long-term needs resulting in reliance on credit for basic needs, with households reporting in addition that the transition away from in-kind or a hybrid assistance package to cash also undermined their well-being (FGD 3).

Respondents benchmarked transfers against several common household costs like charcoal or a doctor's consultation. For example, while the assistance covered a one-time purchase of charcoal, it did not fully meet the cost of a medical consultation (FGD1). Others put the assistance in terms of hours of labour – between 2.5 and 5 days labour (FGD2), including women reporting this against their own income. This latter point highlighted a potential incongruity in the ability of the targeting criteria to identify underlying vulnerability. During some FGDs, women reported that they were unable to work due to lack of safe places to work, appropriate childcare and yet were unable to access assistance. This might suggest that the targeting mechanism is blind to long-term sources of vulnerability (labour market exclusion) or that it is too sensitive to factors that likely change over time.

The implementation of targeting by UNHCR and WFP, with assistance from the UNHCR-WFP Joint Hub, in close collaboration with the Government of the Islamic Republic of Mauritania has generated unique capacity development and governance spill-overs among Government agencies such as *Taazour* and the Social Registry. The technical assistance provided by the UNHCR-WFP Joint Hub to the country office, in addition to the technical work of staff in country offices, notably during the design and execution of the census onboarding exercise, has yielded capacity and governance returns within government departments, with a similar process now replicated in other locations in Mauritania for Mauritanian households by the Social Registry. Discussions in Mauritania indicate that these spill-overs are also witnessed in the development of new (joint) strategies for registration and targeting of refugee and host community households in other administrative districts along the border regions of Mauritania.

7. Discussion

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7. Discussion

The three country cases featured in this study are diverse with respect to the humanitarian and institutional context, which challenges the transferability of the findings to other countries. The humanitarian context in **Colombia** is different from Mauritania and Rwanda, with a lot of heterogeneity among refugees and migrants, both in terms of the length of stay in Colombia, economic capacity, and household wellbeing. The situation is fluid with new refugees and migrants arriving, some of which with the intention to stay and others on transition to other countries. The 2.8 million Venezuelan refugees and migrants are not living in camps, but they are spread over the country. Many of them have registered in the national social registry and obtained temporary residence status that entitles them to access public services. This government policy made Colombia a global leader in its response to the large influx of refugees and migrants (Rossiasco & de Narváez, 2023). Yet, many live in unofficial housing and are deprived of government services. The extreme poverty rate among Venezuelan refugees and migrants is twice as high as that of native Colombians (Bitar, 2022). WFP provides emergency assistance to those refugees and migrants that have the intention to stay in the country.

The situation in Rwanda is protracted and the number of refugees has been relatively stable, while Mauritania has witnessed an influx of new refugees from Mali with an estimated 110,000 new arrivals since January 2024.[19] In both Mauritania and Rwanda most refugees live in camp settings. Of the 200,000 Malian refugees hosted in Mauritania, 90% live in and around the M'bera camp in the southeast of the country. In Rwanda, 91% of the 144,000 refugees live in five camps spread over the country. In both countries, refugees are supported with cash and in-kind assistance from WFP and UNHCR. In Mauritania, the poorest refugees are also eligible for national social protection programmes.

In all three countries, WFP and UNHCR shifted from a blanket to a targeted approach of humanitarian assistance mainly because the needs for assistance exceeded the available resources. In both Colombia and Mauritania, the initial shift occurred around 2019, with further revisions implemented in 2021, which are the focus of this study. In Rwanda the move from blanket to targeted assistance happened in 2021. Colombia and Mauritania use the scorecard method to identify eligible households, and Rwanda uses a set of eight categorical eligibility criteria.

In all three countries the analysis of household level data, either from a census or large N survey, informed the selection of the targeting method and eligibility criteria. In Rwanda and Colombia household surveys were used for the analysis. In Mauritania this process was led by the national Social Registry that implemented a full census of the more than 14,000 refugee households in and around the M'bera camp. In all three countries, the data were analysed econometrically to identify household characteristics that are strongly correlated with vulnerability. This led to the definition of three vulnerability categories in Mauritania and Rwanda, of which households in the least vulnerable group are not eligible for cash or in-kind assistance, and a minimum score in Colombia, below which a household is not eligible for assistance. Yet, in all three countries, selected protection criteria can overrule vulnerability scores and grant eligibility.

[19] www.unhcr.org/countries/mauritania

What are the costs and benefits – both foreseen and unforeseen - of different targeting methodologies and which parties bear the costs or reap the benefits?

The case studies illustrate the costs involved in needs-based targeting. In all three countries, the move from blanket to targeted assistance required financial outlays for additional data collection, staff involvement, and the challenges associated with capturing dynamic household welfare. At the heart of needs-based targeting are (often) large-scale – if not multiple – data collection exercises that must provide representative and high-quality household-level data. These are relatively expensive exercises. Interlocutors noted that leveraging existing data collection exercises can reduce the cost of targeting; data collection exercises such as the JPDM are often commonplace and routine parts of evidence generation and accountability to affected populations. Concern was expressed, though, that piggybacking on existing exercises to reduce cost may mean that less data is available, or data is available less frequently. In Rwanda, for example, making the JPDM equipped for targeting purposes required the extension of the sample and questionnaire. In exchange, JPDM data collection was reduced from two times per year to once per year.

Throughout interviews in Rwanda and Colombia it was noted that the transition to targeting of an existing programme requires considerable additional work, though this perception was less widely shared in Mauritania. The latter may be due to the long-term benefit of refugee inclusion with national social protection systems, in particular the social registry. The full census of the refugees in and around the M'bera camp in 2021 was a joint effort of the Islamic Republic of Mauritania, the World Bank, WFP, UNHCR and the WFP-UNHCR Joint Hub.

Interlocutors in all three case studies noted that staff time in targeting, particularly those roles involved in coordination, management and analysis, was not accounted for in budgeting. While in some instances technical assistance was provided by the UNHCR-WFP Joint Hub in a dedicated role to support targeting at the outset, the burden of targeting-specific tasks thereafter fell on existing programme staff. **Consistent between case studies was the non-existence of targeting-specific budget lines in budgeting processes.** Several respondents from WFP noted that budgeting used very broad budget lines which did not permit granular disaggregation. This makes it challenging to identify the costs of targeting with respect to expenditure or to staff input dedicated to the process.

In all case studies, additional costs were incurred with respect to appeals, often over and above normal grievance and redress mechanisms. The scope of these mechanisms varied, as did their duration. In the case of Colombia, because of the unique non-encamped nature of displaced people, additional help desks were established to enable the screening process to be conducted in convenient community locations. Given the unique context, it remains unclear whether in the absence of targeting, community help desks would still have been established to the same extent to enrol beneficiaries in other forms of assistance.

All three case studies are illustrative for the start-up costs of targeting.[20] The initial set-up costs for the different targeting methodologies in Colombia, Rwanda, and Mauritania include the costs of collecting and analysing data, designing the targeting approach and criteria, and community consultations. In Mauritania, the quantitative scorecard approach involved

[20] This also applies to Mauritania even though the initial shift from blanket to targeted assistance was already taken in 2019. The 2021 re-targeting exercise involved similar initial set-up costs, such as new data collection, analysis, determination of criteria, outreach, appeals procedures, etc.

significant initial costs for data collection, developing the criteria, and community consultations. Subsequently, regular re-targeting and prioritization in all three cases also incur substantial costs due to the dynamic nature of household welfare and the need for continuous monitoring and adaptation. What separates the initial set-up from recurrent costs, are, for example, costs related to cooperation and consultation. In Rwanda, the development of the needs-based and protection-sensitive joint targeting approach resulted in substantial initial costs for consultation meetings and workshops with different stakeholders.

Increasing the investments in the design and implementation of targeting methodologies can potentially result in increased benefits by improving the accuracy and efficiency of targeting, reducing exclusion errors, and ensuring that assistance reaches the most vulnerable populations. This applies to the score-cared approach in Colombia and Mauritania, and the categorical approach in Rwanda. Good quality representative and comprehensive data facilitate the empirical assessments of needs and vulnerabilities. They allow for the ex-ante analysis of different targeting approaches and they are likely to provide more accurate vulnerability criteria and scores, which can a priori reduce inclusion and exclusion errors. The repeated collection of both beneficiary and non-beneficiary data over time, as was done in Rwanda, also allows for the analysis of targeting outcomes (ex post), the extent to which programme objectives have been achieved and the recalibration of the targeting criteria.

In all three countries, large household survey or census data have been used to inform the targeting methodology. In a second step, the scores or eligibility criteria determined in the first step need to be applied to registration data to assign beneficiaries. This requires a link to administrative databases such as UNHCR's proGres in humanitarian context or social registries in national context. In Colombia, a household assessment survey informed the selection of the vulnerability indicators for the targeting questionnaire and the weights were established through a quantitative and qualitative analysis. Household eligibility assessments are done on demand through a combination of limited-scope house-to-house surveys and self-referral across the country. Once a household is deemed eligible, it is registered in the Scope database. The use of a full census approach in Mauritania provided a comprehensive dataset of socio-economic conditions for all households. The close involvement of the Social Registry, particularly their facilitation of the census meant that a substantial portion of the work was done under a contract, creating good visibility of the costs involved. After the full census (and the complementary assessment in 2023), the Social Registry has been linked with UNHCR's proGres database. In Rwanda, the analysis of vulnerability indicators was based on the 2020 JPDM survey. Due to limitations of the available indicators in proGres, the eight eligibility criteria are mainly demographic household characteristics. . The allocation of refugees into the three vulnerability categories was done in proGres. Yet, proGres is not consistently used by all UNHCR Protection staff and the system is not always updated. This can negatively affect benefit eligibility and lead to exclusion and inclusion errors.

In all three case study countries, there is limited information on the targeting outcomes due to the lack of post-targeting monitoring data. Key informants in Colombia in particular expressed concern that there was no feasible method or data source to reliably estimate inclusion and exclusion errors. The data landscape and the inherently mobile population means that it is near impossible to accurately estimate targeting error. In addition, the short-term (six month) duration of transfers further complicates this analysis. Only in Rwanda, the repeated JPDM surveys allow an analysis of the targeting outcomes. The JPDM data is representative at camp level and by vulnerability category. However, in all three case study countries, the benefits

of investing in more data are likely to be limited by the challenges of capturing dynamic household welfare, the opacity of most data-driven targeting systems, and the complexity of the targeting processes.

The three country case studies have shown different levels of cooperation between humanitarian actors and integration with national systems. The integration of refugees and migrants into national social protection systems depends on the host government. Mauritania is exemplary in that respect. Yet, despite the inclusion of the refugees in the Social Registry and coverage of the most vulnerable category by national social protection programmes, the targeting criteria differ between Mauritanians and refugees. The national system applies a PMT to determine eligibility; a score-card approach is used for refugees in around M'bera camp to account for different living conditions in the camp. Refugees in the most vulnerable category are eligible for the same government support as poor Mauritanians. WFP and UNHCR, on the other hand, supplement the assistance for category 1 and provide assistance to refugees in category 2. This approach was jointly developed with all stakeholders (Social Registry, WFP, UNHCR, UNHCR-WFP Joint Hub) and is expected to increase efficiency and effectiveness of national and humanitarian assistance in both the short and long term. It also exemplifies the different mandates and funding constraints of the partners.

The study shows that the costs of targeting fall on agencies and affected populations. Agencies were shown to bear costs not originally envisaged in long-standing programmes, a process exacerbated by a budget and planning system not designed to capture these costs. In some cases, targeting is perceived an integral part of programme implementation and is therefore not a cost in and of its own right. Throughout FGDs, limited financial costs were shown to fall on applicants. In a non-camp setting there was concern that in the absence of an appeals process, regular re-submission was a commonly employed technique for rejected applicants which comes at a cost in terms of time and foregone income.

Concerns about exclusion errors were frequently raised by interlocutors from agencies and among affected population. Exclusion errors are inevitable in a process of targeting as a result of random errors and measurement errors. Exclusion errors play an interesting dual role in both costs and also the evaluation of benefits of targeting by policymakers. Interlocutors at all levels spoke of their concern about exclusion errors, particularly those with a protection mandate or within organisations with a protection mandate. The exclusion of an eligible person or household was considered as a non-financial cost against this mandate. However, concerns were further expressed that the (institutional) pressure to avoid exclusion errors led to additional costs related to the fettling of the targeting criteria which were unforeseen, and that such additional refinements or inclusion of overriding protection criteria led in some cases to very few households identified as low or no vulnerability.

One of the principal benefits of targeting, drawn from both theory and primary qualitative research, is the narrowing of the beneficiary pool. If a policymaker is invariant to the distribution of transfers with respect to any other factors within a population, there is no concept of an exclusion error. However, the reported aversion to exclusion errors by respondents means that policymakers evaluate the distribution of transfers with respect to the underlying and unobserved measure of welfare, and that distributions with higher exclusion errors lead to a greater welfare loss. If policymakers are concerned about exclusion errors, the benefit of targeting cannot be simply expressed as the sum of benefits not distributed as a result of the smaller pool of beneficiaries because this includes transfers not distributed to a household in need. These 'savings' would have to be weighted by a factor which reflects the fact that one

currency unit of aid not provided to a household in need does not represent one currency unit in saving if there is a societal preference for assistance being distributed to households at the lowest point in the welfare distribution.

Interlocutors in all case study locations, and across organisations, spoke extensively of the cost of exclusion errors as a primary and significant cost associated with targeting, despite the lack of empirical evidence. Targeting errors were reported because of several, sometimes concomitant, factors. The timing and frequency of surveys that are or were used in generating indicator weights were said to be a potential source of targeting error. The use of a single snapshot, or infrequent reclassification or calculation means that the dynamic nature of household welfare is not captured. This leads to targeting errors through time as household dynamics change irrespective of transfers, but also as a result of the distributional effects of transfer provision over time.

In all three case study countries, interlocutors believed that the analysis informing the vulnerability scores and eligibility criteria was econometrically sound. However, there was discussion on the distortion effects of the inclusion of normative or protection-related criteria in the targeting process, particularly in Rwanda. It was widely noted that the normative targeting criteria did not map with community perceptions of vulnerability or welfare in the Rwandan camps. The presumed a priori vulnerability of women and girls led to inconsistencies that were difficult to explain and reconcile with the observed reality in the camps and potentially induced negative household behaviour and perverse incentives to adjust household status. This was said to lead to perceived arbitrary exclusion and inclusion, and therefore arbitrary exclusion and inclusion errors.

Respondents in all three country case studies mentioned the opportunity cost of participation in the process, though with some ambiguity about where in the process the costs were incurred and whether they would be incurred irrespective of whether the programme is targeted. While respondents in all country case studies mentioned the opportunity cost of collecting benefits, this is targeting neutral and would be applicable irrespective of targeting. In particular, in Colombia it was reported that registration sites were a significant distance from beneficiaries, resulting in foregone income while attending registration, disbursement, or appeals processes. Appeals-specific costs were mentioned in both Rwanda and Mauritania with specific reference to the appeals process. There was a perception that costs were gendered; in Mauritania women indicated that they could not appeal given the uncertainty around the time taken to resolution and the absence of suitable childcare.

Other costs and benefits of targeting that cannot be measured financially include social cohesion, community trust, and the perceived fairness of the targeting process. For example, in Mauritania, respondents noted that the criteria used to determine eligibility were not clear, and that they did not perceive substantial differences between the material circumstances of households in different categories. Additionally, the involvement of community leaders in the final selection of eligibility criteria and the appeals process was the subject of concern by some participants. Unequal power relations may result in elite capturing of benefits and transaction costs in the form of bribes. The opacity of targeting criteria was also reflected upon in Colombia. Respondents shared the perception that those receiving assistance were not necessarily those most in need, but they were unable to highlight the mechanism through which these targeting errors arose. Field officers also suffered from asymmetric information which affected their ability to help households understand why they were not selected. To deal with the monthly cap on

assistance provided, households were put on waiting lists, sometimes for several months, leaving applicants in uncertainty.

In Rwanda, the introduction of targeting led to other non-financial costs. The sudden cut of assistance for category 3 refugees created high social costs such as stress and uncertainty. Because proGres is not automatically updated and not all complaints are immediately registered, refugees must tell their story several times. There was also a perception that removing households from assistance hindered small refugee-run businesses in the camps. The withdrawal of assistance could lead to increased reliance on purchases on credit at smallholder traders, which might result in these small businesses being unable to continue trading if overleveraged in credit to customers.

These non-financial costs can be measured through qualitative research methods such as focus group discussions, interviews, and surveys. Benefits such as improved governance and capacity development can be measured through assessments of the effectiveness and efficiency of targeting processes and the integration of refugees into national social protection systems.

A primary and overriding benefit mentioned throughout interviews was political economy positioning. The implementation of targeting enables humanitarian organisations to fit large-scale programmes within diminished budgets while still ensuring that assistance accrues to the most vulnerable. In both Rwanda and Colombia, interlocutors noted that the donor landscape explicitly required the implementation of targeting, though donor perspective on this was not obtained first-hand. Throughout the country case studies there was recognition of the need to find durable and sustainable solutions to protracted displacement, including through fostering and promoting self-reliance and economic integration. It was often noted in interviews that the reduction in universal General Food Assistance (GFA) was an important step on that pathway, provided that there is an enabling environment for livelihood generation. In both Rwanda and Mauritania, there was widespread recognition of the heterogeneity of economic propensity for self-reliance and economic welfare which would be further stimulated through the withdrawal of blanket assistance, depending on refugee status.

How can WFP and UNHCR apply the analysis of the costs and added value of targeting to make programmatic and operational decisions? Is sufficient and suitable data available to perform relevant analysis in case study locations?

Targeting (and prioritization) comes at a cost for both policy maker and target group. The problem is that neither the costs nor the benefits are known in advance. As the case studies have shown, it is very difficult if not impossible to measure the marginal costs of targeted versus blanket assistance, at least given the presumption that a certain amount of empirical data, data registries, staff time and community outreach is required irrespective of the delivery mode of humanitarian assistance.

Welfare-based targeting leads to exclusion and inclusion errors. This trade-off is well known in the literature. The more effort is put into reducing inclusion errors, the more likely it is to see an increase in exclusion errors. While many interlocutors referred to exclusion errors as a cost of targeting, no one mentioned inclusion errors. This could be illustrative of a difference between national and humanitarian social programming. While governments are generally more

concerned about inclusion errors, the case studies have convincingly shown that exclusion errors are the main concern for WFP and UNHCR. A similar trade-off concerns the costs and benefits of targeting. Based on the case studies, the following administrative trade-offs are indicative:

Table 1. Administrative trade-offs

	Costs for WFP/UNHCR	Benefits
Mauritania	Cost contribution to full census, data analysis, targeting design, coordination, reviews of appeals, linking Social Registry with proGres	Reduced assistance to category 2 (53% of refugees); Stopped assistance to category 3 (4% of refugees);
Rwanda	Extension of JPDM, additional data analysis, targeting design, coordination, reviews of appeals	Reduced assistance to category 2 (7% of refugees); Stopped assistance to category 3 (7% of refugees);
Colombia	Household survey, targeting design, reviews of appeal	Not available

Source: own elaboration

By understanding these trade-offs, WFP and UNHCR can make informed decisions about the allocation of resources, the design of targeting methodologies, and the implementation of targeting processes. Additionally, they can use this analysis to identify areas where cost efficiencies can be gained, such as through joint targeting efforts or the integration of targeting processes with national social protection systems. Yet, given the lack of reliable data on the staff related costs or the targeting performance, assessing whether benefits exceed the costs is challenging.

Each of the case study highlighted that, at the time of the country visits, no data are routinely collected and collated that estimate the full time and financial cost of targeting, independently or against a counterfactual. As a result, essential metrics on the costs and benefits cannot be assessed in their entirety, including the metrics outlined in the inception report for this study. Without visibility of these metrics, the consequences – positive and negative – of design choices cannot be fully assessed with potentially important consequences for the efficacy and efficiency of programming. In turn, this might undermine accountability to affected populations and other stakeholders as the evidence base on which programming is built is sub-optimal.

What are the policy recommendations for targeting humanitarian and basic needs assistance based on the study findings?

The analysis of the three country case studies highlighted several challenges which can affect the efficiency and effectiveness of targeting processes in a humanitarian context. The policy recommendations below are also inspired by the country case studies.

➔ **The right data, at the right time**

Concern was expressed across case studies among both staff and refugee households, though more acutely in Rwanda and Mauritania, that the data landscape and the infrequent re-targeting (or absence thereof) yielded sub-optimal results. Infrequent re-targeting or absence of continuous targeting was reported to result in static categories that did not reflect the dynamic nature of poverty in the wellbeing space, particularly with proxy scores close to the threshold to eligibility, notably in Mauritania. Moreover, the limited data landscape, often rate-limited by the content of the broadly demographic ProGres database meant econometrically optimal targeting variables are not feasibly usable (all case studies). During conversations with beneficiaries and field-office level staff this was viewed to create scenarios in which it was difficult to both explain and understand eligibility decisions.

Recommendation: invest in regular, representative, granular household data collection to monitor and evaluate programme outcomes and targeting performance. To limit the costs of large household surveys, country offices can piggyback on existing data collection exercises and share costs, for example, by collaborating with (i) national governments and extend household budget or consumption surveys to refugees and migrants, or with (2) humanitarian partners that regularly collect data, such as WFP.

Recommendation: from the outset align the data captured in registration systems to the econometrically specified targeting variables to avoid overfitting models. Where joint targeting is implemented between UNHCR and WFP, ensure safe and streamlined access to databases between agencies; a similar recommendation exists with third party data holders, including governments.

➔ **Cooperation between WFP and UNHCR (and with other partners)**

Despite the disparate mandate of the two agencies, UNHCR and WFP routinely work together through a Memorandum of Understanding in the context of refugee camps, (often) with the same population and similar objectives. In both Rwanda and Mauritania, joint targeting exercises were conducted. In both locations this was reported to be (theoretically) beneficial in that there is a common understanding of vulnerability between agencies enabling more rapid identification of beneficiaries for new or emergency programmes, though in Rwanda it was noted that UNHCR was not, at the time of the mission, using the targeting system which undermines the distributional efficiency logic of targeting.

Recommendation: good cooperation between humanitarian partners can save costs related to targeting processes and implementation while providing an easily accessible platform with a common understanding of vulnerability. It requires agreement on programme objectives and the rationale for targeting. In other words, expectations need to be managed from the beginning of the cooperation. It also includes agreement on the roles and responsibilities of each partner during implementation, and equally important, what happens at the end of the project or in the case of unexpected unilateral funding shortages.

➔ **Improving cost and benefit visibility in the data landscape**

The study also revealed that it is very challenging to assign a monetary value to the cost of targeting, including the additional administrative costs related to targeting design and implementation. Key informants noted that there was, from a budget and planning perspective, limited ability to fully assess the costs of targeting. It was reported, though not universally across case studies, that there was limited understanding or collation even of the time commitment of people involved. Programme and organizational budgets have no dedicated budget lines for operational costs related to targeting, such as appeals mechanisms, or technical assistance. There are no timesheets that would register targeting-specific input of staff. As a result, it is difficult to calculate essential metrics for programme assessment and evaluation such as the cost per dollar of aid delivered.

Recommendation: For a robust analysis of the costs and benefits of targeting a different study design is required. Most importantly, it requires a counterfactual. The counterfactual could be the situation before the introduction of targeting, or the direct comparison between the targeted and non-targeted version of an assistance programme. In both cases, data collection has to start before the introduction of targeting to establish the baseline situation. Data to be collected include detailed time use data and an inventory of other financial outlays connected with the programme. The same data would then be collected during the design and implementation phase. Alternatively, in a pilot setting, both targeted and non-targeted programme variations can be tested and compared.

8. Conclusion

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8. Conclusion

This study contributes to the scant literature on the costs of targeting by offering a rich account from three case studies representing different humanitarian and institutional contexts. Original primary data was collected from a range of different stakeholders involved in the design and implementation of targeting methods and also from the affected population. Even though the study cannot attach a quantitative value to the costs of targeting, it provides an in-depth analysis of why and how these costs occur and for whom.

Overall, while increased investment in targeting methodologies can lead to improved accuracy and effectiveness, it is essential to carefully consider the trade-offs and potential diminishing returns associated with these investments. Balancing the costs of targeting with the need to provide adequate support to beneficiaries is crucial for ensuring the overall success and sustainability of targeting methodologies.

Effective and efficient vulnerability-based targeting requires the availability of regular and granular data on the target population to inform targeting criteria at the onset, to capture changes in living conditions over time and to monitor and evaluate targeting and programme outcomes. The collection and analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data is a necessary ingredient for programme monitoring and evaluation irrespective of the targeting modality. However, to assess the targeting performance, sample surveys may have to be extended to include different population groups, and questionnaires may be longer, both increasing the marginal costs of the data collection. The qualitative evidence presented in this study indicates that investments in information and communication, in community outreach and appeal mechanisms are important to strengthen trust and social cohesion in the community, and prevent feelings of unfairness, stress, and uncertainty among the target population.

The introduction of welfare-based targeting likely requires additional staff time. The lack of dedicated budget lines and the commitment of staff to their work makes it impossible to say by how much, and to what extent additional efforts are required compared to blanket assistance or categorical targeting once the programme is up and running. The case studies indicate though, that the level of required staff effort depends on the context within which the move to targeted assistance is implemented and whether programme design and implementation is in the hands of one or multiple actors.

A widely discussed benefit of targeting is the inevitable reduction in the pool of beneficiaries eligible for transfers, therefore reducing the sum of money transferred per month. In narrowing the pool of beneficiaries using quantitative targeting methods, widely discussed as a benefit of targeting, targeting errors are inevitable – they can be reduced but not eliminated. If similar households receive a very different schedule of transfers over a relatively long period of time this undermines the economic efficiency of targeting which requires that transfers accrue to the most vulnerable or poorest in a given distribution. Moreover, it disturbs the distributional logic of assistance. A household just under the cut-off will be provided with income supplements that will, by design, push their consumption over the cut-off through time, pushing them to a position higher in the distributional rank than a household that started in a similar position above the cut-off that has received little to no further supplemental consumption assistance. Exclusion errors in particular results in a disruption of the economic efficiency logic of targeting by not accruing transfers to the poorest of a given distribution.

In order to obtain reliable and usable cost estimates in cost effectiveness calculations there needs to be common acceptance of how to attribute partially attributable costs – for example the often joint large-scale data collection – and to define how to account for staff time. This can be facilitated through creating, a priori, tools to foresee and create frameworks to capture these costs. For example, WFP's operational guidance note on targeting and prioritization provides a template aims to bring key cost items and staff allocation related to targeting and prioritization together in one spreadsheet (WFP, 2021:56-57). This is an additional layer to that covered by budget and programming colleagues. Nevertheless, economic well-being is also in humanitarian contexts often non-homogenously distributed and therefore there is an economic logic to limiting the recipient base of humanitarian transfers to accrue greater transfer value among the most vulnerable group of the target population, thereby increasing the adequacy of the support provided.

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Annexes

- Methodology
- FGD guides
- Key informant guide

ABC-I

The ABC-I method is an interactive and iterative process identified in the literature as the most effective way of understand disaggregated costs for individual activities that are part of the targeting process. The process resembles closely a key informant interview. The guide consists of a number of questions that provide warm-up and background information, followed by questions that begin to explore what constitute the activities that form part of targeting. As a first step, it is essential to obtain a set of activities/tasks/responsibilities which were part of the targeting/prioritization process from the interlocutor (ideally a senior programme officer with experience in the targeted programme). This forms the structure of the Excel-based tool. During the remainder of the interview, the tool also helps identifying information that can be drawn from ledger data or administrative data. In subsequent interviews, the structure – the activities/tasks/responsibilities - are presented to other staff members both at central and at sub-offices, to check whether all elements of the targeting process have been included in the framework. If there are omissions, these form part of follow-up questions to the original interlocutor.

Key-Informant Interviews

Key informant interviews can be part of the ABC-I process. For senior programme officers, for example, the KII is part of the ABC-I process. Certain questions are probes for more details that are not translated into a cost table, but instead are used to enrich the analysis, and provide contextual information that is essential to interpret other information. These questions refer to perceptions on whether the non-pecuniary costs of targeting are adequately captured, or information about processes. Interviews with other humanitarian actor and implementing partners helps identifying blindspots in targeting costs and benefits not identified during the ABC-I process or KIIs with internal staff.

Focus-Group Discussions

Costs borne by beneficiaries during the targeting/eligibility verification process are essential costs to assess. The information related to costs gained during the FGDs is not representative of the entire population due to sample size limitations. Instead, they are indicative for specific groups, with an emphasis on ensuring the voices of the most vulnerable groups. In addition, this process is essential to collect information on the social costs that targeting may impose, reducing the perceived benefit of the transfers due to the social tensions or social effects induced by targeting. Additionally, we will seek to examine whether the imposition of targeting induces a change in the perceived legitimacy of humanitarian organisations.

Secondary sources

Given the limitations of the study, programme documentation, academic literature and monitoring data can provide essential information on variables that enrich the analysis. Information on the dimensions of the programme is drawn from programme literature and monitoring data. Secondary sources, including academic literature, is essential for identifying potential private and social returns to transfers.

Focus Group Discussion: Beneficiaries

Instructions

RESEARCH GOAL

This serves as a guide for focus group discussions with current beneficiaries from WFP/UNHCR cash transfers. The goal of the discussion is to gather information on beneficiaries' perception of the programme and identifying potential private costs and opportunity costs associated with complying with the programme's targeting. Additionally, we are also looking for information on preferences for redistribution and the subjective 'drag' that targeting may impose on perceptions of transfer value.

ENUMERATOR CHECKLIST:

- Ensure that all participants have been informed of their rights under informed consent.
- Ensure that all participants have been recorded or signed giving their consent to the FGD and to the recording of the session.
- Ensure that you have notepads and pens and the guide
- Ensure you have completed the FGD participant information sheet.
- Ensure that all participants are comfortable and happy to begin.

Session identification

Session description:

Session number/label:

Location: Date:

Partner: Name moderator:

Start time: End time:

CONSENT SCRIPT

Thank you for agreeing to participate in a focus group discussion. You have been asked to join us today because you are a beneficiary of [programme name], and we are interested in hearing about your experience with the program. My name is [say your name], and I am a research assistant hired by Maastricht University, a University in the Netherlands, to support the data collection in [include country]. UNHCR and WFP have asked the research team at Maastricht University to assess all costs involved in registering and selecting the beneficiaries of humanitarian programs, such as the [programme name], including costs possibly incurred by beneficiaries of the program, like yourself.

Today I would like to talk to you about your experiences and your opinions about the [include name of the program], with a special focus on the application process. Maastricht University will analyse this data, along with other data collected here and in other two countries and inform UNHCR and WFP on your experiences with the programme and its application process.

Your words will only be used anonymously. Nobody will be able to identify you from your words. Neither WFP, UNHCR, nor the government will be given access to your name, or the recordings, or the transcript.
There is no direct benefit to participating in this discussion. I do not work for the UN or the authorities in [include country] and I cannot influence the assistance you receive. However, the things you tell me today will be faithfully recorded and analysed. This analysis and the recommendations we make will be presented to both staff from UNHCR and WFP who may use these findings to make better programmes.

I also want to make clear that your participation in this focus group discussion is entirely voluntary. If you do not want to answer any specific questions, or if you want to leave at any point, that is fine – just let me know. You may ask to withdraw your consent after the completion of the discussion, until the point that we publish our findings. After that, Maastricht University will store your information for ten years so that they can

continue to use the focus group information for research and to inform policy, but you can still tell us if you want your information to be deleted.

Any information you provide here today is confidential, and you will remain anonymous throughout the process; your name will never be published in any document or report.

Do you have any questions? [wait for responses]

I would like to record this session so that I have an accurate record of our conversation. It will only be accessed by researchers within our team and will never be given to any other persons. Do I have your permission to begin recording? [Wait for response]

Great- thank you.

Kindly confirm for the recording that I have explained your rights as a participant to you and that you voluntarily agree to participate in this study. [Wait for response]

Kindly each state your name for the tape, and that you consent to being recorded here today.

Participant information sheet

Enumerator: when handing this to the participant, write in this box the number corresponding to the participant's position	
Age	
Gender	
Country of origin	
How long have you been in [insert country]	
Location of residence	
Marital status	
How many people live with you?	
How many children live with you?	
Do you or any member of your family have a disability?	
Are you currently receiving the [include programme name]?	
If yes. How long have you been receiving this benefit?	
Do you receive any other assistance? [include examples from the location]	

1. Could we please start with a brief round of introductions – would each of you tell us your name, and when have you arrived here [Camp/Country].

2. Tell us what do you know about [programme name]. *Warm-up questions to get them to start talking about the program.*
    a. Have you heard about the program? Do you know how the programme works?
    b. Have you ever been a beneficiary of the progam?

If yes, ask: what happened that you are no longer benefitting from the program?

    c. When was the last time you applied to the program?
3. Thinking about the process you went through to apply for the program. Tell me about all the steps you had to take during this process.
   Probes:
    a. Did you have to go somewhere to register to participate in the program? *If yes, ask about travel time and any finalcial cost. Also, ask if they had to go multiples times or just once.*
    b. Were you asked to provide any sort of documentation? *If yes, probe on complexity of documentation and any related financial costs and what happened in case they were not able to provide the documentation.*
    c. During this process, were you interviewed? Or asked to complete a survey or fill out a form? *If yes, probe about how long did the process of interview/application take? [provide estimate in hours]. Also, if there were different ocassions when they were interviewed or had to fill out a survey/form.*
       If they were interviewed or had to fill out survey/form, ask:
    d. In your opinion were the questions you were asked easy to understand and to answer?
    e. Do you believe the questions were appropriate? *Probe if maybe questions felt invasive or unfair.*

4. After the application process, how were you informed that you would not receive [programme name]?
    a. Did you understand the reason for the rejection?
    b. Did you receive information on how to appeal the decision?

5. Do you know of people that appealed the decision?
    a. Tell us about the appeal process. *Probe: Was it easy? Is it a long or complex process?* Where does it take place? Any travel costs involved? Time?
    b. Is it necessary to submit new documents? *If yes, probe on complexity of documentation and any related financial costs. Also, what happened in case they were not able to provide the documentation.*
    c. During this process, are people interviewed? Or asked to complete a survey or fill out a form? *If yes, probe about how long the interview/application process was [provide estimate in hours].*
6. What do you think makes people not appeal the decision? *Probe: in agreement with decision? Were there obstacles to the appeal process? If obstacles with the process, probe about the main barriers, such as complicated process, additional costs.*
7. Going back to thinking about the time you have spent in the process of applying and registering for [programme name]. How much time did it take all in all? What would you otherwise have done during this time? Maybe you would be working or doing house chores?
8. Do people in this [camp/neighborhood] normally work? Note to enumerator: Even small jobs without a formal contract? This might include selling food items or working in a shop or in another person's household.
9. Those that work, do they work every day?
10. What can peoole earn for a typically day of work? Is payment usually in cash or in-kind?

11. Now let's think about the families that are currently receiving the [program].
    a. Do you know families that receive [programme name]?
12. Since they have started receiving the benefit, did you notice a change in the way that they interacted with neighbours or the community? Or in the way the community interact with them? ? *Probe about positive or negative changes. Perhaps, there is animosity fromsome of the households that were rejected?*
13. Do you think the right people are provided with assistance? *Probe about why yes/no.*
14. Do you think more people should be included in the programme? Or some people should be removed? *Probe about why. If others should be included ask:*
    a. Considering that the [programme name] might have a limited amount of money to distribute. Do you believe it would be fair to reduce the amount that everyone receives to be able to include new beneficiaries in the program?
15. Do you feel the process of selection for assistance is fair and transparent? Why?
16. Do you know about any situation in which people had to pay a fee to be able to apply to [programme name]e? *Probe about bribes or favours in exchange to be selected to the programme and if this happened to someone they know or if they heard a rumour.*
17. Is there anything else you consider relevant to your experience with the programme that has not been discussed?
18. Is there anything else you would like to add in terms of the programme's eligibility criteria and/or registration process?

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Partner: Name moderator:

Start time: End time:

CONSENT SCRIPT

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Today I would like to talk to you about your experiences and your opinions about the [include name of the program], with a special focus on the application process. Maastricht University will analyse this data, along with other data collected here and in other two countries and inform UNHCR and WFP on your experiences with the programme and its application process.

Your words will only be used anonymously. Nobody will be able to identify you from your words. Neither WFP, UNHCR, nor the government will be given access to your name, or the recordings, or the transcript.
There is no direct benefit to participating in this discussion. I do not work for the UN or the authorities in [include country] and I cannot influence the assistance you receive. However, the things you tell me today will be faithfully recorded and analysed. This analysis and the recommendations we make will be presented to both staff from UNHCR and WFP who may use these findings to make better programmes.

I also want to make clear that your participation in this focus group discussion is entirely voluntary. If you do not want to answer any specific questions, or if you want to leave at any point, that is fine – just let me know. You may ask to withdraw your consent after the completion of the discussion, until the point that we publish our findings. After that, Maastricht University will store your information for ten years so that they can continue to use the focus group information for research and to inform policy, but you can still tell us if you want your information to be deleted.

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Kindly each state your name for the tape, and that you consent to being recorded here today.

Participant information sheet

Enumerator: when handing this to the participant, write in this box the number corresponding to the participant's position	
Age	
Gender	
Country of origin	
How long have you been in [insert country]	
Location of residence	
Marital status	
How many people live with you?	
How many children live with you?	
Do you or any member of your family have a disability?	
Are you currently receiving the [include programme name]?	
If yes. How long have you been receiving this benefit?	
Do you receive any other assistance? [include examples from the location]	

19. Could we please start with a brief round of introductions – would each of you tell us your name, and when have you arrived here [Camp/Country].
20. Tell us about your general experience with [programme name]. *Warm-up questions to get them to start talking about the program.*
    a. Are you the designated recipient of the assistance in your family?

b. How long have you been a beneficiary?

If beneficiairies for longer than [insert years] ask:

(a) Are you aware of the changes in the programme in the past [X] years? If yes, probe on whether they have noticed any change, whether and how they were informed about the changes and if any action was required from them because of the change.

21. Thinking about the process you went through to become a beneficiary of the program. Tell me about all the steps you had to take during this process.
    Probes:
    a. Did you have to go somewhere to register to participate in the program? *If yes, ask about travel time and any financial cost. Also, ask if they had to go multiples times or just once.*
    b. Were you asked to provide any sort of documentation? *If yes, probe on complexity of documentation and any related financial costs, and what happened in case they were not able to provide the documentation*
    c. During this process, were you interviewed? Or asked to complete a survey or fill out a form? *If yes, probe about how long did the process of interview/application take? [provide estimate in hours]. Also, if there were different ocassions when they were interviewed or had to fill out a survey/form.*
    If they were interviewed or had to fill out survey/form, ask:
    d. In your opinion were the questions you were asked easy to understand and to answer?
    e. Do you believe the questions were appropriate? *Probe if maybe questions felt invasive or unfair.*

22. Going back to thinking about the time you have spent in this process of registering for [programme name]. How much time did it take all in all? What would you otherwise have done during this time? Maybe you would be working or doing house chores?
23. Do people in this [camp/neighborhood] normally work? Note to enumerator: Even small jobs without a formal contract? This might include selling food items or working in a shop or in another person's household.
24. Those that work, do they work every day?
25. What can people earn for a typical day of work? Is payment usually in cash or in-kind?
26. Do you know whether people were initially rejected from receiving [programme name]? *If a participant says yes, ask:*
    a. Did they appeal this decision? *If yes, probe on whether they are familiar with the appeal process and whether it is easy/complex)*
27. When you received assistance from [program], did you lose any other income sources? *(do not say out loud: here we are looking for whether they lost remittances, or perhaps they lost their job)*.
28. When you were chosen for assistance from [program], did you notice a change in the way your household interacted with your neighbours or your community? *Probe about positive or negative changes. Perhaps, do they feel any animosity from households that maybe were rejected?*
    a. How about a change within your household? Was there any change in household dynamics? *Probe about positive or negative changes. For instance, were there changes in who decides what to buy. Did it help reduce stress in the house or did it create more/different stressful situations?*
29. Do you know other households that receive [programme name]? Do you think the right people are provided with assistance? *Probe about why yes/no.*

30. Do you know households that have been rejected from [program]? How do you feel about this? Is it right that they were rejected? Why?
31. Do you think more people should be included in the programme? Or some people should be removed? *Probe about why. If others should be included ask:*
    a. Considering that the [programme name] might have a limited amount of money to distribute. Do you believe it would be fair to reduce the amount that everyone receives to be able to include more beneficiaries in the program?
32. Do you feel the process of selection for assistance is fair and transparent? Why?
33. Do you know about any situation in which people had to pay a fee to be able to apply to [programme name]e? *Probe about bribes or favours in exchange to be selected to the programme and if this happened to someone they know or if they heard a rumour.*
34. The average value of the transfer is [insert value here]. Considering all the processes you went through to apply for the assistance, how much is the benefit worth to you? Why?
35. Now considering the potential impacts (positive or negative) that receiving this assistance has had in your life, for example in terms of interacting with the community. How much is the benefit worth to you? Why?
36. Is there anything else you consider relevant to your experience with the programme that has not been discussed?
37. Is there anything else you would like to add in terms of the programme's eligibility criteria and/or registration process?

Key Informant Interview Guide

Thank you for giving us your time today. This survey is fielded by researchers from UNU-MERIT (part of the United Nations University), in Maastricht, NL as part of a project commissioned by the WFP/UNHCR Joint Targeting & Programme Excellence Hub.

Our team has been commissioned to conduct an exploratory study into the costs and benefits of targeting in a humanitarian setting. The study relies on case studies, such as here in [case study location]. During this process today we are going to talk about the costs - in terms of resources and staff time - associated with targeting the [programme name] programme here in [case study location].

The information you give here today will be used in our analysis. However, no personally identifying information will be used in any of the reports. Moreover, none of the information given here today will have any repercussions or ramifications.

I am going to ask you to describe to me the processes and operations involved in targeting the [programme name] here in [case study location]. Once we have established the steps or activities involved, we are going to identify the staff time committed, at different all levels and the resources committed. This process is iterative and interactive.

1. Kindly introduce yourself - your name, your position/title, your background, length of time in post, tenure in your current position, or whether you worked in a similar role here in [country case study location].
2. Kindly give some background on the [programme name] operating here in [case study location]. Probe for details of the type of assistance, the value of assistance, who is eligible to receive the assistance - has this changed over time, disbursement frequency?
3. Please describe the targeting process in [programme name] Probe for the eligibility criteria, how these were derived, to what extent do data-driven processes underlie the targeting process and is this an on-going component, whether the criteria are updated routinely, beneficiary eligibility verification, on-going enrolment/verification checks, appeals processes/CFM
4. For how long has [programme name] used this targeting mechanism?
5. Prior to the implementation of this specific targeting process, was this programme targeted or blanket assistance?
6. These were the activities identified by the CO as the 'ingredients' in the targeting process for the [programme name] in [case study country]. Looking through this list, is there something you feel is absent from the list? If yes, follow the ABC-I format
7. Do you feel beneficiary costs of engaging in targeting are adequately accounted for in the targeting process?
8. Do you think these beneficiary costs are adequately monitored and factored into the design of the policy?
9. How much do you expect beneficiaries to spend in terms of financial resources in fulfilling the targeting/eligibility criteria?
10. Do you feel this is properly accounted for in the transfer value?
11. How long do you expect beneficiaries to spend in terms of time in fulfilling the targeting/eligibility criteria?
12. Do you feel this is properly accounted for in the transfer value?

13. To what extent do you feel that external costs of targeting are captured and monitored? Probe: these could be those borne by implementing partners or other humanitarian organisations operating here?
14. Are beneficiary costs of participation in eligibility verification monitored regularly?
15. To what extent do you feel that the targeting process used here is effective? Probe: what would need to change to make it work more effectively, and what is preventing this process being changed?
16. To what extent do you feel that the targeting process used here is 13 fair and equitable?

Abbreviations

ABC-I	Activity-Based Costing Ingredients
CARI	Consolidated Approach to Reporting Indicators of Food Security
CFM	Complaints and Feedback Mechanisms
CSA	Commisariat à la Sécurité Alimentaire
CSP	Country Strategic Plan
ECMEN	Economic Capacity to Meet Essential Needs
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
GFA	General Food Assistance
IDP	Internally Displaced Person
JPDM	Joint Post Distribution Monitoring
KII	Key Informant Interview
MEB	Minimum Expenditure Basket
MENA	Middle East and Northern Africa
MFB	Minimum Food Basket
PMT	Proxy Means Testing
WFP	World Food Programme
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

ABOUT UNU-MERIT

The United Nations University Maastricht Economic and Social Research Institute on Innovation and Technology (UNU-MERIT) is a research and training institute of the United Nations University (UNU) which collaborates closely with Maastricht University. UNU-MERIT aims to advance societal policy and innovation research, provide education and mobilise knowledge in order to unlock the full potential of innovation for achieving inclusive sustainable development. The research agenda of UNU-MERIT on 'Comprehensive Innovation for Sustainable Development' (CI4SD) focuses on the interconnected risks andopportunities of innovation, as they relate to climate change, digital transformation, poverty and inequality, migration and population, and the future of work.