

Linking Research and Action

STRENGTHENING FOOD ASSISTANCE AND FOOD POLICY RESEARCH

Assessing the Effectiveness of Community-Based Targeting of Emergency Food Aid in Bangladesh, Ethiopia, and Malawi

“Better flows of information have the potential to improve the effectiveness and consistency of targeting as well as increase residents’ trust that relief is being disbursed according to fair and rational criteria. A strikingly high percentage of households in all three countries did not correctly understand how assistance was being allocated in their communities.”

Good targeting is necessary during emergencies because resources are almost always limited. Poor targeting risks omitting households in genuine need. It may also lead to allocating resources to less needy households, thereby reducing resources available to those in the most dire circumstances.

Increasingly, governments and donors are using community-based targeting to provide assistance in emergency situations. The belief is that communities themselves are likely to have better information than outsiders as to who has been most adversely affected. While an extensive literature is now available on community-based targeting of social safety nets, little hard data exist on such targeting in the case of emergencies such as droughts or floods.

To fill this gap, IFPRI examined the effectiveness of community-based targeting following three recent emergencies: the 1998 floods in Bangladesh; the 2002 drought in Ethiopia; and the 2001-02 failed maize harvest in Malawi.

Bangladesh 1998

In 1998, unusually severe floods covered more than two-thirds of the country, destroying over 10 percent of the rice harvest. Two existing relief programmes provided the bulk of food assistance during and after this emergency. Gratuitous Relief (GR) targeted both across and within localities with community-level decisionmakers allocating relief directly to the most affected households. The Vulnerable Group Feeding (VGF) programme also used community targeting, employing criteria such as assets, income, occupation, and demographics (e.g., female-headed households). GR was mobilized immediately after the flood, while VGF was implemented later, with larger amounts transferred to a larger number of households.

IFPRI researchers evaluated the effectiveness of targeting using a survey of 750 households that was fielded three times over a 15-month period after the floods ended, as well as additional data collected in 2004. These surveys obtained information on the severity of flood exposure, household economic and demographic characteristics, and households’ participation in food assistance programmes.

IFPRI found that community relief committees appear to have targeted according to the spirit of the programmes: GR channelled relief more effectively to flood victims. Within villages receiving assistance, households that were more severely exposed to the flood were three times more likely to receive GR transfers than those that were not exposed. Within villages receiving aid, VGF directed food aid more effectively to the poor rather than those severely affected by the flood.

IFPRI also examined community

members’ knowledge and perceptions of how the programmes targeted aid. In 1998, 43 percent of respondents claimed that they did not know how assistance was targeted. Nevertheless, close to 50 percent of the respondents were able to correctly identify targeting criteria such as flood exposure and poverty. Moreover, a greater proportion (75 percent) of respondents said they thought the allocation was fair in 1998, compared to 66 percent during the floods of 1988.

Ethiopia 2002

During a drought in 2002, Ethiopia’s cereal production fell by approximately 25 percent. By December 2002, an estimated 14.3 million Ethiopians faced significant or severe food shortages. Drought relief was made available in the worst affected areas of the country.

In 2004, IFPRI and collaborators surveyed households in 15 villages in localities covering all major crop growing regions of Ethiopia. These households had been surveyed several times prior to 2002. This pre-drought information made it possible to assess targeting based on ex-ante household characteristics such as consumption and wealth levels, while the post-drought survey instrument collected information on access to various forms of drought assistance as well as information on other factors that might have affected access to aid.

Ethiopia’s *National Food Aid Targeting Guidelines* give local communities responsibility for drawing up criteria for the allocation of drought relief. For this reason, researchers fielded a community questionnaire at the same time as the household survey to obtain information on criteria for allocating emergency assistance.

Nine of the 15 villages received some form of drought relief. In the case of the largest form of drought assistance, public work provided under Food-for-Work (FFW) or Employment Generation Schemes (EGS), locally set targeting criteria seem to have been poorly understood. Poverty related criteria were not always used and even where they were employed, seemed to have had little impact. However, there is also relatively little evidence that individuals with good local connections were advantaged in access to drought-related employment. And while there is some evidence that communities used local knowledge of the circumstances of individual households in allocating assistance, overall, the only meaningful criteria appear to have been that households had individuals able to work, with the wage set in such a way that the richest households were slightly less likely to participate.

In the case of the second form of assistance, Gratuitous Relief (GR), targeting criteria appear somewhat better understood. Targeting of this assistance was considerably more progressive than that found under work-based schemes. As with FFW/EGS, there is relatively little evidence that individuals with good local connections were advantaged in access to GR—but also little evidence of the use of knowledge of idiosyncratic events that affected particular households. However, because the number of villages in the sample is small, these results should not be taken as findings generalizable to the entire country.

Malawi 2001-02

When Malawi's maize harvests failed in 2001 and 2002, the initial response to the food crisis was delayed due to poor information, trade and transport bottlenecks, and a general lack of institutional preparedness in dealing with large-scale emergencies. Food assis-

tance, provided under the Joint Food Emergency Programme, arrived late, although it was scaled up quickly. Most of the aid was administered by nongovernmental organizations in partnership with district- and village-level institutions. Community-based targeting was the chosen *modus operandi*.

The largest programme, General Food Distribution, targeted the “poorest of the poor” households with additional special emphasis placed on reaching households with orphans and/or malnourished children, families with elderly or ill members, female-headed households, and those who had suffered most from the drought.

Assessment of targeting was based on information collected from 529 households in 2001 and 2004 in 19 Traditional Authorities in rural Malawi, supplemented by a community-level survey implemented in the same areas in 2004.

Though guidelines for targeting were clearly stated in the manual prepared for administrators, they do not appear to have been well understood by households or community leaders. In 30 of the 42 communities surveyed, key informants lacked any specific knowledge about targeting criteria. In seven of them, respondents said they thought that targeting was actually random. Further, about a third of the households living in programme areas did not even know that a relief programme was operating in their vicinity. Lack of information on targeting criteria used was particularly severe among those who owned the least amount of land.

The IFPRI study found that when targeting criteria are clearly observable and verifiable in practice—for instance, female-headed households, households with orphans or the elderly—targeting in practice was more likely to match the guidelines. How-

ever, when the criteria were not as easily observable or verifiable, as in the case of identifying the “poorest of the poor,” or those badly affected by drought, it was less likely to be implemented.

Implications for Food Assistance Programmes

These case studies present a mixed picture. Community-based targeting worked best in Bangladesh, less well in Ethiopia, and least well in Malawi. While one must be careful when attempting to draw broad conclusions from a limited set of case studies, three features are of note.

First, targeting experience may improve targeting performance. Bangladesh, the most successful in reaching targeted populations, also had the most experience with targeting emergency assistance. Ethiopia, with somewhat shorter experience, has implemented various methods of targeting over the years, with varying degrees of success. Malawi, where targeting was arguably least successful, had not experienced a similar crisis since the 1940s, and was ill-prepared for a national food emergency.

Second, community-based targeting may work better when programmes face tight budgets. In Ethiopia, where communities allocated both public works and free distributions, targeting was better in the latter programme, which was more resource constrained.

Third, better flows of information within communities have the potential to improve the effectiveness and consistency of targeting as well as increase residents' trust that relief is being disbursed according to fair and rational criteria. A strikingly high percentage of households in all three countries did not correctly understand how assistance was being allocated in their communities.

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