Targeting the Vulnerable: A Review of the Necessity and Feasibility of Targeting Vulnerable Households

Susanne Jaspars
NutritionWorks

Jeremy Shoham
NutritionWorks

This article examines whether it is possible to target vulnerable households within a geographically defined area. It looks first at the justification for targeting and then reviews recent practical experience in actually trying to reach vulnerable groups. As complex emergencies increasingly last longer, strategies to target vulnerable households are common in the protracted phase of the emergency. While this is often necessary because of a decline in resources, it is not always justified by an improvement in nutritional status or food security of the beneficiary population.

Common target groups are the poor and the malnourished, but in complex emergencies these are not always the most vulnerable. Moreover, recent practical experience has shown considerable difficulties in targeting the poor. Methods to target the poor rely on community-based relief committees, whose priorities are not necessarily the same as those of external agencies. This paper gives examples of such targeted assistance programmes in Kenya, south Sudan and Tanzania. The paper concludes that situations where targeting vulnerable households is justified and feasible are extremely limited. It is suggested that if targeting has to be done because of scarce resources, this should be done on a geographical basis and on the basis of nutritional status. Case-study material shows that it is essential to understand the political determinants of vulnerability and to design methods that will reach the most vulnerable.

Keywords: Tanzania, Kenya, NGOs, southern Sudan, vulnerability, targeting, community based, limited resources.

Introduction

This paper asks whether it is possible to target the most vulnerable households within a geographically defined area or population with emergency relief, in particular emergency food aid. This type of targeting is distinct from geographic targeting which assumes an equi-distribution for all who are within the geographic unit of interest, e.g. village, district, region, or defined by the type of livelihoods or food economy.

Despite evidence of the difficulties of targeting in the late 1980s (Borton and Shoham, 1989; Keen, 1991b) the 1990s have seen a renewed emphasis on targeting. Possible reasons for this include the application of the relief-to-development...
continuum model, and a decline in resources with the increasing duration of conflict-related emergencies.

The relief-to-development continuum model was developed following the natural disasters of the 1980s. However, the majority of emergencies that require humanitarian assistance today are conflict related (Duffield, 1994a). The continuum model perceives a linear progression from relief to rehabilitation to development. Within the model, relief is seen as a short-term measure to sustain people until the crisis is over, after which they can rebuild their livelihoods. Complex emergencies are, not, however, temporary interruptions in a linear development process, but rather systemic and protracted crises (Duffield, 1994a). The application of the continuum model has led to assumptions that, over time, emergency-affected populations will find alternative sources of food and gradually become more self-reliant. This article examines whether this assumption is justified and the implications for targeting strategies in complex emergencies.

Protracted emergencies are often accompanied by a decline in resources over time. This leads to pressure to target, even when this may not be justified. In response to this pressure, agencies such as Oxfam, SCF (UK) and WFP have developed methods to target the most vulnerable households. One such method uses community-based relief committees to identify the most vulnerable households within their communities and distribute food to these households. This paper describes the approach as it was applied in South Sudan, Kenya and Tanzania, based on the practical experience of the authors with these programmes. The paper examines the practical difficulties with community-based targeting, particularly in war situations.

Finally, the paper examines the implications for emergency Public Nutrition. While nutrition and food-security assessment methods have advanced significantly in recent years (MSF Holland, 1997), such assessments frequently fail to incorporate any analysis of the wider political context. Complex emergencies are highly political in nature. Malnutrition and food insecurity may be the effects of complex emergencies, but the causes are political. The paper shows the importance of a political analysis in designing targeting strategies that will effectively reach the most vulnerable.

Why target?

A study of NGO practices in the targeting of emergency food aid during the Sahelian famine of 1983-6 suggested that the main reasons for targeting were:

- limited resources;
- the desire not to damage the local economy; and
- the desire to concentrate on the worst-affected areas and populations (Borton and Shoham, 1989).

In general, justifications for targeting in the late 1990s appear to have remained the same. In applying the relief-to-development continuum model, the rationale of minimising damage to the local economy has been expanded into reducing dependency of emergency-affected populations and supporting local coping strategies (see, for example, the objectives of Operation Lifeline Sudan, in Karim et al., 1996).

However, in the intervening period the nature of emergencies has changed markedly. In the last decade, the majority of emergencies that require humanitarian
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assistance are related to internal conflict, and have been termed complex emergencies. The defining characteristics of these emergencies are that they are highly political in nature and that they are of long duration (Duffield, 1994a). The three main reasons for targeting given for the 1980s are examined below in relation to the conflict-related emergencies of the 1990s.

Decline in resources over time

Complex political emergencies are characterised by their protracted nature. This means that in the last decade, relief has had to be provided to emergency-affected populations for increasingly long durations. Unfortunately, aid resources or response to emergency appeals generally declines over time (Shoham et al., 1999). Agency workers therefore find they have to target available resources even when this may not be justified. In places like south Sudan, targeting of resources is also necessary because much of the aid has to be air-lifted and logistical capacity to do this is generally insufficient to meet the needs of affected populations in their entirety.

The decline in relief provision over time is influenced by a number of factors and beliefs which are not mutually exclusive. In relation to nutrition and food security, there are two most important reasons for this decline. First, the fear that prolonged provision of relief will create dependency. It is thought that aid may be a disincentive to finding alternative food sources, disrupting markets, etc. Second, that over time, emergency-affected populations will develop coping strategies and gain access to additional sources of food. These reasons are examined in more detail below.

The fallacy of the continuum in complex emergencies

The application of the relief-development continuum persists among decision-makers, despite the changing nature of emergencies. Internal conflict reflects systemic crisis, where the survival of the powerful depends on marginalisation or exploitation of politically weaker groups. War strategies frequently target the civilian support base of the opposing side. Such emergencies are long lasting and often aimed at destroying the people’s livelihoods. As such, these crises are not short periods of acute food insecurity after which people can rebuild their livelihoods. Nor does the concept of coping strategies apply to complex emergencies. Coping strategies were originally defined as:

> Short-term, temporary responses to declining food entitlements, which are characteristic of structurally secure livelihood systems (Davies, 1992).

Conflict-related emergencies are not short term, nor can livelihoods be structurally secure in such situations.

There is no evidence to show that in complex emergencies basic needs support encourages dependency. This type of anti-welfarist argument has been adopted uncritically from Western thinking related to social welfare programmes in the developed world and may have little relevance to complex-emergency scenarios. Keen (1999) asserts that in Sierra Leone arguments about discouraging dependency by the UN and donors were a smokescreen for reducing rations when the real reason was lack of resources. Insecurity and fear were the major constraints on farming rather than any disincentive effect of food aid.
Emergency-affected populations do not necessarily develop 'coping strategies' over time. At least not strategies that can be considered successful in that they contribute to well-being and rebuilding of former livelihoods. Increasingly narrowly defined target groups and reductions in rations have actually resulted in a deterioration of people's welfare (Macrae et al., 1997). This is because in many chronic political emergencies reduction in relief is not accompanied by an increase in genuine development opportunities. In more extreme cases, the justification for a reduction in assistance has resulted in a readjustment of hitherto sacrosanct standards. In Sudan in the early 1990s, malnutrition rates of children under five years of age between 10 and 20 per cent (<80 per cent weight-for-height) were considered sufficient to launch an emergency response, but in 1996 the same rates among the war displaced were considered normal (Karim et al., 1996). Despite being of long duration therefore, protracted emergencies rarely provide people with the options necessary for becoming self-reliant.

Concentrating on the worst affected; who is targeted and why?

Concentrating assistance on the worst affected requires an analysis of vulnerability. Common target groups in humanitarian assistance programmes include:

- the physiologically vulnerable: the malnourished and sick, pregnant and lactating women, young children and the elderly;
- the socially vulnerable: female-headed households, unaccompanied minors and the disabled;
- the economically vulnerable: the poorest; and
- the politically vulnerable: internally displaced, refugees (Jaspars and Young, 1995a).

The concept of vulnerability is not straightforward, however, and the above target groups cannot necessarily be selected as the most vulnerable in all situations. For example, while women and children are generally recognised to be a vulnerable group, it is also true that in most situations, some women are more vulnerable than others (see Webb, this issue).

Identifying the vulnerable, requires an analysis of the type of risks that people face and the means they have to cope with them. For example, targeting the malnourished is justified on the basis of their increased risk of mortality. However, targeting the malnourished deals with the symptoms of crisis, rather than the pre-disposing factors or underlying causes. It does not identify who is most at risk of food insecurity and dying or why.

The desire to focus assistance on the poor is based on the assumption that they are the most vulnerable. The poor are assumed to have the least resilience to absorb external shocks and risks. Chambers (1989) was the first to consider vulnerability as being different from poverty. Vulnerability implies defencelessness and insecurity in the face of particular risks (Chambers, 1989). The types of risks that people face may include: drought, market failure and war, and the effects of these will depend on the livelihoods of the affected people and the alternative strategies that people have.

National surveys of income and malnutrition often show an association between poverty and malnutrition. However, while a relationship between poverty and malnutrition may exist at the population level, at the household level, the poor are not
necessarily the malnourished, and vice versa (Jaspars and Young, 1995b). Sen's entitlement theory also implies that it is the poorest who become malnourished and die in famines (Sen, 1981).

In war situations, it is not necessarily the poor who are most vulnerable (for example, Duffield, 1994b; Keen, 1991b; de Waal, 1994). In situations of insecurity, it may be those with assets who are most at risk (Duffield, 1994b). War strategies are often aimed at particular social, ethnic or political groups. Sen's entitlement theory has been criticised for not incorporating the role of violence in causing famine (de Waal, 1991).

Even in natural disasters, the relationship between malnutrition and poverty is not straightforward. The relationship is influenced by the health environment, people's livelihoods, the frequency of exposure to food insecurity and the development of coping strategies. In Darfur in 1985, de Waal (1988) found no relationship between risk of dying and socio-economic status. Jaspars and Young (1995b) later showed there was no correlation between malnutrition and poverty in the same area.

In complex emergencies, the evidence is that social and political marginalisation are the most important determinants of vulnerability. For example, in Somalia, the main victims of the 1992 famine fell into two categories: traditional minorities and people displaced from their homes by virtue of being members of the 'wrong' clan. The worst famine occurred among these groups (de Waal, 1994). In south Sudan in 1988 and again in 1998, the worst famine occurred among the Dinka in Bahr-el-Ghazal, while within these, the worst-affected groups were the displaced and members of smaller and politically marginalised clans (SPLM/SRRA/OLS, 1998; Harrigan, 1998; Jaspars, 1999).

There are a number of possible reasons why agencies continue to target poor households, despite the evidence that in complex emergencies the nature of vulnerability is essentially political. First, if people do find alternative ways of accessing food in the protracted phase of an emergency, this must be at least in part determined by socio-economic factors. Second, it is what agencies have become accustomed to in the 1980s. Following the famines of the mid-1980s and the paradigm shift caused by Sen's work on entitlements (1981), numerous famine early warning systems were established that were based on socio-economic indicators. Third, those carrying out food-security assessments are generally not trained or required to examine the political dimensions of the crisis. Identification of the vulnerable depends in part on the objectives of the assessment. For example, following a nutritional assessment, an agency may decide to target the malnourished (or all under-fives) and a food-economy assessment results in recommendations to target those with the greatest food deficit — for example, the poorest.

Finally, it is not necessary to know about the political determinants of food insecurity to determine the need for food aid or how much is needed. Moreover, rather than being based on an analysis of vulnerability, target groups are usually discrete categories of people for whom external support can be provided. Poverty and malnutrition may, in fact, be the result of political vulnerability, but in this case, target groups do not relate to the causes of vulnerability.

However, as will be argued later, knowledge about the process of marginalisation and dispossession as causes of vulnerability is crucial for designing targeting and distribution mechanisms that will actually reach those most in need. Without this knowledge, food aid, like other resources, is more liable to manipulation by the most powerful.
The conclusion is that targeting criteria in complex emergencies are not based on an analysis of vulnerability, but on assumptions derived from stable contexts and an inability to incorporate the political dimensions of crisis in nutrition or food-security assessments. Ironically, the 1989 targeting study, which reviewed responses to drought-induced emergencies, also found that targeting was usually based on assumptions. This was attributed to a limited understanding of the underlying processes operating during a food crisis (Borton and Shoham, 1989).

**Reaching the vulnerable**

This section reviews community-based targeting, as this method of identifying vulnerable households has become increasingly popular in recent years. Case studies were drawn from food-distribution systems in Kenya (Turkana), south Sudan (Bahr-el-Ghazal) and Tanzania (Singida and Dodoma). These represent widely varying emergency contexts, where almost exactly the same targeting methods were applied. South Sudan has faced a protracted conflict-related emergency with regular acute crises (for example, 1998). In Turkana, the targeting method was applied to poor or destitute pastoralists living around Lake Turkana, and in Tanzania, the same approach was used for drought- and later flood- and pest-affected farmers.

**What is community-based targeting?**

Community-based targeting is any beneficiary selection carried out by its own members. This targeting method was developed because of the need to target and the inability of outsiders to do so on the basis of socio-economic criteria. Local representatives are required to select households without livestock, with little available labour, or female-headed households who are not receiving support from relatives. With the increasing focus on targeting vulnerable households in emergency operations therefore, community-based targeting has become increasingly popular.

Community representatives could include traditional community leaders or elders, local government, or committees particularly formed for the purpose of relief distribution. In most cases, community-based targeting happens by means of specially elected relief committees. Ideally, these committees are elected by the community and because they represent cross-community interests. The committees then select the most vulnerable for targeting within the community. The targeting methods used in Tanzania, Kenya and south Sudan are described in more detail in Box 1.

In reality, despite the rhetoric of targeting according to the community’s perception of vulnerability, agencies usually require communities to target according to the agency’s own criteria. Furthermore, because targeting is usually driven by scarcity of resources, the agency sets a limit on the proportion of the community that can be targeted. For example, in south Sudan, the proportion of the community to be so targeted is determined by food-economy assessments. In Turkana, based on information from the local famine early warning system, Oxfam set the proportion in need of food aid at 30 per cent. The community identified recipient households using a wealth-ranking technique. In Tanzania, the proportion of the population to be targeted was set at approximately 60 per cent. Thus, selection criteria are influenced by outsider perceptions of vulnerability and the perceived need to target only a percentage of households. Communities are effectively co-opted into targeting.
Box 1  Community-based targeting methods (in Kenya, Tanzania and south Sudan)

1. A team from the implementing NGO or UN agency visits the village and explains the nature of the programmes in meetings with local authorities and in public meetings. If food aid is to be provided regularly (say, to the same groups on a monthly basis), the proportion of the population to be targeted is explained (for example, Kenya and Tanzania).

2. Villagers elect a relief committee (RC) at a public meeting. Tanzania: one man and one woman from each sub-village. South Sudan: maximum of 13 members (seven women and six men) to cover an area, usually representing all geographical units but not all villages or clans. In Kenya, RC of three women and three men.

3. South Sudan: the team discusses which geographical units are worst affected and determines allocation of food by proportional piling. Chiefs are then informed of the number of households to be targeted in their area (the total number of households or proportion of the population entitled to food aid being determined by a previous food-economy assessment).

4. The team tells the RC the proportion of households to be targeted and discusses the beneficiary selection criteria. In south Sudan, this involves discussion of the findings of the food-economy assessment. In Tanzania, following discussion with the RC the criteria are discussed in a public meeting.

5. In Tanzania, members of the RC register households on the basis of agreed selection criteria. In Kenya, members of the RC carry out wealth ranking of all households in the community. In south Sudan, the chiefs meet with clan leaders to determine the number of households to be targeted in each village.

6. In Tanzania and Kenya, the team discusses the registration list with the RC which is followed by a public meeting where all names of registered households are called out. In south Sudan, the entire population in the affected area is asked to come on the distribution day. The RC identifies female village representatives who select the most vulnerable households to come and collect food.

7. In Tanzania, food was delivered to the village and handed over to village government and RC who were responsible for distribution. In Kenya, way bills were signed by the RC and an NGO food monitor, who were responsible for distribution. In south Sudan, UN food monitors were responsible, but distribution was done by local authorities, chiefs and the RC.

8. In Kenya, in addition to the RC, the NGO employed one monitor per 1,000 beneficiaries who were permanently based at the distribution point. In Tanzania, regular food-basket monitoring was carried out by the NGO in one-third of the villages. In south Sudan, monitoring consists of qualitative household and key-informant interviews. Sometimes, however, monitoring was difficult both because the UN could not establish a permanent presence, and because access to the affected population was restricted.

Source: Jaspars et al., 1997, 1999; Shoham, 1999.

Reasons for failures in community-based targeting

Reason 1. Perceptions of vulnerability and entitlement to food aid differ between communities and outsiders. Target groups in south Sudan and Kenya were narrowly defined as those unable to meet their food needs, the destitute, etc. From an outsider's point of view this may make sense if food aid is provided for purely nutritional purposes. However, local people may consider that everyone is affected to some degree and therefore entitled to food aid, even if certain households are able to meet...
their immediate food needs. Furthermore, local networks of sharing often define how relief should be distributed among the emergency-affected population.

This means that there is often a great difference between the number of people that the community considers affected by a particular event and entitled to food aid, and the proportion of the community that the agency says can be targeted. In south Sudan in 1998 and Turkana in 1996, local people at first agreed to target the most vulnerable community members, but food was later redistributed to almost everyone (Jaspars et al., 1997, 1999).

In Turkana, relief committees successfully targeted the most destitute, but some of these households were later obliged to share their food with other non-targeted ones. In south Sudan, relief committees and other community representatives put on a show for WFP which gave the appearance of targeting. In reality, 'targeted' women were chosen to carry food to a site where it was then redistributed by local chiefs.

In the case of south Sudan and Turkana, there is sufficient empirical evidence to support the community view that in fact everyone was affected. In Turkana the programme was implemented among destitute pastoralists who had migrated to the shores of Lake Turkana in previous famines. An evaluation of the programme showed that the distinctions that relief committees had to make to select the target groups were minimal. In many cases distinctions had to be made between the destitute. In some communities only people who were destitute and old or disabled were included, whereas those who were destitute and younger and strong enough to collect firewood were excluded. Beneficiaries shared their food with those who were not targeted, but the evaluation still showed that the food security of the non-targeted population deteriorated significantly during the project (Jaspars et al., 1997).

In south Sudan, in 1998, there was clear evidence of extreme crisis in northern Bahr-el-Ghazal. Food-economy assessments in 1996 and 1997 showed that the large majority of the population were destitute. Events in 1998 led to a famine associated with significant loss of life. At the height of the famine, malnutrition and mortality rates of up to 80 per cent and 26/10,000/day, respectively, were reported. Despite this, WFP continued their attempts to target only a proportion of the population (Jaspars, 1999). As in all famines, more powerful members of the population were able to meet their own food needs and exploited the poor and marginalised groups. However, because WFP relied on community-based relief committees, it was precisely those powerful groups that received the majority of aid.

In both these examples, a shortage of resources was a significant determinant of the need to target. In Turkana, food aid was only available for 30 per cent of the population while WFP had received little response to the OLS appeal for 1998. By the time WFP obtained the necessary resources, the crisis in southern Sudan was at its peak and it was simply not possible to scale up the operation within such a limited period of time.

Even where communities agree that some of its members are worse affected than others and that some families can still gain access to food, food aid is often redistributed among the entire community. There are several explanations for this. First, food aid is provided by outsiders and therefore does not fit into the existing system of claims and obligations. In many societies, everyone is considered entitled to external resources which are provided for free. Second, better-off households may have assisted their poorer relatives in the past and in order to maintain these support networks, poor households may therefore insist that part of the food aid is provided to
the better off or will share their food ration with them. Food aid may also be used to repay debts if resources were received in the past as loans rather than gifts.

Finally, distributing food aid to everyone may remove the shame associated with being a recipient of charity (Harragin, 1998). Sharp (1998) found that even in public works programmes in Ethiopia there was a redistribution of work days so that a much larger number of households benefited than was originally planned. Despite being implemented as a form of self-targeting for the poor, the study found no examples where schemes successfully selected the poorest and excluded the better off.

Reason 2. Community representatives do not necessarily prioritise the most vulnerable. Earlier sections argued that vulnerability is often determined by social and political status. In distributions by community representatives, it is often the socially and politically vulnerable that are excluded from food distributions.

In any crisis situation, local representatives will tend to favour their own people in distributions. This means that rather than distribution on the basis of need, resident populations are often given priority over the displaced. Within resident populations, the focus may be on the villages, tribes or clans that are represented in local government or even elected relief committees. In south Sudan, it was found that local representatives gave first priority to the resident population, then the largest and most powerful clans within this, and then others who ‘belonged’. People excluded from within the clan might include female-headed households not taken in by their husband’s family, lone elderly people and unaccompanied minors. WFP food monitors often saw malnourished and weak people around the distribution site who received nothing.

Keen found a similar situation in his study of targeting of food aid in Darfur in 1985–6. In relief distribution in Darfur in the mid-1980s, the displaced were repeatedly discriminated against. Nomads, one of the hardest-hit groups by the drought, generally received less than their fair share (Keen, 1991a).

Reason 3. Political and military priorities. While the influence of political and military objectives is most extreme in conflict situations, they are also evident in more stable situations. In any situation, local government and community representatives will be under pressure to favour groups with superior lobbying power. For example, the urban constituency and civil servants in Sudan have in the past been favoured in relief distributions for precisely this reason (Keen, 1991a). Richer villages in Darfur were also found to receive more assistance than the poorest. Food was often consigned to the richer villages, giving the better-off a greater claim to relief grain.

In war, there are several ways in which aid may be manipulated. The examples given below all illustrate powerful political or military motivations by warring parties that will make it almost impossible to ensure that all food aid reaches the most vulnerable. Frequent reports of food aid being diverted to the army has led to fears that aid in such contexts may fuel the conflict and do more harm than good.

Taxation of food aid by the SPLA in south Sudan has been reported for as long as the aid operation. The extent of this has been difficult to determine, but appears to vary by location and time of the year, mainly depending on the need for protection or defence from GOS-supported militia (SPLM/SRRA/OLS, 1998). Various reports from south Sudan in 1998, point to taxation of food aid at the time of redistribution. Thus, when chiefs redistribute the food, a portion is allocated to the army and/or civil
administration. In addition to such direct taxation, the wives, daughters or sisters of solders would of course collect food aid and share it with them. As such, it is difficult to distinguish between civilians and the army as almost all families have a male relative in the army.

Local representatives are either directly involved in such taxation, or otherwise are under pressure to tax food beneficiaries. In south Sudan, one reason why relief committees had been formed was to reduce the role of chiefs and the SRRA in the distribution. Distribution during the crisis in 1998 showed, however, that chiefs and the SRRA had far more power than the relief committees and were in fact the ones who determined the allocation of food aid and who eventually received it (Jaspars, 1999).

Displaced populations may be created and maintained in poor condition in order to attract assistance. One of the best-known examples is the manipulation of unaccompanied minors among the returnees from Ethiopia to south Sudan in 1991:

A fair proportion of the special foods distributed for the unaccompanied children never reached their mouths, but instead was used to feed other more powerful individuals. The minors therefore remained in a state of near starvation and this helped the continuation of relief assistance (Scott-Villiers et al., 1993).

There are many other examples where the other side of the conflict deliberately tries to deny assistance and for this reason may argue for greater targeting or a reduction in rations. Targeting the most needy in a situation of internal war is extremely difficult as the most vulnerable are so precisely because they are subjected to various military strategies aimed at denying them access to food and other resources. The targeted provision of food aid in such cases is in direct opposition to the war aims of one side of the conflict. In Congo-Zaire, any dry food distribution to Rwandan refugees was subject to diversion and theft. The most vulnerable could only be reached when food was cooked and distributed directly to them (Jaspars, 1998).

Situations where community-based targeting may work

A community-based targeting system in the Singida and Dodoma regions of central Tanzania was perceived by all key actors, government, NGOs and recipient communities to have been successful in reaching the most needy members of the community (Shoham, 1999). The programme was implemented at the end of 1998 and early 1999 in response to a severe pest attack on maize, sorghum and millet crops. This followed the previous year’s crop failure caused by flooding. Food and cash crops formed the main basis of people’s livelihoods in the area.

Food aid had to be targeted because the amount available was limited. It was leftover food from a previous EMOP that had not been allocated. Food could only be provided for about 60 per cent of households in the target area. A community-based system was implemented because previous targeted programmes in 1997/8 administered by the village government had proved to be inequitable. The end result was that small quantities of food were distributed to all households in recipient villages.

A number of factors may have predisposed the area to successful community-based targeting in Tanzania:
• There was peace and stability in an area of small cohesive village units (3,000–5,000) and an absence of any serious inter-communal division.
• There was no excessive stress; the objective of the intervention was preventive — to preserve livelihoods. It was not in response to an acute crisis.
• A relatively high proportion of the community was targeted with assistance.
• There was a well-established structure of village government and tradition of village-level public meetings and decision-making.
• There was present a pool of government extension staff and NGO personnel with knowledge of the area and experience of working at village level using participatory approaches.
• A participatory approach was consistent with established national policy and initiatives already taken in the region.
• There was a common aim and understanding between all key actors, recipient communities, governments and agencies, and a strong level of support from central and regional government.

In Turkana, the system of targeting was exactly the same, and many of the conditions mentioned above also applied. In addition, Oxfam had had a long-term presence in the area and in-depth knowledge of the area and its people. As in Tanzania, the relief committees successfully identified and targeted the poorest among the community. The key difference, however, is the much greater level of poverty in the Turkana communities. Almost everyone was destitute, the differences in wealth were marginal and the population therefore felt that targeting was unfair. As a result, food was redistributed following the targeting exercise. Beneficiaries felt obliged to share their food with those who had not been targeted (Jaspars et al., 1997). Even in Tanzania, frequently more than 60 per cent of households fell into the selection criteria. If this was the case, relief committees were given the flexibility to increase the proportion of households included to 70 per cent. They did this by reducing the per-capita ration and excluding infants.

Conclusions: when and how to target

In most emergency contexts, targeting vulnerable households is either inappropriate or not feasible. At the same time, it must be recognised that in some situations it is necessary to target vulnerable individuals or households because resources are insufficient to feed everyone within the emergency-affected population.

The first step in developing a targeting strategy is to examine whether targeting is actually justified. This requires an analysis of vulnerability, which includes the risks faced by particular population groups and the means they have to cope with such risks. Targeting on the basis of reducing dependency or supporting coping strategies is rarely justified by empirical evidence of people's nutritional or food-security status, particularly in complex emergencies. Furthermore, despite 'the poor' being a common target group, vulnerability in emergencies is not necessarily related to poverty. In an internal war, the causes of vulnerability are in large part political, and food insecurity or poverty are functions of this political vulnerability.

Food aid must, however, often be targeted because of scarcity of resources. This paper shows that targeting vulnerable households on the basis of socio-economic
criteria is extremely difficult and that situations where this can only be successfully carried out are very limited. Criteria for success may include:

- stable, non-conflict, situations;
- relatively large wealth differentials within communities and where not all wealth groups are equally affected by food insecurity;
- targeting of a fairly large proportion of the community; and
- the ability to identify community representatives that can be relied on to target the most vulnerable. This requires long-term presence or in-depth knowledge of the population by the organisation implementing the programme.

The socio-economically vulnerable can only be identified by community representatives who are under pressure to favour particular groups. Particularly during a war, vulnerable groups are unlikely to be reached by community-based relief committees. This is because they are vulnerable at least in part because they are excluded from existing community networks, whether traditional social support networks or local administration. Examples from south Sudan showed that civilians may be manipulated to attract resources, or that war strategies can be aimed precisely at denying the opposition such resources. Even in non-conflict situations, where such targeting may be considered successful in distributing food to the ‘worst-off’, social obligations often dictate that this food is redistributed.

Knowledge of political vulnerability is essential to develop targeting methods that ensure that the most vulnerable are reached. Case studies show that often the most vulnerable are excluded from relief assistance. However, in conflict situations the political environment may prevent the exclusive targeting of these groups. One solution in such cases, may be to return to systems of geographical targeting, but ensuring that all groups are represented. From the mid-1980s until recently, many agencies recognised that the only feasible way to target was on a geographical basis and that all households living within the target area should be included. If food aid has to be targeted, the most obvious criteria to use are those based on nutritional status or age groups (for example, the elderly or children under five). This can be justified both on the basis of physiological risk and for pragmatic reasons. As outsiders, it is only possible to identify the vulnerable based on clearly visible criteria. In political crises, community representatives may be unable, or unwilling, to target the vulnerable.

The limitations to what can realistically be achieved have to be recognised. In conflict situations there is no method that can exclusively reach the most vulnerable groups. Effective targeting would require being able impose regulation on the warring parties which is not within the capacity of any humanitarian agency. There is a need for greater openness about the constraints that nutritionists face, as well as the constraints faced by conflict-affected populations in promoting and achieving food insecurity.

Progress can only be made by acknowledging that effective targeting cannot be achieved in all situations, and may be inappropriate or harmful. A more realistic aim in targeting would be to maximise the effectiveness of methods in reaching the most vulnerable, and minimise diversions and manipulation of aid. Acknowledgement of the difficulties in targeting should lead to improvement in delivering relief to save lives, rather than changing the objectives of humanitarian assistance to promoting self-reliance in situations where this is impossible.

To promote good practice in targeting and distribution, it is necessary to:
• Incorporate political analysis as part of needs assessments, in order to understand political vulnerability and safeguard programmes against manipulation by political actors.
• Take explicit account of the impact of a war environment and the constraints that this poses for all aspects of food-aid programming, in particular by setting realistic objectives of what can be achieved.
• Ensure that programme decisions are based on an actual situation analysis, if possible on the basis of empirical evidence.
• Recognise that there is no single targeting method that can be applied to all situations, but that they have to be based on an analysis of vulnerability and the feasibility of reaching vulnerable groups within that particular context.
• Only advocate targeting of certain households if feasible methods for targeting them can be formulated. If a food-security assessment concludes that only a proportion of households is food insecure and in need of assistance, recommendations should clearly say whether, and how, it is possible to reach these groups.

If nutritionists and food-security analysts fail to do this they will be complicit in an erosion of standards, and ultimately a deterioration in the welfare of emergency-affected populations.

Note
1. There is clear evidence that severe malnutrition is associated with a greatly increased risk of dying. Whereas the risk associated with moderate malnutrition depends on the prevailing pattern of disease (Young and Jaspars. 1995).

References


**Address for correspondence:** NutritionWorks, PO Box 27415, London SW9 6WD. E-mail: <<n.works@odi.org.uk>>