Discussion:

Case-based vs. House-based data: for a more efficient utilization and allocation of scarce resources

Foreword:

This paper assesses the potential opportunity for assistance efficiency based on aggregating refugee cases together. Its finding suggest that there is no advantage to aggregating the case-based information into house-based data, but there could be significant efficiency gains from providing assistance to those most in need first through a case-based approach.

Background:

As the conflict in Syria enters its fifth year, intense financial pressure is faced by the Humanitarian agencies. As of today (January 7, 2015) 622,384 Syrian refugees are registered with UNHCR in Jordan. Economic resources (for food, cash, and other sectors) available for assistance distribution are limited. Finite resources is a reality. Confronted by financial constraints an assistance distribution and an assistance targeting methodology that provides an optimal allocation of scarce resources needs to be developed and employed.

Status Quo:

Data collected and stored in UNHCR's database servers provide case-based information. As is well understood across the Humanitarian Community many cases live with other cases, as a consequence, UNHCR is considering the possibility of generating house-based data (identifying which cases live in a house together and aggregating that data). As of today, creating house data is not possible as this requires census data (to date we have home visit records on approximately 12% of the refugee population; see "Creating Household data: a conundrum of feasibility" for an in-depth analysis on house-data).

Does House-data Optimize Assistance Distribution?

This paper suggests that it does not.

Scenario 1: Cases supporting each other within a house

Consider the example of two cases living in a house. Case A is composed of 2 people and has per capita expenditures of 100 JD (i.e. 200 JD in total). Case B is composed of 4 people and has per capita expenditures of 25 JD (i.e. 100 JD in total).

- *It is possible that Case A is supporting financially Case B. As a result, its reported total expenditures of 200 JD is in reality shared amongst 6 people rather than 2 people as initially believed.*

  - o *Consequently, Case A and Case B are both poor (the house is vulnerable: 200 JD + 100 JD = 300 JD divided by a total of 6 people = per capita expenditure of 50 JD, eighteen JD below the poverty line).*

By creating house-data we would treat the house as one entity with an expenditure of 50 JD. Assistance would be provided to this house of 6 people as they are aggregately 'poor'. This however represents a potential inefficient allocation of assistance, and furthermore, the humanitarian agencies risk depleting resources prior to a provision of assistance to all poor families.

The optimal allocation results in the provision of assistance only to Case B. Providing assistance to Case B and making them non-poor (expenditures above the poverty line of 68 JD) implies that Case A no longer needs to support Case B and as a result they retain all or most of their wealth (100 JD per capita). The provision of assistance to 4, rather than 6, people is enough to lift the house out of poverty.

This is optimal since assistance packages are standardized. Case B is likely to receive 50 JD per person (total assistance is equal to 200 JD; per capita expenditures are now 200 + 100 = 300 divided by 4 people = 75 JD). In house data six people will receive 50 JD (total assistance is equal to 300 JD). Unless we are able to provide customized assistance (18 JD per person in house data = 18 x 6 = 108 JD; versus 43 JD in case data = 43 x 4 = 172) case data provides greater efficiency. Nonetheless, even if a customized to HH approach to humanitarian assistance is established (no standardized packages, i.e.: cash assistance packages of 50 JD, food vouchers of 24 JD, etc.) the assumption - and issue - that a house is necessarily a household remains (see paragraph below).

Inadmissible Exclusion Error:

As explained in "Creating Household data: a conundrum of feasibility" a house is not necessarily a household. Case A and Case B live together, but they might not pool resources together. Sharing a common roof may signify sharing rent and utility bills (cheaper living costs) however we currently do not have data which reliably confirms this.
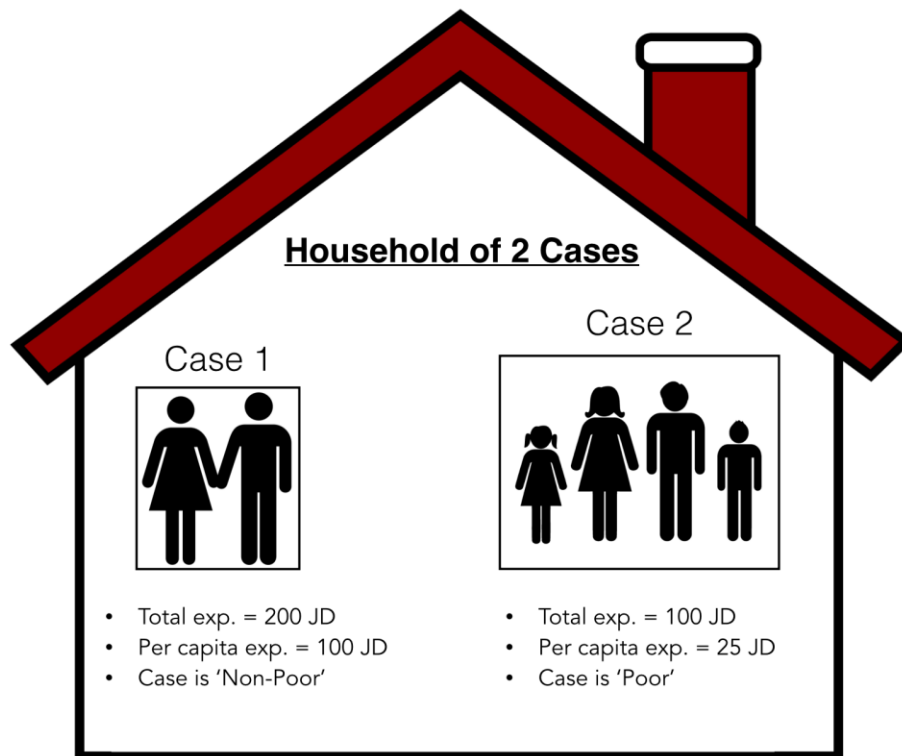
Scenario 2: Cases not supporting each other within a house

In this second scenario, aggregating case-data to generate house-data would be a mistake - the house should not be considered as one entity. Consider the same example as above except that now Case A has expenditure per capita of 160 JD and is providing no support to Case B. House aggregated information states they are non-poor (320 JD + 100 JD = 420 JD divided by 6 = 70 JD per capita). No assistance is therefore provided to the 6 people in the non-poor house. As they are a house (and not a household where resources are pooled together), we encounter an inadmissible exclusion error by preventing Case B from being eligible for assistance.

Conclusions:

To achieve an optimal allocation of scarce resources, case-based information, rather than house-based data is recommended. Faced by financial constraints case-based assistance distribution is also preferable. House-based information also allows for perverse exclusion errors, as the leap form 'house' to 'household' is long and frail. We must provide assistance to all the Case B-like families (starting from the poorest) before any assistance is provided to the Case As. The key is to lift Case B out of poverty. Money is saved, and more money is available to help more truly poor families.

Annex:

Household of 2 Cases

Case 1
- Total exp. = 200 JD
- Per capita exp. = 100 JD
- Case is 'Non-Poor'

Case 2
- Total exp. = 100 JD
- Per capita exp. = 25 JD
- Case is 'Poor'

Household data ("eating from the same pot", "pooling resources together") can only be created if the data is collected in that specific manner. The survey must be household-based; enumerators interview the head of household, rather than the head of case. If household data is something we want to pursue, we need to change the way we have been collecting data.

For More Information See:

a) Presentation slides (LONG): Case-based data vs. Household-based data: for a more efficient use and distribution of scarce resources

b) Presentation slides (SHORT): Case vs. Household data/targeting

c) One Pager: Creating Household data: a conundrum of feasibility