

Reaching the poorest refugees in Niger: An evaluation of targeting approaches for food and cash

The following is a summary of the research paper by Theresa Beltramo, Christina Wieser, Chiara Gigliariano and Robert Heyn, August 2019¹



Malian refugee women awaiting cash assistance distribution. © UNHCR/Louise Donovan

Targeting of assistance – or identifying appropriate recipients for assistance – is at the core of maximizing the impact of aid, particularly in the current environment where demand for assistance is outpacing growth in humanitarian financing. Confronted with competing demands, humanitarian organisations generally prioritize new emergencies. This was the case in Niger where, between 2013–2016, UNHCR faced a dramatic 86 percent reduction in financing for the protracted² Malian refugee crises to accommodate emergency situations in the Lake Chad and other regions. Together with WFP, UNHCR responded to this reduction in financing by targeting assistance to the most vulnerable rather than to all refugees. This revised targeting strategy is based on household survey data and econometric models which creates a welfare score for each refugee household, based on which, the population is divided into four welfare groups receiving different levels of assistance. For the strategy to work, identifying refugees based on accurate measurement of their welfare is necessary, so as to determine the level of cash needed to support the autonomy and self-sufficiency goals that UNHCR set forth.

Methods of identifying refugees for assistance programs

Humanitarian organisations have traditionally used simplified categorical targeting strategies—such as number of children and gender of the household head—to target varying forms assistance ranging from food, cash, health and livelihoods support. Though easy to implement, research shows that categorical targeting strategies are not always the most effective. The erroneous inclusion of a household that is not part of the intended population or the exclusion of a household that is in need is an ineffective use of resources. Effective targeting strategies require additional administrative steps and skills which add costs to the targeting

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² “A protracted refugee situation is one in which refugees find themselves in a long-lasting and intractable state of limbo,” (UNHCR, 2004). In practice this is typically defined as refugees for more than 3 or 5 years.

process. In an attempt to keep these costs minimal, we set out to determine the most efficient targeting strategy.

After determining total consumption for each household, which includes food and non-food items and is determined the best way to measure welfare of refugee households, we selected three commonly used methods to predict household welfare. These methods, which were tested in Niger's Intikane and Tabareybarey refugee communities, are:

- (i) proxy means testing (PMT), in which field workers collect demographic, asset or housing information that can be used to approximate a household's poverty status
- (ii) adapted participatory wealth ranking (PWR), where communities identify poor households through participatory methods
- (iii) principal components analysis (PCA), which WFP uses in Niger in its targeting for food and cash assistance to nationals, which allows for the aggregation of complex information by assigning one value of wealth to each individual.

What is the optimal targeting strategy?

Proxy means testing emerged as the most accurate method in estimating the welfare of Malian refugees in Niger. It outperformed the adapted PWR method by 66 percent and the PCA method by 50 percent. For Malian refugees in Niger, the most significant predictors of household welfare are household size; dependency ratio; livestock owned by a household, participation in the habanayé system;³ whether the dwelling walls are made from durable material; the number of durable goods owned by the household; access to credit; household head's marital status; and how often the household invites guests for tea.

The proxy mean test results show that rather than using categorical criteria for targeting, aid effectiveness can be improved by targeting assistance to households based on a variety of household characteristics that are relatively easy to collect. In addition, a review of a 2016 targeting strategy used in Intikane to target households for food assistance, using categories including households that were headed by women, or did not have income earners, or had persons with disabilities or chronic illnesses, was less efficient. Households within the above categories received full food rations while all others received half food rations. We found that households receiving half food rations effectively consumed 8 percent less overall than those who received the full ration. Without a counterfactual, it is challenging to estimate the consumption of households that received the full ration had they received only half the ration. This said, the review showed that categorical targeting has undesired effects on welfare, since the households who received half the food ration are actually worse off, a clear indication that targeting could be improved.

Additional analysis on predictors of refugee welfare

Consistent with many findings in the economic literature, we found household size to be the main driver of welfare for both Malian refugees settled in the camp Tabareybarey and those living nomadically in Intikane. Interestingly, the second and third largest predictor of welfare differ for both groups. For the nomadic Intikane, the second largest predictor of welfare is a high incidence of inviting others to tea and per capita income. In Tabareybarey, per capita income, number of durable goods owned, and inviting others to tea seem equally as important in predicting consumption. This highlights the additional challenge that development and humanitarian agencies face in targeting assistance to refugee situations, diverse attributes within communities may require specific targeting strategies for different types of refugee population. The different lifestyle and economic activities of refugees from Mali – some primarily animal herders, while others are more engaged in crop agriculture or small businesses – shows the complexity of developing a comprehensive targeting strategy for diverse economic factions of one refugee population.

³ The 'habanayé' system is a traditional "solidarity" system, whereby better-off households lend animals to poorer households. This allows poorer farmers or those who lost their livestock to borrow animals and keep its off springs.