Key considerations for targeting social assistance in situations of protracted crises

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Summary

Targeting social assistance[1] in situations of protracted conflict, protracted displacement, or recurrent climate shock, so that it reaches those most in need rapidly, effectively and without doing further harm, has historically been one of the most complex technical and political challenges for development and humanitarian programmes. Trade-offs involving costs beyond the economic – such as risks of exclusion and concerns over protection – raise questions about who to target, how to target and whether to target at all (i.e. through universal coverage or lotteries) would lead to better impacts in contexts where systems of state provision are often damaged or non-existent. The multiplicity of actors involved in delivering social assistance in crisis situations, with their own targeting cultures and mandates, can result in uncoordinated patchy and limited assistance, often overlooking equity concerns. Drawing on a range of literature, in this paper we examine the key considerations and dilemmas for targeting social assistance in protracted crises, including shock contexts, targeting methods, exclusion and protection risks, national and international actors' politics, and technologies. Our purpose is to draw out lessons to better inform targeting of future social assistance programming across the humanitarian-development nexus.

About the authors

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[1] 'Social assistance' refers to cash assistance provided through the social protection and humanitarian sectors.

Contents

1. Introduction

Targeting social assistance so that it rapidly and effectively reaches those most in need of support remains one of the most complex and discussed challenges in development and humanitarian programming. Achieving this objective requires making trade-offs between targeting accuracy and targeting costs, which in many crisis contexts go beyond economic costs. In contexts of emergency or protracted crisis due to conflict or recurrent climate shock, or in localities where poverty is widespread, the time and budgetary costs of identifying and excluding the non-poor can make poverty-targeting inappropriate and socially divisive (Ellis 2012). Conversely, crude targeting or no targeting (universal coverage) can be extremely wasteful of scarce resources (Devereux *et al*. 2017). Furthermore, targeting is a deeply contested and, usually, an intensely political exercise that plays out in the realms of decision-making concerning the allocation of finite resources.[2]

A substantial literature exists, and evidence is increasingly reported, on the advantages and disadvantages of alternative targeting methods, their coverage, exclusion errors and costs in contexts of relative stability[3] (*ibid*.; Coady, Grosh and Hoddinott 2004; Slater *et al*. 2009). The same is not true of contexts of sudden or protracted crises, particularly those affected by conflict – contexts often characterised by broken or non-existent state support institutions co-existing with partisan relief provision by various political and/or religious factions, as well as limited humanitarian relief from international agencies; contexts where climatic shocks are recurring and/or where there is movement of forcibly displaced people. In fact, as we show in this paper, the evidence base on targeting in these protracted crises settings is limited and patchy.

To inform our analysis, searches[4] were made of academic databases and Google to capture academic papers and grey literature from the past 15 years to collate documents on elements of social assistance targeting processes that may be unique to, or intensified in, protracted crisis settings (e.g. exclusion errors, approaches, technology and eligibility).[5] More papers were found through snowballing, suggestions from members of the better Assistance in Crises (BASIC) Research team, as well as from the Zotero reference management software group libraries from both BASIC Research and BASIC SPACE and BASIC Technical Assistance Services. More literature is available than could be included within the scope and limitations of this paper, as due to time constraints the searches were not systematic or exhaustive.

Our purpose here, given the limited literature identified, is to discuss how settings of protracted crises affect the key trade-offs and dilemmas involved in targeting social assistance. We do this in relation to what is known about targeting social assistance in more stable contexts; in other words, pointing out similarities or uniqueness. In particular, we explore: (1) how the nature of shocks and stresses influence targeting methods and approaches; (2) the relative advantages and disadvantages of using alternative targeting methods in different contexts; (3) what is known about how targeting enables or disables inclusion and participation of different groups; (4) how the politics of national and international actors influences eligibility criteria and identification of those eligible; and (5) how technology is being used to support targeting process in contexts of protracted crises. A better understanding of the opportunities and pitfalls of targeting social assistance in these contexts is useful for informing programming across the humanitarian-development spheres of support. Furthermore, we unearth gaps in knowledge and potential avenues for operational research that will improve provision for those adversely affected by crises.

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[2] Some caution should be taken with the 'finite budget constraint' argument, at least without putting it in the context of a limited time period to avoid falling into the 'naïve budget constraint' category as per Pritchett (2005), when the decision on targeting is made under a (false) assumption that the budget for redistribution is fixed and it is sought to maximise social welfare by targeting benefits at the poor.

[3] 'Stable contexts' refer to situations/regions/countries where there is a low level of conflict and violence; low prevalence of the involuntary movement of populations; low incidence of severe climactic shocks; and a reasonable level of trust in and effectiveness of the central government, including the provision of public services.

[4] These searches looked at different aspects of targeting (errors, approaches, criteria, technology, etc.) of social assistance (including different modalities) and of particular crisis contexts such as displacement, conflict and climate shocks.

[5] In this paper we have made a concerted effort to draw on evidence and examples from BASIC Research countries.

The paper highlights various targeting considerations that are unique to or intensified by contexts of protracted crises. These relate to the need for awareness of multi-level and competing political landscapes, social and power dynamics that will have implications – beyond the merely technical debate on methods and criteria – of what will work in targeting (sustainability, ethics and effectiveness), where, when and for whom. The paper also finds that harmonisation, as opposed to homogenisation, of targeting in crises (e.g. by aligning humanitarian and development targeting systems) holds out the potential opportunity for efficiency gains, but has economic, political, technical and security implications and trade-offs. Furthermore, building flexibility into programme design and implementation (e.g. in data collection, targeting criteria, integrated social registry, etc.) generates opportunities for adaptation to ensure inclusion of those in need in fluid contexts, as it is often less about crisis contexts being different and more about them being fluid, resulting in selection biases and gaps in coverage. This flexibility in targeting processes can respond to third-party monitoring and grievance mechanisms and be enabled through technology and social media. Finally, the paper highlights that value-for-money trade-offs in crisis situations change as minimising exclusion errors becomes more pertinent than inclusion errors. However, efficiency gains, such as with harmonisation, need to be carefully weighted. Indeed, value for money should be analysed to the extent that there are genuine choices to be made – options may be eliminated due to political or technical reasons in relation to the crisis context.

2. Key considerations and dilemmas for targeting social assistance in contexts of acute and protracted crises

2.1 Nature of crisis and 'usual' response

Recent research looks at how different shock characteristics such as onset, recurrence, type of shock and severity all have implications in terms of what can and cannot be done via or in coordination with social protection, especially in terms of targeting choices (TRANSFORM 2020). The type of shock or longer-term stress influences the nature of poverty and vulnerability (and thus objectives for social assistance); influences the channel by which social assistance can be targeted and provided; and, thus, has implications for who is best placed to provide social assistance. Table 2.1 illustrates how different shocks and stresses often play out in terms of the channels of response.

This categorisation is intentionally siloed, not because channels of response necessarily indicate the optimal way to respond to shocks and stresses, but because this reflects the usual landscape of response across shock and crisis contexts and providers in many countries. Differences in approach reflect a whole range of things (discussed in this paper): from constraints in delivery and lack of data to agency cultures and mandates, some of which frustrate efforts to increase effectiveness and efficiency creating barriers to harmonisation and alignment.

Broadly speaking,[6] routine social assistance/protection often responds to poverty and vulnerability that arises from predictable seasonal fluctuations in income, long-term economic recessions, lifecycle changes related to age, ability and labour contracts. The kinds of programmes that respond to these predictable changes include old age pensions, public works, and unemployment and disability benefits. In other words, these should be programmes that aim to address relatively predictable risks (in terms of known probabilities) in a reliable way.

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[6] In this first subsection, we present a justification for targeting based on a more normative agenda. Alternatively, as elaborated in subsections below, the provision of social assistance often responds to domestic and international politics and, thus, targeting is influenced by political agendas (Lavers and Hickey 2015).

Table 2.1: Characteristics of 'usual' targeting responders according to type of shock, stress or crisis

Type of shock/ crisis	Seasonal stress; predictable drought, price/income shocks	Sudden-onset climatic shock – drought and floods	Large-scale covariate* climate, health or environmental	Conflict; instability; war; violence; protracted conflict
Usual social assistance channel	Routine social protection	Shock-responsive social protection	Disaster response	Conflict-related humanitarian
Provider	Government social welfare ministries; INGOs; international development response	Government social protection systems/affiliated ministries; INGOs; international development response	Government disaster and social assistance agencies; (I)NGOs; international development and humanitarian response	Humanitarian or national government response; (I)NGOs; FBOs; international humanitarian response
Objective	Consumption support for basic needs and livelihood resilience to poor; offering vulnerable people longer-term improved livelihood security and basic needs support	Consumption support for basic needs and livelihood resilience to people vulnerable to poverty caused by acute shock; avoids destitution and asset depletion	Provides timely life and livelihood saving support; covers basic needs; 'do no harm' humanitarian principle	Provides timely life and livelihood saving support; covers basic needs; 'do no harm' humanitarian principle
Target population	Chronically poor and food-insecure or vulnerable groups	Chronically and temporarily poor and those vulnerable to poverty; not necessarily poverty focused	People/households adversely affected by a covariate crisis regardless of social or economic background	People/households adversely affected by conflict and war regardless of social or economic background
Nature of support	Medium to long term; regular, systematic, reliable and predictable	Short to medium term; predictable (triggered by anticipated shocks) and time delimited	Short to medium term; one-off or successive, time delimited; often unpredictable	Short to very long term; one-off or successive, time delimited; unpredictable
Example	Household Uplifting Programme (Nigeria): responds to deficiencies in capacity and lack of investment in human capital of poor and vulnerable households; provides fixed bimonthly cash payment, and conditional monthly payment for school attendance and participation in vaccination programmes; complementary activities in addition.	Productive Safety Net Programme (Ethiopia): Ministry of Agriculture provides cash payments in exchange for work; work requirement dropped in shock-responsive scenarios Baxnaano (Somalia): government-led (Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs) national cash transfer programme targeting chronically poor and vulnerable people in rural areas; shock-responsive and scalable in events such as climate-induced floods and desert locust infestation	Multiple humanitarian assistance programmes (e.g. from Mercy Corps, World Food Programme (WFP), etc.) that provide short-term cash assistance and other components to households affected by, for example, the 2010 Haiti earthquake	E-card voucher assistance (Lebanon): WFP, in response to a government request to address the food and nutrition needs of the growing population of Syrian refugees, provides e-cards (unconditional transfers) to targeted refugees in Lebanon, as determined by vulnerability assessment of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon (multisector analysis that WFP conducts annually with UNHCR and UNICEF)

Notes: FBO = faith-based organisation; NGO = non-governmental organisation; INGO = international NGO
*Covariate shocks refer to shocks that are correlated across households within communities – affecting many individuals, households or businesses in the same area and/or at the same time. These can be natural, political or economic in nature, among others.
Source: Authors' own.

However, shock-responsive social protection (SRSP) and disaster response are most frequently employed in connection with disasters triggered by natural hazards (IFRC 2020; Pelham, Clay and Braunholz 2011). They are more appropriate as a response to high-impact, low-frequency shocks, whereas classic social protection would be used for the more predictable, slow-onset stresses. This illustrates a significant challenge for routine social protection in responding to heightened needs of the usual caseload, as its transfer values are often set too low and unable to increase quickly in response to additional need. The 'shock response' in SRSP refers to the ability of a social protection programme or system to respond – in terms of provision of assistance whether in cash, food or assets – to a relatively quick onset covariate shock. It goes without saying that some form of social protection programme or system must be in place if it is to be a 'shock-responsive' one. In numerous situations where conflict is endemic or protracted, crises have completely eroded the capacity and systems for welfare delivery, or where large-scale disasters have disrupted the workings of an otherwise functioning system, the idea of providing social protection through a shock-responsive government-supported system is out of the question (if not meaningless). In such contexts, humanitarian and/or disaster response has filled the gap (e.g. South Sudan, Somalia, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)) – as shock responders – but this is not the same as an SRSP system.

There are other situations where there is uncertainty about the occurrence, nature, extent (i.e. magnitude) and severity of a shock or crisis; for instance, in the case of a rapid-onset shock, such as a tsunami or cyclone. The usual response to these types of shocks is emergency provision or disaster response. The context may (or may not) be characterised by high levels of poverty such that an unexpected shock deepens chronic need, especially where the poor are often the most exposed to rapid-onset hazards.[7] However, in addition, a new caseload of 'acute' and/or transitory poor will exist who commonly have a smaller poverty gap. This has certainly been the case with the new social protection caseloads due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Conflicts are much harder to fit into a neat set of 'shock' categories. They can be fast or slow to develop and more or less anticipated (Håvard and Håvard 2021; Hegre, Nygård and Landsverk 2021). Although nowadays civil wars are less common than in the twentieth century, conflict and violence are often characterised by unpredictability, such as the recent upsurge of conflict in Ethiopia's Tigray region or the start of the war in Syria in 2011. Protracted conflict does allow for some predictability; for instance, the war in Syria is entering its second decade and wars in Somalia, South Sudan and DRC have continued over several decades. Even when there is an apparent peace process, there are high risks of returning to conflict, as in South Sudan in 2013 (Human Rights Watch 2019). Interestingly, state-run social protection systems may be surprisingly resilient in the face of conflict, such as the public distribution system in Iraq (Krishnan, Olivieri and Ramadan 2018), social pensions in Nepal (Holmes and Uphadya 2009) and Samurdhi poverty alleviation programme in Sri Lanka (Bandara 2016). But in other contexts, they are more heavily disrupted or were not present in the first place. Humanitarian aid, largely delivered by international organisations and funded by Western donors, is often an important but inadequate substitute and can continue for decades, becoming in practice a de facto safety net, but one that has high levels of uncertainty as funding is only agreed on a year-by-year basis and is subject to fluctuations and donor fatigue. In many conflicts, governments do not have effective control over large parts of the country and so government-run social protection cannot reach large parts of the population; non-state organisations, both national and international, fill in some of the gaps, as in Mali (see Mohamed *et al*. 2021). International aid agencies sometimes have access to these populations but more usually, as in northeast Nigeria, significant numbers of people do not receive any assistance. Non-state armed groups controlling territory may provide some forms of assistance but with huge limitations in terms of adequacy, access and equity.

Unlike in contexts of relative stability where the primary objective of routine social assistance is to provide consumption support, economic security and build resilience, the eligible populations served by humanitarian agencies in conflict-affected situations are those adversely affected by war and insecurity, regardless of their social or economic status, or any other identity marker. In conflict-affected humanitarian settings, the focus is on saving lives and minimising suffering, reducing malnutrition, addressing multidimensional needs, and responding to displacement and damage. In other words, pre-conflict poverty is not the defining feature of eligibility, although often the poorest are those most impacted by the conflict or war. In fact, there is a clear positive correlation between countries with recurrent humanitarian crises and poverty (Development

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[7] Vulnerability to hazard is often mediated by poverty ex ante.

Initiatives 2019). In aggregate, more than a third of the population (35%) of the 22 countries with a UN-coordinated appeal in 2018, and consecutively for at least one preceding year, were living in extreme poverty (on less than US$1.90 a day). This is three times the developing country average of 11.5 per cent. Of these 22 countries, five had emergency aid appeals in at least ten consecutive years. The average extreme poverty rate across these countries was six times the developing country average, at 64.3 per cent of the population (*ibid*.). For this reason, the duration of support in conflict-affected contexts can range from short-term, one-off payments to years of recurrent aid, and the nature of support can be very variable. In these protracted contexts (much more than particular one-off events), humanitarian assistance often substitutes for regular social protection.

It is obvious that in many situations, shocks, stresses and uncertainties overlap, are interconnected and exacerbate each other, leading to situations of complex and protracted crises. This combination and overlay of stress and shock is more greatly intensified in contexts of crises – with protracted conflict, forced displacement and recurrent climate shock – than in stable settings, making the provision, targeting and delivery of social assistance uniquely complex. For instance, think of a country with a high proportion of chronically poor people; then overlay this with recurrent seasonal climate stresses and a violent conflict, as in a country such as Somalia. In such a situation, multiple 'responders' – including international agencies, the state, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and faith-based organisations – operate in similar and overlapping geographic and 'shock' spaces – each naturally gravitating to address the 'usual' shocks and caseloads that the agency is mandated to respond to (see Table 2.1 and later discussion). This leads to a complicated, often uncoordinated and patchy reaction to complex emergencies or protracted crises, making targeting decisions very context specific.

2.2 Which targeting methods are fit-for-context in settings of protracted crises?

Many targeting methodologies are used across the world and often applied in combination. These include: (1) geographic, which targets geographical areas with high levels of poverty and vulnerability; (2) categorical, which targets demographic groups that have a higher risk of poverty or are considered particularly vulnerable; (3) community based, which involves a group of community representatives or elders using their local knowledge to inform decisions about who is to benefit from the assistance; (4) means testing, which targets based on an assessment of applicants' income, assets or wealth; (5) proxy means testing (PMT), which uses observable characteristics to obtain a score that proxies the available resources at household level; (6) self-targeting, which relies on programme design for ensuring that only the most vulnerable and those in need benefit from the programme; (7) universal, which problematises targeting approaches and instead argues for universal benefits based on the principle of equality; and (8) lotteries, where everyone can apply and a certain number of people will be randomly selected into the programme. For a review of this literature, primarily from stable contexts, as well as reviews on the trade-offs between different targeting methodologies in terms of efficiency and effectiveness, errors of targeting, costs of targeting see Coady, Grosh and Hoddinott (2004), Devereux *et al*. (2017) and Barrientos and Niño-Zarazúa (2011). Our purpose here is not to rehearse this extensive literature, but instead to illustrate the benefits and pitfalls of these different methods in settings of fragility and conflict.

Unlike in stable settings where administrative data are relatively more available and accessible (e.g. from labour market or government registration systems), humanitarian and conflict response more frequently occur in contexts where systems have been broken or shattered, finances have been withdrawn or 'captured', up-to-date data may not exist and where they do exist can be inaccurate, partial and difficult to obtain. For these reasons, methods such as means testing are nearly always out of the question.[8] Other methods that are 'data heavy' and require substantial technical, financial and administrative capacity to implement, will be less suited to contexts where data are unavailable, out of date or difficult to collect.

Table 2.2 details key considerations for applying different targeting methods in contexts of protracted crises. These include: the data requirements for any specific method; required capacity (financial, technical and administrative) to design and implement the method; relative speed and accuracy (in terms of inclusions and

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[8] We have excluded means testing as a method in Table 2 as, while it is in theory the most accurate, due to its heavy data requirements and costs, it is rarely used in fragile and conflict affected contexts.

exclusion errors); and relative transparency of the method in terms of community perceptions as well as ease of manipulation.

PMT targeting requires the collection of selected household-level indicators that are regressed against consumption to determine the weights to use. Households are then given a score, based on the values of the indicators and the weights for each. The indicators selected are based on their ability to predict welfare as measured by, for example, consumption expenditure of households. Large-scale data sets are required to create the statistical weights, and ideally these data should reflect the correct situation of households. So, if sudden crises and shocks have led to a substantial shift in the nature and extent of poverty, then out-of-date data will not correctly identify those in need. In conflict situations, especially those of protracted crisis, it is usual that recent national poverty data do not exist and data that do exist are either out of date or not accessible, so using them to create a PMT indicator of eligibility or a poverty line is problematic (Development Initiatives 2019).

Table 2.2: Key considerations for applying different targeting methods in fragile and conflict-affected settings

Approach to eligibility verification	Key considerations for fragile and conflict-affected settings			
	Data requirements*	Capacity requirements*	Speed and accuracy	Transparent/open to manipulation
Proxy means testing (PMT) *Target – poor people (as defined by indicators in PMT)*	Existing quality socioeconomic data (e.g. consumption) from household surveys to create weights; covers beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries, so can enable scaling Data (ideally collected as 'close' to the shock as possible) from short survey of potential target population to establish the PMT Data are static and cannot predict newly poor, so require frequent updates in fluid contexts	Requires technical, financial and administrative capacities Capacities and procedures for data collection can be leveraged in the aftermath of a shock Often expensive and time-consuming	+ve: use of existing registry and information system as a starting point might enable more rapid data collection than collecting all information from scratch -ve: risk of exclusion errors (higher if data are out of date); further screenings or updated data collection necessary to preserve accuracy but could compromise timeliness	+ve: algorithm is simple and calculations transparent for those literate in statistics -ve: lack of transparency at community and beneficiary levels (i.e. based on mathematical formulas) can result in distrust of methods and fuel social and political tensions; where poverty is very widely distributed and income distribution flat, arbitrariness of PMT threshold will be felt deeply and create tension because PMT scores are so similar
Categorical *Target – identity marker serving as a proxy for poverty*	Relatively low data requirements (socio-demographic data) as categories are usually highly visible (children, old people, pregnant women) but can also be complex (e.g. people with disabilities)	Requires some administrative capacity Can piggyback on existing systems	+ve: low-cost and low administrative complexity for implementation and scaling if data exist, which translates into speediness; often high political acceptability -ve: subject to self-exclusion of some groups; categories not necessarily correlated with poverty or vulnerability (e.g. older people in poor countries are relatively better off)	+ve: low risk of tensions or manipulation due to high transparency -ve: can be exclusionary if support is tied to specific affiliation (religious or political); can also leave beneficiary groups vulnerable to abuse and violence; can lead to adverse policy effects (e.g. behavioural change or fraud to become eligible)

Approach to eligibility verification	Key considerations for fragile and conflict-affected settings			
	Data requirements*	Capacity requirements*	Speed and accuracy	Transparent/open to manipulation
Community based *Target – the most poor or vulnerable people as defined by community representatives*	Locally available data/knowledge Data obtained from local communities under consultative exercise or people representing recipient communities; where existing data are available, they do not include non-beneficiaries so are of limited use in acute emergencies	Requires some administrative capacity Knowledge, relationships and procedures retained by existing selection committees (local authorities, NGOs) can be leveraged in the aftermath of a shock	+ve: can entail a speedy method to identify the most 'deserving' based on very localised knowledge -ve: conducting community-based targeting without pre-existing capacity or systems can be a lengthy and costly exercise, requiring extensive training	+ve: transparent within community consulted -ve: risks of political interference and secrecy; higher risks where community representation is contested; open to capture by local power groups; risks excluding already socially marginalised and geographically isolated groups as they are not part of community identification process
Geographic *Target – selected most-affected areas*	Updated local-level data nationwide (not just for accessible areas)	Need for high technical capacity, local-level updated data (economic, environmental, political, etc.) nationwide	+ve: greater timeliness -ve: higher risk of inclusion and exclusion errors; risks exclusion by implementation (due to low access)	+ve: low risk of tension or manipulation within recipient communities due to high transparency -ve: could attract additional violence and conflict to an area
Self-selection (public works) *Target – able-bodied people*	Existing data source is not required for provision or expansion Registration of those who self-select to work and verification of household demographics to manage caseload	Low cost and low administrative complexity for provision, management and scaling Risks of over-demand or excessively low transfer values	+ve: very timely, high accuracy -ve: excludes non-abled people and those only able to conduct lighter work	+ve: highly transparent -ve: only for those able to do manual, heavy labour/work for a very low wage; excludes the most vulnerable (i.e. those without labour or people unable to manage the workload required such as older people, pregnant women); visibilises the most vulnerable possibly making them a target for violence and abuse
Blanket *Target – universal coverage of a region or category*	Low up-to-date data requirements Possibility to leverage existing data for identification Often requires some form of ID system in practice to prove eligibility	High financial capacity required	-ve: much higher risk of inclusion errors +ve: quick to implement	+ve: low risk of tensions or manipulation due to high transparency -ve: tensions in contexts of open or contested borders; relatively high barriers to and potential exclusion of people that lack official IDs
Lottery *Target – random selection of applicants*	Low up-to-date data requirements Possibility to leverage applicants' existing data (need for a complete census of eligible participants) for random selection	Low administrative, financial and technical capacity required	-ve: risk of inclusion and exclusion errors +ve: relatively quick to implement	+ve: low risk of tension or manipulation due to high transparency -ve: could be seen as unfair as there is an equal likelihood of including those in need and not in need receiving support

Source: Authors' own. Created using information from Barca and Beazley (2019). CC BY 3.0 AU.

Where the survey data for PMT use are out of date, the statistical weights may not provide appropriate poverty scores and this will lead to high inclusion and exclusion errors, particularly in the case of large displacement and refugee influxes (IRC 2017). However, age of data is likely to be a lesser problem than data that have not recently been collected from households; for instance, where registration for a programme is a one-time event or conducted very infrequently. In this case, households that have been newly formed since the last registration period will be left out of the programme unless on-demand registration exists. Despite these obvious pitfalls, PMT is increasingly used in fragile and conflict-affected settings (FCAS). For instance, the PMT in Lebanon currently recommended by the World Bank for the proposed expansion of the National Poverty Targeting Program is based on data from 2011 – from before multiple economic crises and the 2020 Beirut port explosion. In fact, humanitarian targeting approaches often have an equivalent to a PMT based on household economy approach data, yet there is limited evidence on their performance and, from an accountability perspective, they are weaker than standard PMT approaches.

In addition, in politically charged situations, using out-of-date data sources can create distrust among different population groups, as the newly poor will not be captured. However, even with suitable data, statistical formulas for identifying eligible people can be unintuitive and difficult for communities to comprehend, leading to distrust in the method (Smith 2014). This distrust can be pronounced in protracted conflict settings where relationships between providers and vulnerable populations may already be fractured. In contexts of protracted crises, this can create opportunities for diverse interpretation and manipulation (Smith 2014). It is argued that applying PMT techniques to humanitarian aid is deeply problematic due to its high exclusion errors, and low community buy-in and accountability. Indeed, in their assessment of PMT, Kidd and Wylde (2011) refer to riots in refugee camps in Lebanon resulting from the introduction of PMT. Qualitative research into refugees' perceptions of the PMT targeting mechanism used in Lebanon showed that refugees did not understand how beneficiaries were selected. As one person said: 'It is luck! The computer picks names and assistance is given to those names' (Development Pathways 2018). In other words, targeting methods that are conducted at arm's length – in a 'black box' – away from the recipients are often viewed suspiciously. Many of the highlighted issues relevant to the PMT (out-of-date data, mistrust of methods) apply to any context, but are intensified in contexts of protracted crisis, where appropriate data are less likely to exist and the propensity for social unrest is higher.

In contexts where there is a paucity of appropriate income or expenditure data, or where certain groups of people are vulnerable due to shocks, *categorical targeting* (based on administrative data covering disability status, age, gender, etc.) can be very effective and often yield similar levels of inclusion of the poor, for a given programme size, at a much lower administrative cost than PMT (see research by Altındağ *et al.* 2021 in Lebanon). Targeting groups of people based on identity markers (as a proxy for poverty) can be relatively low cost as the markers, such as pregnancy or age, are visible to some extent.[9] Administrative data are required to verify age or disability status, for instance, but compared to PMT this is more straightforward and lower cost. However, within conflict-affected settings, visibilising vulnerability can attract violence and exploitation, especially if the criteria for inclusion in a programme align with fractured political, ethnic or religious identities. However, use of this method is currently limited in FCAS contexts to the extent that places have administrative data (i.e. basic demographic information from typical administrative records held by aid organisations and governments, which can entail a series of indicators reflecting specific vulnerabilities or protection concerns, such as education level, age, gender) that could be used for these purposes.

Community-based targeting (CBT) can work as an alternative to PMT's more complex methods. In conflict settings, population participation in the process can be especially important for those excluded from large-scale social protection schemes and for hard-to-reach groups. It is critical that approaches are sensitive to local community dynamics. A report from Development Initiatives (2019) on how different agencies in Somalia collect and analyse data in cash transfer programming, finds that most humanitarian agencies use a combination of geographic and CBT approaches to select recipients of cash transfers, especially in regions that are safe and accessible for aid workers. After identifying the region with the most vulnerable households, CBT is often facilitated by village relief committees, internally displaced person (IDP) camp committees and local authorities such as clan elders, imams, chiefs, district commissioners and businesspeople. That said, in

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[9] Assessing disability status is extremely difficult and contentious; there is very little evidence on how to do it well in low-income contexts.

conflict settings who gets to represent the community is often contested, and there are more opportunities for corruption and fraud, leading to higher targeting errors.

The CBT approach is subject to its own inherent limitations and risks, including those related to lack of transparency, discriminatory practices, exclusion of the poor considered 'undeserving' and elite capture. For example, in CBT practices, research shows that this risk is linked to lack of social solidarity or social integration (Mansuri and Rao 2003; McCord 2013; Ravallion 2003). On the other hand, there are also examples of cases where the use of CBT, and consequent perception of fairness in the targeting process can result in higher community acceptability and empowerment, and reduced risk of fraud. Sierra Leona's response to the flooding and mudslide of 2017 involved community members in identifying affected households during registration, which contributed to minimising corruption in the process (UNICEF 2018).

Using geographic targeting in FCAS can be helpful to quickly target 'hotspots' where large proportions of people likely require assistance. Nevertheless, provision of assistance in areas with high needs and fragility can be subject to beneficiary exclusion due to insecurity-based low access. Poor access due to security concerns leads to the concentration of assistance in safer urban areas, where there is a presence of government and international security forces, to the detriment of rural zones (Development Initiatives 2019). Furthermore, special attention needs to be given to exclusion resulting from governing authorities trying to manipulate which geographic areas are hotspots (i.e. elite capture and favouritism).

Some social assistance interventions come with 'intrinsic' targeting. For instance, public works programmes typically require eligible people to self-select into the work. This is a low-cost way of targeting as only those ready to perform (usually heavy) manual labour for a low wage will be willing to be part of the programme. School feeding programmes also have an intrinsic categorical targeting mechanism, given that they focus on children of a specific age. These types of programmes are easy to target, yet they often face logistical challenges in swiftly producing foodstuffs or implements, and ensuring trained labour for supervision and delivery. These challenges are exacerbated in conflict settings. Furthermore, for public works, the requirement to work can act as a qualifying condition that imposes an excessive burden on beneficiaries at times of crisis.

2.3 Universal approaches

Targeting in countries with large numbers of poor people can be challenging because making accurate distinctions between small gradations in poverty can be extremely difficult. In lower- and middle-income countries, only 54 per cent of the poorest quintile are covered by social protection and labour programmes (World Bank 2018b). Given high levels of households moving in and out of poverty in contexts that are fluid and uncertain, the sluggish mechanisms and processes for targeting cannot keep up with the real-time incidence and movement of poverty. Furthermore, targeting performance is often prone to being arbitrary and corrupt. These leakages are difficult to quantify due to limited data, but existing evidence shows that leakages can represent over half of a programme's total budget; for example, evidence from a social assistance programme in Uganda shows that 87 per cent of benefits did not reach intended beneficiaries (Reinikka and Svensson 2004). These challenges are particularly pertinent in protracted crises where poverty is widespread and chronic poverty is overlaid with other recurrent shocks and the impact of conflict (Development Initiatives 2019). In these contexts, in response to observed coverage gaps for the poor, context fluidity and general leaks in targeting processes, more area-specific universal approaches have emerged.

Where budget allows, although a blanket or more universal approach can mean high inclusion errors, it can also have high popular support as it overcomes some of the (social) challenges of household-level support and may contribute to dampening tensions within recipient communities as people understand targeting criteria and consider them to be fair (Smith 2014). Universal approaches are usually *de facto* targeted or limited in some way to categories of people such as older people, children or 'citizens' – people who can show ID (e.g. in Nepal) or are limited by budget realities (e.g. in Mozambique). This was the case of a World Food Programme (WFP) initiative with *de facto* universal targeting in Jordan, which provided all 440,000 refugees living in host communities with two biweekly food vouchers (Husain, Bauer and Sandström 2014). Where programme data for identifying those eligible are not current, in the event of a sudden shock or emerging humanitarian crisis, expanding the provision to newly eligible people through blanket or more universal approaches may be the quickest way to reach those in need. The *de facto* design of universal

approaches to targeting is an open area of research, which includes choices related to categorical criteria, possibilities for leveraging existing data, affluence-testing options and more.

2.4 What do we know about lotteries to distribute social assistance?

As discussed above, fragile contexts are characterised by limited information on income and vulnerability status. Targeting can therefore have large cost implications, both on determining the right set of criteria but also finding the people who qualify. This poses the question of whether it is worth doing at all. Further, even if targeting is pursued, there are well-documented cases of benefits being diluted – and effectiveness reduced – in situations where 'everyone is poor' because many people share assistance with equally deserving family and community members (Sabates-Wheeler, Lind and Hoddinott 2013).

An alternative approach to targeting, still not much discussed or researched in the literature, is the use of lotteries. A lottery is a simple random draw: chance is the only factor at play; everyone can apply and a certain number of people will be selected into the programme. Lotteries have already been used for many social policies around the world (e.g. school admissions, military draft, visa allocation and vaccine distribution) including for social assistance.[10] The existing literature around lotteries argues that, under certain conditions, using this method can be appropriate and even preferable in relation to targeting. This could be the case in contexts of conflict and instability, where the target group is relatively homogenous in terms of poverty; where data sources to support targeting are limited (i.e. no social registry or fiscal records exist); and where the power dynamics at community level or the dynamics of acceptability at national level can exacerbate existing tensions and the risk of violence (Slater 2018).

In emergency contexts, research on lotteries versus targeting methods have compared key elements including efficiency, legitimacy and readiness, mostly with positive outcomes for lotteries. Studies that look at efficiency showcase findings linked to accuracy and impact. For example, in Pakistan an International Rescue Committee study showed that the use of national registries to apply a targeting method has limited relevance (in terms of the food-insecure population) unless the registry is frequently updated (IRC 2017). Barca and Beazley (2019)'s evidence review arrives at similar conclusions.

Furthermore, studies have shown that often a lottery would perform as well as community- or survey-based methods in ultra-poor settings, especially for programmes responding to covariate shocks such as forced displacement (Altındağ *et al*. 2021; Bance and Schnitzer 2021b; Brown, Ravallion and van de Walle 2018; Premand and Schnitzer 2020). CBT in public work programmes can result in rotation systems where more households are included in the programme (Lieuw-Kie-Song 2011) but receive less work each or where there is a redistribution/sharing of received social assistance between community members. This can potentially result in less impact, but can also compensate for some of the adverse selection errors involved during beneficiary identification (Endris, Kibwika, Obaa and Hassan 2020). Some literature also highlights lotteries' ability to compensate for these selection errors, as well as controversial eligibility criteria which can result in social tensions. Indeed, in the Central African Republic, the LONDO project finds that local selection and differentiating between different geographical regions – including rural areas with conflict and instability – are both logistically too challenging and likely to generate perceived unfairness. Instead, the project provides support to all districts and in each runs a lottery to identify beneficiaries (Slater 2018).

It is important to note that an issue with public works programmes in general is that there is nearly always self-selection bias in who enrols on them. Indeed, research on efficiency of lotteries, particularly in public works programmes, finds that the poverty profiles of lottery participants show that work requirements results in self-selection (Alik-Lagrange and Ravallion 2018; World Bank 2016).

Legitimacy of targeting also becomes important as social assistance is provided in areas where social cohesion is at stake. The risk of corruption (elite capture or patronage systems) and raised expectations in targeting (e.g. Camacho and Conover 2011) create specific challenges for targeting and mean that lotteries could be perceived as fairer and more acceptable. An overall perception of fairness can provide programmes with enhanced legitimacy. Further, in contexts with a flat income distribution, communities might not want to

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[10] To run a lottery, a complete census of eligible households or individuals is needed (administrative requirement) and a decision must be made on how beneficiaries will be selected among them (e.g method: based on technology, administrative needs).

be targeted knowing that a neighbour in a similar situation will not be (Maunder *et al*. 2018). With funding restrictions, a lottery can give **equally deserving** people an equal chance to benefit (Stone 2007).

Anderson (1999) argues that lottery systems are transparent, simple and participatory, which are important considerations in fragile and potentially violent settings where the 'do no harm' principle can often lead to prioritising *legitimacy* (and perceived fairness) over efficiency. The change in priorities means shifting the focus away from minimising errors towards minimising grievances, improving household and community dynamics, and building trust in programmes at local level. In these contexts, where one particular political or ethnic group is dominant and influential, communities may often distrust officials and external actors (e.g. see Bisca and Bance 2019 on the contested Ebola response in eastern DRC). A study of a community-driven development programme in Liberia that used lotteries to distribute assistance found that there were no conflicts resulting from randomisation, and communities viewed the process favourably, believing it to be equitable (Fearon, Humphreys and Weinstein 2009). LONDO carried out lotteries without incident in all 71 districts of CAR (Bance and Schnitzer 2021a).

In protracted crises contexts with multiple and compounding shocks, there is a need for adaptive assistance to reduce exposure to these shocks (Bowen *et al*. 2020), making operational readiness essential for crisis response. Targeting continues to be one of the highest cost drivers of cash programming; it often takes weeks or months to define, identify and reach people in need in an emergency. However, when the priority lies in reaching households quickly, lotteries as an alternative are inexpensive and quick to organise, with no technology or administrative requirements, and they can be operationalised in any environment (Bance and Schnitzer 2021b). However, lotteries' effectiveness and acceptability have not yet been fully tested and understood. Research by Kidd, Gelders and Bailey-Athias (2017) suggests that in many contexts, people perceive PMT as 'lotteries', highlighting that community members do not understand why some people living in poverty are selected, whereas others who are equally deserving are excluded, causing social conflict, as in Nicaragua. This suggests potential areas of concern in designing and implementing lotteries that need further research. Further, lotteries also run counter to donor agencies' orthodox operations (Slater 2018). Maybe due to their similarity to randomised control trials, some agencies do not support lotteries, describing them as unethical as they understand social protection to be exclusively rights based (Palermo 2017). Other donors maintain a focus on minimising errors (World Bank and Proxy Means Testing) with an underlying assumption that this is the most cost-effective way to provide assistance to those in need (World Bank 2018a). This is still an open area for research.

3. Targeting, exclusion and protection risks

3.1 Minimising exclusion (not inclusion) errors

In emergency and protracted crisis situations there is an opportunity – and it makes good sense – to focus more on exclusion errors as opposed to inclusion errors, which tend more often to occupy targeting discussions in stable settings. This is because the priority must be to ensure that everyone requiring help receives it as quickly as possible. Often, the levels and numbers needing support are high and support is short term, so concern about inclusion errors is less pertinent. This is further justified by capacity deficits in up-to-date registries and data needed for accurate targeting.

Exclusion errors are a concern expressed by both programme beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries. This is especially apparent in settings: (1) of mass displacement; (2) where the numbers of poor are very high and income distribution is flat (i.e. there is no clear difference between beneficiary and non-beneficiary households); and (3) where people do not trust the targeting process. A decentralised evaluation of the Emergency Social Safety Net (ESSN) in Turkey, shows how beneficiaries tended to disagree with the ESSN targeting criteria and would have preferred a larger number of refugees to have been reached, even if it meant everyone received a smaller amount. The evaluation stated that: 'Out of 63 beneficiaries who attended FGD discussions, 52 stated that the transfers need to cover all Syrian refugees, regardless of eligibility criteria. Only 11 would object to achieving this at the cost of a decrease in the transfer amount' (Maunder *et al*. 2018). Another example is from Ethiopia's Productive Safety Net Programme, where beneficiaries of

targeted assistance shared the received transfers with others due to concerns about social divisiveness (Sabates-Wheeler *et al*. 2013).

Because funds are attached to any form of social provision, targeting processes are prone to the risks of corruption and abuse of power, which can be particularly pronounced in FCAS settings. Indeed within FCAS, as already seen, the risk of exclusion resulting from corruption and elite capture can operate through different targeting mechanisms such as CBT and PMT. For example, in Sierra Leone cash transfers from the Social Safety Net programme drove elite capture as a result of the poverty of the members of the allocation committee themselves (Osofisan 2011).

FCAS are frequently characterised by fractured social relationships and low levels of trust between different groups. A lack of social integration disproportionately affects marginalised groups (e.g. due to gender, age, disability, religion, wealth, etc.) and non-citizens. Social norms and biases in these contexts can result in their voices being disregarded and being socially excluded from assistance (Majid and Harmer 2016). This is often the case when using CBT approaches, but corruption and fraud can be experienced when using PMT as well; for example, in Colombia during election periods local government officials adapted poverty scores once the PMT score composition was known (Camacho and Conover 2011).

Other reasons for exclusion relate to requirements for formal national identification and conditionalities that can be challenging in crisis contexts, particularly if there are barriers to complying with conditions (TRANSFORM 2020). Indeed, in settings of mass displacement, requirements of proof of citizenship and/or prolonged residence to qualify for social protection measure can directly exclude IDPs (in cases of recent forced displacement) and/or refugees (because of lack of citizenship). This can generate barriers for many marginalised groups in both targeting processes and universal approaches. A reason for this is that although social assistance is non-contributory, if it is state financed and comes from taxation, governments might not be willing to use their own resources to target non-citizens. Because state-financed social assistance often excludes refugees, targeting criteria for humanitarian assistance by international agencies often deliberately include them as a category.

Box 3.1: Challenges to harmonising targeting approaches for refugees and citizens

Policy discussions that relate to cash and in-kind transfers, particularly those spearheaded by international donors, frequently express a desire to harmonise the targeting approach used in host countries for refugee populations with that used for the general population. For instance, several national programmes use national household survey data to inform a PMT to identify households for inclusion in national programmes, while refugees – whether living in camps or within the population at large – are often identified for inclusion in programmes using separate surveys or through humanitarian registers and sometimes CBT. Using separate surveys and registration and eligibility procedures for different population groups living in the same country/areas – often the case for refugees, as they are commonly provided social assistance in parallel to the system created by the state for citizens – can create various inefficiencies, including 'double-dipping' across programmes, social tension between populations and inefficiencies in funding due to the costs of setting up parallel systems. The aspiration – of the international community, at least – is that harmonising targeting approaches would, over time, open up possibilities for refugees to integrate more fully into national social protection systems.

An example of this is in Djibouti, where WFP uses Minimum Expenditure Basket (MEB) surveys and livelihood profiles to target refugees in camps and in urban areas, and where the government uses a PMT based on 2017 EDAM4 household survey national poverty data, to identify eligible citizens. Targeting of the citizen population is based on a PMT using national poverty data whereby 12 of the 17 questions used to construct the PMT measure durable assets, such as type of wall, roof, energy, toilet and then assets. These durable assets are useful indicators for settled citizen populations and might also be appropriate for long-term, urban-settled refugees. But they are unlikely to be appropriate indicators of poverty for refugee camp populations, particularly if the refugees have recently arrived, because indicators of dwelling places and accumulated assets will not be relevant for them. So, while it might make sense to use the same poverty survey to collect data on all residents/refugees, care must be taken when choosing indicators to construct eligibility criteria for populations with starkly different poverty profiles. If the eligibility criteria are not tailored to certain refugee populations, it could lead to significant targeting errors. This is a clear example of where harmonising targeting methods would benefit governments and donors alike, but homogenising targeting criteria could be problematic.

Exclusion is not necessarily linked to specific targeting methods (design) and can also be subject to targeting implementation (communication chain, outreach, registration process, etc.). Indeed, evidence suggests that women and girls are more likely than men to face barriers to registration, such as bribery, sexual exploitation and gender-based violence, and are at risk of retaliation if they do not comply (e.g. in Cameroon as reported by Freccero *et al*. 2019: 698). For example, in Mozambique, local community leaders demanded money or sex in exchange for being put on aid distribution lists after Cyclone Idai in 2019 (HRW 2019a). Indeed, CBT is fraught with problems (e.g. see Buur and Salimo 2018 in relation to Mozambique). A lack of disaggregated data in crises situations can leave some marginalised groups, such as people with disabilities, invisible from programming that is trying to address their needs (Holden *et al*. 2019: 8; Amnesty International 2019: 6). People with disabilities may also decide to not disclose their situation or choose to self-exclude from programming due to the stigma attached to their disabilities and additional costs in accessing assistance or other services (e.g. such as loans). Quotas for women or other groups (e.g. IDPs, ex-combatants) can be used as long as there is general agreement on the special obstacles faced by such groups and should be discussed in advance with communities to ensure they will not generate animosity (e.g. domestic violence) (World Bank 2014).

3.2 Violence, protection and 'do no harm'

In addition to exclusion risks, certain risks relate to inclusion. For instance, a beneficiary of social assistance in a conflict-affected setting can be exposed to potential harm from rebel groups who may be aware of which households are receiving transfers. Targeting criteria can also lead to increased violence between beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries, making the included extremely vulnerable and possibly increasing their protection risks. There are examples of poverty-based selection causing social conflict in communities. For instance, in a context where poverty is widespread, selecting people for programme inclusion based on their level of poverty (such as with a PMT) can undermine community cohesion (Smith 2014). Indeed, Kidd and Wylde (2011) cite the introduction of PMT in Lebanon as the cause of riots in refugee camps. This is often gendered or leads to religious or ethnic stigma, theft, resentment and violence. Lack of transparency, accountability and/or consultation in addition to people not understanding how the targeting system works are more likely to arise in PMT than other forms of targeting. Although problems of resentment and stigma are common everywhere, there is broad consensus that they have more serious consequences in FCAS where there is evidence they may lead to violence.

Data collection and management when targeting in contexts with undermined accountability can be a source of further violence and harm, particularly in settings of mass displacement. Data privacy and security risks when performing categorical targeting can jeopardise marginalised people's wellbeing in contexts of great power imbalances, where who collects the data also decides on the provision of assistance (Holloway and Lough 2021; Weitzberg, Cheesman, Martin and Schoemaker 2021). This is the case for Rohingya people, who had their citizenship rights stripped by authorities in Myanmar in 1982. Many have been confined to IDP camps, deprived of assistance, or have fled to neighbouring countries such as Bangladesh (Fortify Rights 2018). In Bangladesh, UNHCR, the UN refugee agency, has collected biometric data of Rohingya refugees in coordination with the Bangladeshi government for humanitarian purposes. Organisations including Human Rights Watch allege that the agency has shared the data with the governments of Bangladesh and Myanmar without proper informed consent (HRW 2021; Amnesty International 2017; Rahman 2021). Both governments have expressed the desire to get the Rohingya out of their territory (Krishnan 2019). Government officials and the military in Myanmar are accused of crimes against humanity (Amnesty International 2018; Bauchner 2020; HRW 2017). The use of biometrics, in particular, creates further risks (Rahman, Verhaert and Nyst 2018) as these are unlike names or other personal information that can be changed or escaped from. In this case, the Bangladeshi government used these data to submit refugee details to the Myanmar government for possible repatriation (Fortify Rights 2018; HRW 2021). This illustrates how the misuse of targeting data can be of huge concern in relation to processes of protection linked to, for example, involuntary repatriation (The Financial Express 2021).

In an effort to be gender sensitive, agencies often prioritise women by targeting female-headed households as a particular category and ensuring that women are the named recipients of transfers in households. However, the literature on the impacts of such efforts is mixed (Beegle 2020; Simon 2019). Demands for sexual favours by agency staff or community gatekeepers in exchange for beneficiary cards are common forms of sexual abuse, for instance. Stigma prevents victims from reporting incidents or discussing them with

communities (Majid and Harmer 2016). The challenges in this respect can outweigh any potential gains of being the official recipients of assistance. Further, manipulation of targeting in social assistance programmes can be part of the political landscape: a system of political patronage, through theft, looting, taxation, resentment, displacement (Foster, McGrath and Jansen 2019) and diversion of aid by soldiers, warlords and militias. This political landscape plays a role in who benefits during and from crises. Being targeted does not resolve issues of marginalisation and violence (*ibid*.).

4. Political and institutional influences on targeting eligibility and approaches

Debates about targeting are often presented as purely technical – about which approaches work best in terms of inclusion and exclusion errors and affordability. However, targeting is far from just a technical exercise: it is a deeply contested and political exercise. The most-debated issues focus on *who* is eligible, and *how* to identify and register these people. Features of FCAS contexts mean that making these decisions involves layers of complexity that are less pronounced in stable contexts. These include the multiplicity of responders with competing principles, different objectives and varied mechanisms that frequently co-exist in crises and emergency situations, as well as democratic and institutional deficits that are common trademarks of FCAS.

4.1 Different mandates and targeting cultures

Contestation over targeting happens in global international policy arenas as well as at national levels, with different competing approaches vying for primacy in national policies and programmes. In protracted crises, these controversies are often made more complex by the mix of humanitarian and development actors. These debates and disagreements are often in and of themselves a challenge to effective targeting, with weak government institutions pulled in different directions by assertive, technically and politically savvy multilateral organisations. An issue of concern is the affiliation of different organisations with the use of specific targeting mechanisms. For instance, more universal or categorical approaches (Kidd 2020; Kidd and Athias 2019) linked to a social protection floor[11] (including pensions and child and disability benefits that rely on life-cycle approaches) are touted by the International Labour Organization and UNICEF, the UN's fund for children (ILO 2021; UNICEF and ILO 2019), while PMT approaches that aim to target the poorest and most vulnerable are favoured by the World Bank (World Bank 2018a). These targeting methods use different data sources and techniques, with different implications for citizen and government buy-in (e.g. social contract), affordability, ethics, sustainability and effectiveness. While citizens often perceive universal approaches as fairer citizens, donors and governments might not accept them due to their higher costs in some contexts.

For international humanitarian actors, the model of operating outside of or with limited engagement in government systems of recipient countries[12] – particularly around decisions over targeting criteria and/or mechanisms – is dictated by several constraints. These include: a risky operating environment and pressure to ensure life-saving goals; possible lack of government sovereignty over a territory in full or in part; legislation preventing some types of domestic assistance to refugees (or other groups); or concerns about the impartiality of governments in conflicts (Gentilini, Laughton and O'Brien 2018). Furthermore, tensions exist between fragile states' principles focused on state-building – such as Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development principles – and humanitarian ones, focused on neutrality, impartiality and independence (GHD 2003; OECD 2007). Even when governments are not party to a conflict, the culture of humanitarian actors and ways of working are often ingrained in much of their institutional history and known methods. This has implications for targeting in fragile settings. Assistance targeted and delivered by international actors can be restricted in terms of reach and limited resources. International provision of

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[11] 'Social protection floors are nationally defined sets of basic social security guarantees that should ensure, as a minimum that, over the life cycle, all in need have access to essential health care and to basic income security which together secure effective access to goods and services defined as necessary at the national level' (ILO 2021).

[12] As opposed to government systems and politics of donor countries, which can be the main driver of decisions about whether and where to act, and where not to, rather than evidence of need.

assistance can also undermine national and local capacities. It could thus be detrimental to notions of state-building and the political contract between a state and its citizens (de Waal 1998; Harvey *et al*. 2007). This is an under-researched area.

4.2 Government deficits and gap-filling by other actors

Provision of social assistance is not solely the purview of state, international or NGO actors, but also one of the stated objectives of non-state actors. This non-state provision can be complementary or in competition with more formal support (Helmke and Levitsky 2004). In fragile systems, where there is a lack of working social protection systems and state provision of social assistance is often broken or non-existent, assistance becomes inextricably bound up in local political dynamics and governance, which has implications for targeting. Weak and fragile state institutions often leave space for non-state armed actors and other informal structures (e.g. local collective organisations and faith-based actors) to provide assistance. According to their priorities, they often apply different targeting criteria and/or mechanisms. In Mali, the Jama'a Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin' (JNIM), a coalition of jihadist armed factions that was formed in 2017, has been actively seeking to help local populations to garner popular support. In the centre of Mali, the JNIM's main affiliate group, the Katiba Macina led by Amadou Kouffa, has cultivated a form of 'pastoralist populism'. Building on long-standing grievances against the Malian state's ineffectiveness and disregard for ethnic-Fulani pastoralists, the group has provided protection, regulation and various forms of assistance to pastoralists (Benjaminsen and Ba 2019). These types of assistance are highly relevant in fragile contexts, particularly where CBT is part of the approach. However, they can also be exclusionary if support is tied to a religious or ethnic identity marker or requires affiliation with a specific non-state armed group. This is the case in Lebanon where Hezbollah[13] provides social assistance with relatively high coverage and transfer value. The party has managed to create its own 'resistance network' that goes beyond the state apparatus. Studies point out how Hezbollah works to fill the gap left by the Lebanese state, providing housing, education, reconstruction, and health-care services primarily for its supporters among the Shi'a community (Karaki 2013; Manyok 2011).

As discussed earlier, geographic location highly determines targeting effectiveness and its limitations. In FCAS where there is low access and little government capacity or legitimacy, a key concern is that poorly targeted social protection (eligibility, access, etc.) may result in geographic locations with the greatest need being the least covered. Indeed, in many fragile contexts, governments do not have effective control over large parts of the country, so government-provided social protection is unable to reach large parts of the population. In such situations, targeting through parallel systems may present an element of institutional expediency, which may enable international aid agencies to maintain more direct contact with beneficiaries (Gentilini *et al*. 2018). Of course, there will be trade-offs here between speed, quality and cost of delivery, all important value-for-money considerations for providers. Any targeting effectiveness (i.e. reaching the intended population) of these parallel systems can be a subject of local conflict. In Mali, WFP provided a food assistance programme in Mopti, but armed groups often impeded targeting and coverage, blocking access to roads in certain areas (Aurino *et al*. 2019).

International aid agencies can sometimes negotiate access to these populations; but at other times, as in northeast Nigeria, significant numbers of people still do not receive any assistance. Alternatively, non-state armed groups that control territory often provide some forms of assistance, as outlined above, but with great limitations in terms of adequacy and access. Areas of the country with significant need can remain excluded from aid due to physical inaccessibility based on insecurity and insufficient infrastructure, which limits geographical coverage, and often (*de facto*) ethnic or other groups. This exclusion is exacerbated by elite capture and favouritism. Some initiatives have tried to overcome these challenges, as in Afghanistan and Somalia where agencies have used local remittance companies or individuals (e.g. the *hawala* system)[14] to deliver money to targeted people in remote and insecure areas. Limited accessibility has contributed, in part,

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[13] Hezbollah has significant power in Lebanon, where it operates as both a Shiite political party and militant group. Hezbollah is a hybrid actor, enjoying state legitimacy in Lebanon and operating both within and outside the state without being accountable to the state (Khatib 2021).

[14] *Hawala* is the most popular means of cash transfer. Many people use it to send remittances. It is an informal channel for transferring funds from one location to another through service providers (CWGI 2020). *Hawala* works through a network of money brokers throughout the world, allowing money transfers from one geographic location to another.

to the concentration of assistance targeted at urban areas that are relatively safer than rural ones due to the presence of government and international security forces (Development Initiatives 2019).

5. The role of technology in targeting

The role of technology in targeting in crisis settings is particularly relevant to collecting data, identifying eligible people, early warning and monitoring. Technology can be especially useful in protracted crises where for multiple reasons (e.g. insecurity, lack of capacity, population movements, etc.) availability of traditional data (e.g. official statistics) tends to be very limited (Idris 2019). Technology is used in insecure contexts to scan areas of interest; for example, WFP Mali uses satellite imagery to detect physical impacts of conflict (e.g. crop abandonment) and thus identify vulnerability and food insecurity patterns and hotspots (WFP 2020). It is also used in contexts of recurrent climate shock, through climate forecasting. In Niger, the Red Crescent Climate Centre with the World Bank conducted a scoping study as part of the Adaptive Social Protection Programme to assess a timelier approach to addressing the lean season through scalable safety nets, to support the shift from costly cyclical lean season responses to longer-term programmes (Longhurst 2019). Further, some safety concerns intrinsic to protracted conflict settings can be minimised by using technologies. Use of digital technologies – for example, during registration – can increase response speed and efficiency in economies of scale. As well as allowing arm's-length transactions, in Somalia the introduction of technologies to enhance targeting, including fingerprinting and cash payments using mobile phones and other electronic systems, have been accompanied 'by reducing multiple claims and monitoring where money is received.' (Majid and Harmer 2016: 23). Avoiding on-the-ground data collection can reduce protection risks in humanitarian contexts of conflict, mass displacement and climate disaster (Barca *et al*. 2010). In the Sahel, UNHCR deployed 'cash for social protection' assistance for refugees living in the urban centres of Nouakchott and Nouadhibou in Mauritania, in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. Refugee community mobilisers were instrumental in helping UNHCR get in touch with and identify hard-to-reach and marginalised refugees by phone (UNHCR 2020). Use of technologies and social media can also support adaptation, particularly in humanitarian settings through feedback and monitoring targeting in an emergency – or longer-term interventions – where the information received makes it possible to learn from targeting errors, as in the case of the Emergency Crisis Response Project (ECRP) in Yemen, which uses Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp and other social media to get feedback (de Silva and Afrah Alawi 2018).

However, technology can also increase vulnerabilities. Where 'those in charge' favour their family or clan, technologies can be just another means to hide favouritism. 'With mobile money, no one can see what you are distributing and to whom you are giving [it]' (Majid and Harmer 2016: 22). This means that although technologies provide transparency in certain contexts, in contexts of fragility they do not necessarily provide a major deterrent to corruption and may even contribute to a perception that the likelihood of corruption has increased (*ibid*.). Further, there are certain data protection and digital risks linked to digital approaches, where if sensitive or personal information is shared, it can threaten lives or stigmatise individuals. In conflicts, as in the case of the Rohingya, security concerns around sharing personal information are particularly acute. In Somalia, unauthorised data-sharing puts the security of recipients of cash assistance at risk because of ongoing conflict. Specifically, if their data leak to militias such as Al-Shabaab, recipients could be targeted for violence or harassment because of their political, ethnic, clan or religious background or because they have received aid. There are also risks related to third-party monitoring such as conflict of interests, ethical concerns, risk transfer and loss of presence in the field (and failing to engage face to face) (Dette, Steets and Sagmeister 2016; Humanitarian Outcomes n.d.). Indeed, research by Humanitarian Outcomes' Secure Access in Volatile Environments SAVE research project in Afghanistan and Somalia found that feedback channels that rely on technology do not enable community members to discuss sensitive matters (e.g. aid diversion and sexual abuse). Consulted communities highlighted the need to feel comfortable before discussions take place and therefore prefer regular face-to-face communication, preferably one on one (Ruppert and Sagmeister 2016). It is important to consider that equity and effectiveness can be potentially compromised due to digital or financial gaps, which mostly affect highly vulnerable people in digitisation and biometric registration processes, including digitally excluded people (Wylde and Venton 2020). The most marginalised people tend not to have access to technology, meaning they can be excluded even further (Barca, Hebbar and Cote 2021). Indeed, digital and financial gender gaps can leave women and other

groups vulnerable. Efforts to overcome these gaps are often subject to local social norms, which can be challenging to work with (Bourgault and O'Donnell 2020: 19; Highet, Salman and Singh 2020; World Bank 2020).

5.1 Lessons and opportunities for moving ahead and conclusions

Current debates and research about what works in targeting generally, and in crises in particular, focus largely on the detail, including who to select, how many to select, how to select and how to carry out the selection, with the main concern being to minimise inclusion and exclusion errors. The discussion in this paper shows just how complex it can be to target the most in need in protracted crisis contexts efficiently and effectively. These contexts illuminate new and different dimensions for identifying who is eligible, which has implications for which methods and data are most appropriate. We know that the chronic poor are disproportionately vulnerable to bad outcomes from shocks; however, some kinds of shocks affect the near-poor and non-poor to a significant extent as well. This is particularly apparent in contexts of conflict and emergency or when natural disasters hit, requiring a shift in objectives, target groups and targeting methods that might not be the case under usual social protection response. Further, depending on the design and implementation of routine social protection in any fragile context, there is potential to leverage existing capacity and data systems for responding to shocks. In fact, routine registration procedures might provide a basis for crisis response. But having funds and social protection systems in place to respond to acute and complex protracted crises is often the exception rather than the rule.

5.2 Politics of targeting

A narrow – and common – focus on the technicalities of targeting leaves political and social considerations largely unattended. Attention to the highly political nature of targeting social assistance is pertinent in contexts of fragility and conflict, where provision is fragmented across multiple actors, often against the backdrop of government democratic and institutional deficits, and where multiple responders have their own objectives, mandates and cultures. Indeed, targeting methods or tools in these contexts are expected to influence buy-in from different key stakeholders, but they also have implications for sustainability, effectiveness and ethics. The complexity of the context (paired with unsuitable data) often makes the targeting exercise exclusionary and susceptible to corruption and/or harm.

Because social assistance is a contested space in fragile settings, corruption, elite capture and favouritism is not exclusive to a specific targeting method. Marginalised groups and non-citizens can be at relatively higher risk of exclusion in targeting exercises across methods and criteria due to social norms, local power politics and imposed challenging requirements. This lack of access can be reinforced due to the limited availability of suitable data (e.g. lack of updated or disaggregated data). In many cases, efforts to be sensitive to these norms and dynamics through the purposeful inclusion of specific groups or use of technologies may exacerbate the risk of corruption and vulnerability for these groups, leaving them facing repercussions such as added stigma and/or violence. In addition to the technical targeting exercise and debate, awareness of the international, national and local political landscapes, and understanding of social and power dynamics, are essential to identify what will work in targeting in a specific place at a specific time.

5.3 Harmonisation not homogenisation

In crisis situations, social protection and humanitarian programmes often operate in parallel with potentially overlapping target groups; in Lebanon, for instance, a 2014 review showed that more than 30 different aid agencies managed cash transfers and vouchers with 14 different objectives, ranging from food to legal assistance (ODI and CGD 2015). This means that the same household can receive multiple benefits but also risks exclusion errors (e.g. being unfairly excluded from humanitarian aid due to receiving social protection benefits with different objectives or which are too small to make much difference). In a World Bank discussion paper, Ghorpade and Ammar (2021) highlight evidence of the likely exclusion of many poor households in Yemen from social assistance, suggesting that there is significant scope to reduce this exclusion through improved humanitarian-development coordination. This poses the need to maximise the linkages of targeting across the range of programmes operating in a region (e.g. with integrated beneficiary registries) and is linked to the increasing relevance of the 'coordination agenda' related to 'who is doing what, where', across sectors.

There is a clear need to reduce duplication of efforts, both within humanitarian assistance and across humanitarian–social protection programming. Efforts to align targeting systems between the humanitarian and social sectors may ensure that the acutely poor and vulnerable – such as refugees affected by conflict or sudden-onset natural disasters – are retained within a system of possible beneficiaries. This way, they are more likely to benefit from long-term support if/when development actors take over if/when humanitarian actors leave (O'Brien *et al*. 2018; Sabates-Wheeler 2019; Seyfert *et al*. 2019; Smith and Bowen 2020; SPaN 2019).

However, arguments for harmonising humanitarian assistance with national systems-led social assistance do not necessarily mean completely homogenising programming and targeting approaches (McLean, Carraro and Little 2020; Grand Bargain Sub-Group on Linking 2021a, 2021b). In Iraq, since 2018 humanitarian actors such as the Cash Consortium have been working to align the design of targeting in their emergency cash assistance programmes with that of the core national safety net programme, to support a gradual transition of the humanitarian caseload into the government programme as national capacity grows (Longhurst *et al*. 2020). Harmonisation can be achieved through different modes of alignment, such as designing an intervention with objectives, targeting method, transfer value or delivery mechanism resembling others that already exist or are planned, but without integrating the two. Alignment can allow the implementation of a hybrid system that enables efficiency gains, but in case of political sensitivities in non-stable contexts, might allow keeping targeting criteria separate (Bowen *et al*. 2020; Wylde and Venton 2020).

In conflict-affected areas, where data privacy and protection risks are heightened, the additional challenges of harmonising parts of a system between humanitarian and state actors need to be understood and navigated. Indeed, there are certain limits to the extent humanitarian agencies can collaborate with the government to take forward the harmonisation agenda (Development Initiatives 2019). Any investment in building longer-term systems through integrating registration of new caseloads into social registries for longer-term use and targeting has important economic, principle/political, technical and security implications. Economic implications involve cost reduction when piggybacking – through economies of scale, sharing common registries, registration or enrolment – but require alignment costs upfront. These upfront costs entail developing a registry, collecting data and updating them, as well as ensuring their interoperability. Principle implications include the need to be context appropriate as integration where governments may be party to conflict can compromise impartiality, which also links to political implications (Wylde and Venton 2020). Using different eligibility criteria limits the extent to which data can be transferred from one programme to another or shared by agencies for targeting purposes. Further, data privacy and protection risks prevent sharing data in many conflict-affected areas, illustrating some of the security implications. Most humanitarian agencies reported that they do not share data because they lack an effective mechanism for monitoring how data are used or protected once shared with third parties (Development Initiatives 2019). In fact, harmonising systems for targeting in fragile contexts carries certain risks. As mentioned above, in Somalia unauthorised sharing of data puts the security of recipients of cash assistance at risk because of the ongoing conflict. These implications limit the extent to which humanitarian agencies can collaborate with the government to achieve any harmonisation within the targeting function (ASiST 2017; Raftree 2021; Schoemaker 2020).

5.4 Flexibility as a remedy to uncertainty and fluidity

Building flexibility into programme operations is required if support is to continue to reach those in need throughout the course of a crisis. The fluid dynamics of crisis contexts require continual re-assessment and adaptation of strategies and actions. Flexibility may involve changing the ways that a programme is implemented, such as the mode of transfer delivery, how targeting is done, what documentation is needed, who local partners are, prioritising specific geographies or instruments, etc. (EU 2019). De Silva and Afrah Alawi (2018) illustrate how targeting mechanisms can change in response to a crisis. Using the case of Yemen, they show how a pre-crisis design that encompassed poverty-targeting using a census and household budget survey transformed into an adaptive design that included conflict-related data (on displacement and food insecurity) and factored in political economy sensitivities.

To make targeting more objective *ex ante* (e.g. to respond to rapid-onset crises), many decisions must be taken in advance, including who is targeted and how. There is, however, a caveat about whether pre-determining these decisions is suitable in contexts of fluidity. It is often less about crisis contexts being different and more about them being very fluid. For instance, the question might not be whether CBT is

possible, but about the relationships in those situations that are constantly changing and that have the potential to create a problem for conducting CBT. This has implications for targeting linked to how often registries and targeting criteria are updated.

In all contexts, the choice of targeting methodology is complicated, but even more so in conflict-affected settings. In fact, there is plenty of scope to trial approaches in crises that layer and combine a range of methods; for instance, with initial geographic targeting (in an area severely affected by crisis) as a first layer, complemented by universally leaning and categorical approaches within those areas. These could be accompanied by: (1) messaging; and (2) simple and easily understandable forms of affluence-testing or basic scorecards, including potentially leveraging existing administrative data where this does not pose any protection concerns. Sequentially implementing different methods to take advantage of the strengths of each one will help to maximise targeting effectiveness and reduce errors.

Looking ahead, social assistance coverage needs to be expanded to include both pre-existing and newly poor and vulnerable populations. Expansion in coverage could include the creation of a broader base of potential beneficiaries, allowing social protection systems to expand in the event of a crisis (i.e. having wide, if not universal, coverage of an integrated social registry) and then contract thereafter. Coverage entails not just total numbers reached but also the distribution of that coverage to assess how many of the poor are receiving assistance. Based on available documentation and actual targeting efficiency information, estimates can be calculated to understand if the people who need assistance are the ones that are indeed receiving it. Monitoring targeting errors helps to understand effectiveness indicators.

Targeting performance, assessment and evaluation constitute important stages of the beneficiary-selection decision scheme. Third-party monitoring, grievance mechanisms and other monitoring practices help to re-evaluate the beneficiary targeting process. This can further help correct selection biases and detect gaps in coverage (Tassot 2019). However, grievance and redress mechanisms do not 'fix' targeting errors where those errors are part of the design. For instance, someone wrongly excluded by a PMT would only be included if their data changed within the statistical algorithm. Constant tracking of inclusion/exclusion errors, occasional abuses, design manipulations and other inconsistencies is essential during any programme's implementation. For example, Ethiopia's Productive Safety Net Programme reassesses areas with food insecurity and retargets beneficiaries annually to improve targeting accuracy (de Silva and Afrah Alawi 2018).

Technology and social media can be used to support flexibility and adaptation in humanitarian settings, particularly by providing feedback and monitoring functions. We described above how social media in Yemen is used to gather feedback within an ongoing conflict. The ECRP project enacts the following scheme for monitoring beneficiaries: a third-party monitoring agency works closely with trained community members who provide daily feedback using mobile and cloud-based applications; the feedback received makes it possible to learn from targeting errors, improve the quality of services, assure the credibility of the programme and achieve accountability of implementing agencies and service providers (*ibid*.).

5.5 Value for money of targeting in protracted crises

The value for money of targeting is critical for donors, implementers and beneficiaries. In stable contexts, there is a big push towards addressing inclusion errors due to concerns about sustainability and political acceptability of programming (e.g. targeting people who should not be targeted). However, in crisis situations attention shifts to exclusion errors (e.g. making sure that everyone who needs to be targeted receives social assistance, reducing efforts towards 'medium' vulnerable people receiving support).

Targeting continues to constitute one of the highest administrative cost drivers in delivering assistance. CBT, PMT and other methods require periodic targeting processes, an additional cost related to the frequency of re-targeting. Re-targeting is designed to ensure that targeting accuracy is maintained as target group circumstances change, but it requires similar resources to be reinvested as in the initial targeting (White, Hodges and Greenslade 2013).

Targeting costs can, in principle, be reduced by establishing a social assistance information system or common targeting mechanism that uses rolling or on-demand approaches, making it possible to share costs across a range of social programmes. Research by Schnitzer (2016) in Niger shows that harmonising data collection tools of PMT and household economy approach users would serve as a crucial building block for a

unified registry and play a key role in improving the efficiency of adaptive social protection systems. Integrating specific targeting approaches into existing or wider systems may allow increased value for money, so that sunk costs are leveraged for future responses. However, doing this if there are issues with the main targeting mechanism could replicate problems. Indeed, targeting does not necessarily result in better identification of the most vulnerable. Sometimes, the additional targeting costs outweigh these benefits, meaning trade-offs must be made (White *et al*. 2013; Sabates-Wheeler, Hurrell and Devereux 2015). Samson, Van Niekerk and Mac Quene (2010) note that the costs of improving targeting increase sharply as efforts are made to achieve ever greater targeting accuracy. Value for money of targeting options should be analysed, to the extent that there are genuine choices to be made – some options may be excluded for political or technical reasons (White *et al*. 2013). In crisis contexts, where little existing information on income and vulnerability status exists, targeting can have a large cost implication – for both determining the right set of criteria and finding the people who qualify – and there is space to consider alternatives to reduce programme exclusion and social tensions and maximise value for money.

6. Identified gaps and research questions for BASIC Research

6.1 Gaps

There are big gaps in our understanding of both who is in need and to what extent different groups are reached, and how.

- Quantitative understanding of the impacts of crises or conflicts on poverty is limited – who is in need at different points in time?
- Evidence is lacking on the performance of targeting approaches used in humanitarian assistance.
- National-level programmes (e.g. Yemen) are based on targeting lists that are many years old – to what extent do those align with current distribution of needs?
- Crisis contexts obviously put further limitations (e.g. geographic, speed, administrative capacity) on who can be reached in practice – does this skew targeting effectiveness?
- Localisation advocates argue that involving local actors increases targeting accuracy, but there is little evidence of this in practice.

Building flexibility into programme operations is required if support is to continue to reach those in need throughout the course of a crisis. The fluid dynamics of crisis contexts require frequent reassessment and adaptation of strategies and actions, yet targeting systems tend to be rather inflexible and static. More evidence is needed on how targeting systems can be designed to better flex in line with rapid changes in needs, affected populations and governance at the local level.

Targeting debates have value for money at their centre. However, the preoccupation in stable contexts with reducing inclusion errors due to concerns about sustainability and political acceptability of programming contrasts with emergency situations where attention shifts to exclusion errors. A key area that has not been explored regards the appropriate balance of effort at different stages of a protracted crisis between tackling inclusion and exclusion errors and the economy, efficiency, effectiveness and equity outcomes of each approach.

6.2 Research questions

Targeting effectiveness questions include:

- To what extent does the targeted group align with targeting in design? Is there self-selection bias in uptake?
- To what extent does targeting reach those most in need?
- How does targeting performance align with perceptions of need and fairness within communities in which assistance is provided?
- To what extent is there overlap in targeting by humanitarian assistance and national social protection programmes?

Other questions are:

- In conflict-affected areas where data privacy and protection risks are heightened, what are the additional challenges in harmonising – as opposed to homogenising – parts of a system between humanitarian and state actors? This is particularly important for meeting the needs of IDPs and refugees.
- To what extent can humanitarian agencies collaborate and coordinate with governments during crises to achieve harmonisation within the targeting function?
- Can – or should – humanitarian approaches 'align' with targeting of national social protection programmes? (With specific focus on if and how to incorporate IDPs and refugees displaced by conflict into registries.)
- Do humanitarian or regular social protection targeting approaches reach those most 'in need'?
  - Sub-questions start with understanding needs in crisis contexts: how do crises impact poverty in different settings? How do needs differ across IDPs vs non-displaced people?
  - How do different contexts influence available options and how they perform?

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