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KNOWLEDGE PLATFORM ON INCLUSIVE DEVELOPMENT POLICIES

On Target?

The human side of targeting in development programmes and policies

By Caspar Swinkels



On Target? The Human side of targeting in development programmes and policies.

Targeting is believed to make projects more efficient. But how do you make sure that your project reaches the right group? Many interventions target people living in poverty. Income, assets, or other characteristics are used to zone in on participants¹. This sounds technical, but human factors play a big role in this process. In fact, the human side makes it difficult to determine which targeting method is the best. Accuracy is not the only factor to consider in targeting. Think about what it means to be ‘targeted’ or, perhaps even worse, to be left out. This brief presents some key lessons and recommendations from the report ‘Targeting strategies in development programmes and policies.’

First, targeting seems technical but it is messy. Unintended inclusion and exclusion effects of targeting follow from assumptions and blind spots at the design stage. This means that complexities in target populations and political interests vested in the targeting methods’ implementation are overlooked. Unintended aspects of targeting systems carry social costs for the communities involved, for example tensions over the selection, and mistrust in the implementing organisation or local actors involved. Furthermore, targeting in small-scale and pilot projects may not work on a larger scale. Small-scale projects’ targeting is often characterised by high involvement of staff, which is not always possible on a larger scale. The unintended effects and human factors also tend to work out differently on different scales of programmes.

Secondly, it is not only about access and numbers. Access is just one step; the process of enrolment and participation can pose additional barriers to successful participation. These may be administrative steps, conditionality, time costs, social costs like stigmatization or jealousy, and mobility or communication issues. These qualitative aspects of inclusion play a role for meaningful participation in programmes or policies. Focusing attention only to the numbers of enrolled participants is not enough.

Third, political interests influence designs and implementation. Criteria and indicators may reflect political interests more closely than capturing the local reality. For example, homelessness as an indicator of an urban health insurance exemption scheme in Ghana, which precluded most of the target population. This was seen as a way to limit expenditure on the programme. In some cases selection processes can be perceived as lotteries, especially if the differences between those selected and left out within the population are small. This is also the case with projects that target specific regions or communities over others. In some cases, feasibility or low overhead costs are prioritised over effective targeting.

Fourth, inclusion and exclusion do not end after enrolment. The extent to which participants or beneficiaries can benefit and participate in meaningful ways is influenced by processes and policies they must deal with. Elements like attendance lists, queuing for registration or activities, fixed meeting places and rigid conditionalities can impede participation, cause participants to miss out on elements or completely drop out.

What does this mean for targeting systems?

In short, targeting decisions should be made decentralised instead of top-down only. These decisions should be made inclusively, and informed by a complex reading of the social, economic, and political context of the programme objectives on one side, and community on the other. A focus on social costs and implications of targeting should feature in the designs and assessment. And as a rule, implementation has a large impact on these aspects, which calls for a decentralised approach to design and formulation of targeting instead of only delegating implementation tasks. This means that the people who are the ones to be targeted have a say in how they will be approached. A decentralised approach can tackle bias at the design level and catch problems at the implementation level.

Following the above, some general recommendations are made to generate a reflection on targeting approaches and inclusion and exclusion in development policies and programmes.

Recommendation 1. Human factors and political economy should be considered in the design and implementation of targeting systems:

- Include the people that are being targeted in the design stage of interventions.
- Take account of the social costs of the targeting exercise itself, as well as deviations from designs. Monitoring and grievance redressal systems can play a role in this.

Recommendation 2. Scaling up a programme requires rethinking targeting, as small-scale targeting systems may not work on a larger scale:

- Coordination between programmes and shared administration such as a single registry could help achieve better coverage.

Recommendation 3. Unintended/unexpected inclusion and exclusion in design and implementation should be mapped and understood:

- Unintended exclusion can follow from communication strategies, distribution and delivery mechanisms, language, communication mechanisms and technologies.
- The organizational and administrative aspects of programme implementation affect inclusion and pose barriers to participation.

For more details on these recommendations, please refer to the full report and the executive summary of this review.

For more direct feedback, questions or suggestions please leave your comment on our website underneath the post, or reach out to caspar@includeplatform.net

ⁱ We use participants, not beneficiaries, because participants are active agents within development, not passive receivers of aid.