

Selecting Beneficiaries for Food Aid

Deciding who will receive food assistance and who will not is a difficult task. This process is often called “beneficiary selection” or “targeting.” It often involves hard choices and always requires wisdom. As people called to generosity and compassion, Christians may wonder why it is necessary to determine who will get the food. Why can’t we just give something to everyone?

Why Target Food?

The truth is that, sometimes, it *is* appropriate for everyone in a particular area to receive food. However, it can also be harmful to simply distribute food to everyone. In order to avoid this harm, it is important that organizations using food aid reflect on the situation and decide who should receive food. There are two main benefits to effective targeting: avoiding negative effects of food aid, and good stewardship of God’s gifts.

Avoiding negative effects: Providing food aid where it is not needed can harm local production, cause conflicts and promote dependency on aid (see *tips* 402 for more on risks). Poorly targeted food projects have often turned into prolonged feeding programs that do not promote dignity or creativity. Food projects with weak targeting and monitoring systems are more likely to encourage pilfering or manipulation by people who take advantage of difficult situations and the poor. Good targeting, on the other hand, is an important part of effective food aid.

Good stewardship: Food aid is a limited resource, and the needs are great. In order to use this God-given resource wisely, it is important to make sure that it goes to those in greatest need. This will involve hard choices in areas where the needs are many, and should not be done without the participation of local people.

Researching Beneficiary Selection

The first step that is often overlooked during the beneficiary selection process is gathering information about past and current beneficiary selection activities by your agency and/or other agencies working in the region or adjacent regions you have targeted. This important piece of research will improve your targeting and coordination with other organizations. It will also reduce the potential for conflict between communities that may feel they are being treated differently. The key questions that should be asked for both past and current food aid interventions include the following:

1. How many people were targeted? What percentage of the population does this represent? Were they individuals, households or entire communities?
2. What were the criteria used in the targeting?
3. Who selected the beneficiaries using the criteria? Examples include community relief committee, external agency, village heads or the community.
4. Were surveys conducted? If so, try to find a copy of the surveys.
5. While meeting with other organizations, learn about the type, quality, quantity and duration of the food rations.

This information, if available, will assist you during your beneficiary selection process.

Who to Target?

Once a region has been chosen and your agency understands previous and current beneficiary selection strategies by other organizations, beneficiaries may be selected at three main levels: individual, household and community. The most appropriate level of targeting depends on the food situation, local culture and what is being done by other organizations.

Individual: Sometimes, it is possible to identify specific types of individuals who require food assistance. Only individuals that meet these criteria are eligible to receive food. For example, a food project might target undernourished children less than 10 years of age. Only children who are under 10 and who meet certain criteria of malnutrition (low arm circumference, appearance, nutritional disease, one or less meals/day, etc.) will receive food. Common examples of individual target groups are: orphans, school children, severely malnourished individuals, pregnant women. In this case, others will not receive food, even if they are from the same household or community. This level of targeting is often used in school feeding, therapeutic feeding, and vulnerable group feeding. It is important to recognize that individual-level targeting may cause tensions with those that are ineligible for food. Also, if the food is distributed as dry rations, it is very likely that the targeted individual will share (or be forced to share!) with others. It is also possible that individuals in wet feeding programs will receive less food at home.

Household: Food is commonly distributed to entire households that are considered vulnerable. Vulnerability may be assessed on the basis of household food

Effective targeting has two main benefits:

Avoiding the negative effects of food aid and Good stewardship of God’s gifts

Food Aid projects may target

Individuals, Households, or Entire communities

production, income, or composition (e.g. widow-headed households). This type of targeting recognizes that hunger is often shared among the household. If there are food shortages, parents may go without in order to feed their children. However, be aware that food is not always distributed fairly within the household. For example, men and boys may eat before women or girls. These dynamics will vary according to culture.

Community: In certain situations, it makes sense for everyone in a community to receive food aid. Often, if entire communities have been displaced or destroyed by conflict or disaster, all members of the community will be in need of food.

Identifying Targeting Criteria

At each of the levels described above (individual, household and community), selection criteria must be identified to use during the targeting process. There are two distinct methods to identify the criteria. One way is identifying suitable criteria based on consultations with community and regional authorities. The second way is to allow the community to establish criteria as they develop vulnerability categories. Out of these two criteria identifying processes, several criteria are usually identified. Some criteria are more useful than others, and your agency must determine which criteria and how many criteria should be used. The criteria often fall into one of the three following categories:

1. **Health criteria** describe the status of a person's health and may include nutritional measures, disease, and physical ability. All of these can impair a person's ability to acquire food and to function normally.
2. **Asset criteria** may include a beneficiary's current income, crop loss, land base, housing availability, or tools. At a community level, damage to roads and infrastructure, and market prices may provide useful information on the current state of affairs. Again, these factors all affect people's ability to acquire food and to function normally.
3. **Coping strategy criteria** refer to what people are doing to survive at the present time. Observing the coping strategies being used can be a good indicator of vulnerability. As well, certain coping strategies – such as selling off tools or livestock at low prices – can impair people's ability to acquire food in the future. As described in tips 302, the FEWS matrix provides categories of vulnerability based on coping strategies. The two key components are *what people are doing with their assets* (resources or wealth) and *how they are producing food or income*. Using a framework like the FEWS can provide useful information on the current level of vulnerability – of communities, households or individuals.

Whatever the level of targeting, the criteria should be clear, culturally appropriate, and ensure that those seeking personal gain do not manipulate the process. As well, the criteria must not be too general. A common oversight is including general categories like “elderly household” as a criteria for a beneficiary household. Since it is possible

that some of the elderly are well taken care of by their children or have a well established land base, more specific criteria must be developed to select the most vulnerable people from the group of “elderly households”.

Targeting Method

Once the targeting criteria have been determined, a targeting method needs to be established to identify eligible individuals, households or communities. Some possibilities include:

Implementing agency: The organization that is running the program may directly select the beneficiaries. This allows the agency to retain control over the food it is providing, and gives it the assurance that the food is reaching the right people. Implementing agencies often use surveys, measurements (such as arm circumference), or interviews with focus groups or key informants (see tips 202) to select eligible recipients. This type of targeting requires a good knowledge of the local community. It is usually strengthened by the use of participatory methods, such as community mapping, ranking, and piling exercises.

Local leaders: Sometimes, local leaders (e.g. chiefs, pastors, government officials) guide the targeting process. The success of this method depends on how well these leaders know who is truly vulnerable and on their strength of character. If the local leaders are not trustworthy, they cannot be relied upon to guide the selection of beneficiaries.

Community groups: Many projects involve the formation of food committees to oversee the distribution of food. These committees are made up of community members who are trusted to identify vulnerable people and ensure that they actually receive the food. Such community groups can be a very effective method of targeting. As with any method of targeting, the effectiveness of these groups will depend on the wisdom and character of those involved.

The choice of method should take into account cultural factors and the level of targeting. For example, a study in Ethiopia suggested that the best approach in that context was for the implementing agency to select the communities, and for community groups to select the individuals or households within those communities. In certain countries, as in Ethiopia, there are also government approvals and regulations to be observed when selecting beneficiaries for a food program.

No method is foolproof. Thus, it is wise to collect information on those who receive the food as a check on the accuracy and reliability of the targeting process. The Canadian Foodgrains Bank proposal and end-of-project report forms contain space to report information on the vulnerability of those who received food.

Best Time to Target

Selecting beneficiaries should take place well before the food arrives. There should be sufficient time for the following activities:

- Targeting decisions

Criteria should be based on:
Health status
Assets
Coping strategies

- Appeal by individual beneficiaries against targeting decisions
- Re-targeting and revision of beneficiary list
- Finalizing beneficiary list
- Forwarding list to relevant authorities

During the targeting process, beneficiaries should be informed of the:

- Ration commodities and size
- Type of food distribution – free food distribution, school feeding, food for work, etc.
- Distribution schedule

Major Targeting Errors

When a targeting mechanism fails to identify and reach the intended beneficiaries, we say targeting errors have occurred. The most commonly observed targeting errors are:

- Excluding needy household from food assistance
- Including households that do not need food aid

The above errors relate to who gets food. Your agency also needs to be concerned with how much food a household gets and for how long, which may lead to the following errors:

- Giving a household more food than it needs
- Giving a household less food than it needs

Avoiding or Minimizing Targeting Errors

To avoid or minimize targeting errors, your agency will need to identify the sources of the errors. Some common examples include the following:

- Lack of accurate, timely and reliable baseline data

- Lack of knowledge/skills to differentiate between the rich and poor (e.g.: wealth ranking and other tools)
- Lack of coordination among various agencies
- Movement of people
- Lack of communication
- Absence of community participation in targeting
- Attitude that everyone is entitled to food and everyone is equally poor
- Lack of clear criteria
- Absence of regularly updating beneficiary list when households leave, the situation improves or deteriorates or there is a death
- Lack of awareness about the importance of including women in the decision making process
- Linking food aid to personal or political objectives
- Favouritism of relatives or clan members
- Overlooking the registration of vulnerable or marginalized people (female headed households, elderly, disabled, children)

Since the situation is constantly changing, your agency must use a monitoring system to keep the beneficiary list up to date. In a sense, the selection of beneficiaries is an ongoing process, although the majority of the work takes places at the beginning of the program.

Resources

For more information on selecting beneficiaries or any other planning, monitoring or evaluation issues, contact the Canadian Foodgrains Bank at the address below, or email inquiries to cfgb@foodgrainsbank.ca