



Mauritania: Assessing Feasibility of using a Social Registry for Targeting Shock Response Programmes

OVERVIEW OF STUDY

An ECHO-funded technical assistance facility, managed by the World Food Programme (WFP), aims to explore how social protection systems can be strengthened in fragile and forced displacement contexts, with a view to contributing to the global learning agenda on when and how these can be used to address humanitarian needs in a more cost-effective, efficient and predictable way.

Short-term technical assistance has been provided to improve programme design or implementation in nine countries facing protracted crises¹. Each assignment tackles a priority theme identified collectively by humanitarian and development partners, complementing and catalysing efforts by national governments and their partners to enhance the well-being of chronically poor or vulnerable populations, those affected by crises, those living in conflict situations and/or refugees. The assignments focus on linkages between humanitarian action and social

protection: this includes the identification of good practices and recommendations for improved institutional coordination, knowledge transfer, and delivery systems such as information systems or payment mechanisms. Projects are designed and managed in country by a partnership of WFP, FAO, ECHO, UNICEF, DFID and World Bank representatives, in consultation with the government and other agencies according to the context. One partner serves as the lead in each country.

This briefing note summarises technical assistance in Mauritania. This focuses on Mauritania's Social Registry, designed to support targeting of long-term social protection programmes, and assessed the feasibility of using this for targeting seasonal programmes (including humanitarian interventions) that are responding to shocks contributing to food insecurity. We examined feasibility in relation to six factors – how data in the register can inform shock response (inclusion of those most in need, extent of gaps); the dynamism of the registry in the

¹ The nine countries are Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Iraq, Malawi, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Somalia and Uganda.

face of shocks; the options for articulating linkages between shock response interventions and regular social protection programmes through the registry, their pros and cons; how transparency and accountability to affected populations can be ensured; whether registry-based targeting could allow some level geographical continuity in the response (as opposed to the humanitarian practice of concentrating assistance in certain villages only); and information sharing arrangements between humanitarian actors and the government registry services. We developed methodological guidance to use the registry for this purpose and improve the consistency, timeliness and efficiency of targeting on shock response programmes while maximising accountability.

COUNTRY CONTEXT

In Mauritania around 25% of the population (almost 1 million people) face chronic food insecurity and acute malnutrition rates exceed emergency thresholds in several areas of the country. The population is exposed to recurrent and cyclical shocks, particularly droughts, the effects of which are compounded by the stresses of soil erosion and desertification on account of climate change, poor agropastoral practices and pressures on natural resources. Even in so-called “normal” years, the most vulnerable populations face high seasonal food insecurity. In crisis years, such as the severe drought events in 2011, 2014 and 2017 the scale and intensity of needs is much increased.

The setup of an adaptive social protection has become a government priority – and a key component under the national development strategy. Recent developments, building upon a National Strategy for Social Protection, include the design and progressive implementation of the safety net programme known as “Tekavoul”, the piloting of the shock-responsive cash-transfer programme known as Tekavoul, and investments in the tools and processes required to establish a national early warning, preparedness and response scheme. These also include the development of a national Social Register, under the authority of the Ministry of Economy and Finance (MEF), with the aim of providing a single repository of information for the targeting of households for national social protection programmes. Construction of the register began in 2015. It is a list of poor households, associated with a socioeconomic database for these households. Roll out has begun, the registry covered 35,000 households in four Departments in 2018 with plans for incremental scale up across 18 more Departments by the end of 2019. The identification of households to be included at the level of each locality is through a community-based approach and then socioeconomic data is collected from each identified household by the National Office of Statistics.

The government and partners have long been implementing seasonal and emergency interventions in response to shocks contributing to food insecurity and malnutrition, independently of the social protection sector but essentially serving a “protective” safety-net function. Actors are now aligning behind a strategic vision to adopt a more systemic and integrated approach to assistance across the humanitarian-development nexus, and to develop the potential of ‘shock-resilient’ or ‘adaptive social protection’ to more efficiently and effectively respond to both structural and cyclical vulnerability in the country. The aim is to use the systems and processes underpinning social protection programmes to respond to shocks. The setup of an integrated targeting mechanism is among the key building blocks required for such a system to function effectively.

In this context, it is hoped that the registry could be an effective platform for targeting seasonal food assistance programmes, potentially significantly speeding up the targeting process, reducing costs and allowing for synergies and linkages to be made between emergency and longer-term interventions. Developing a harmonised targeting approach for shock response based on the register is a flagship project of the government and partners. To date, efforts have focused on inclusion of Household Economy Approach-type indicators used by humanitarian partners in the registry data collection tools, and piloting use of the register for targeting shock response². There are plans to increase the size of the register to 200,000 households, to capture additional households which are not extremely poor but vulnerable to shock. This technical assistance complements and builds upon these actions.

RESEARCH METHOD

WFP Mauritania managed this assignment, in close technical collaboration with the World Bank. Multi-stakeholder participation in conceptualizing the study was achieved through an established in-country working group focusing on early warning and response planning issues and WFP’s strategic partnership with the World Bank on Shock-Responsive Social Protection. The assignment indeed fits among the priority actions planned under the country-level memorandum of understanding signed by WFP and the World Bank.

Work was entrusted to an independent firm and led by a senior consultant having prior extensive knowledge of the subject matter in Mauritania. It comprised:

- A desk review of experiences and good practices in the use of social registers, taking into account lessons learned from the 2017 pilot in Mauritania and from elsewhere in the Sahel³.

2 Undertaken by CSA, Oxfam and WFP in the district of M’Bout during the 2017 food insecurity response.

3 For example, similar approaches are being tried in Senegal, Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger

- A review of current targeting practices applied by the register and humanitarian partners on shock response programmes (such as the Household Economy Approach (HEA)). This included reviewing technical manuals and consultations with technical staff of the registry and humanitarian actors. Local consultations were also held with stakeholders and focus groups were undertaken in 30 communities⁴ benefiting from the 2018 lean season response to capture their perceptions of targeting approaches.
- A comparative analysis of targeting methods (registry vs HEA) within areas of intervention of the 2018 emergency response to better understand reasons for discrepancies in targeting outcomes.
- Consultations with potential registry users, including Government, NGOs, donors and UN agencies⁵, to capture strategic priorities and operational constraints.

The entire consultancy was undertaken under the supervision of a technical committee led by the Social Registry service of the MEF and composed of the *Commissariat à la Sécurité Alimentaire*, the World Bank, Oxfam, WFP and ECHO. Findings of the analysis were presented and discussed during two inclusive workshops (one strategic and one technical) held in Nouakchott on 11 and 17 October 2018, attended by Government institutions, NGOs, World Bank, WFP and donors. The findings and the workshop conclusions (including the definition of 9 key guiding principles, described in the box below) informed the content of the methodological guide.

FINDINGS

This study presents findings on the suitability of the register to support shock response.

The registry is a useful household data repository for informing shock response targeting strategies but there are risks of exclusion, whatever the targeting method used: At risk areas are included in the registry, but coverage can be insufficient at the local level, given the geographical concentration of shocks and the need for a similar concentration of the response. However, following integration and application of an additional shock vulnerability buffer, the number of households registered will be at least as high as the number of households experiencing food and nutritional insecurity according to historical data (2011-2015). While the registry's coverage may remain below that of humanitarian responses in some affected localities, the registry's full territorial

deployment offers the ability for humanitarian actors to quickly identify affected vulnerable households in localities that often remain excluded from seasonal interventions. The overlap between households targeted by humanitarian actors and those in the register is not particularly strong. A comparison in 8 localities found only 42% of households targeted by humanitarian responses in 2018 would be registered - equivalent to random targeting⁶. This can be caused by i) the fact that targeting criteria typically used to define inclusion in the register or to define eligibility for humanitarian response are not strong determinants of cyclical food insecurity; ii) the different geographic targeting strategies employed by the registry and shock response actors; iii) inaccuracies in implementation of targeting approaches; and iv) community bias in selection of households for inclusion.

Most households registered do have the profile of poor and very poor households according to the HEA methodology⁷, so the registry is effective at consolidating data on a large proportion of target populations for shock responses. However, it is also likely that a range of households that would be desirable to target as part of the response to shocks are not included because of the coverage quotas applied to the registry, an uncertain relationship between profiles prioritised by the registry and food insecurity, and inaccuracies related to the implementation of different targeting methods.

The need for dynamism is being prioritised by the registry but procedures are not fully operational, or their effectiveness tested: To be useful for targeting assistance, data in the registry must be an accurate reflection of the household situation. Given that household circumstances change over time, this requires that records can be updated. For targeting shock response, this process of updating may need to be more frequent, to capture fluctuation in circumstances due to shocks. The government recognises this and is developing various mechanisms to ensure this. Fully updating the registry (list of households, and socioeconomic data) is a step highlighted in its operations manual though the frequency of this activity hasn't been agreed. Since such exercises are expensive, the manual also has processes for data to be shared proactively by other parties, to ensure more frequent partial updates. There is a grievance mechanism for households to raise complaints about their assigned status, so corrections can be made to the list of registered households. This is underpinned by operational procedures and is becoming well established however there may be issues in its effectiveness at flagging and addressing issues due to typical constraints facing complaints

4 Including interviews with 24 local authorities, 9 representatives of government departments, members of 7 targeting committees, and focus groups with men and women - including those who are beneficiaries of social protection schemes, or of programmes delivered by aid agencies, as well as those who have been registered in the Social Register and those who have not.

5 22 key informants were included, representing donors (ECHO, AFD, EU), UN (WFP), NGOs (ACF, Au Seours, OXFAM) and Government (CSA, OSA, ONS, DRS, Tekavoul, MEF).

6 These observations are similar to findings from analyses conducted in other countries in the Sahel region.

7 Estimates should be interpreted with great caution because they are very sensitive to the choice of the combination of variables used to characterize the household profiles and the thresholds adopted for each variable

mechanisms on social protection programmes globally⁸. Partial updates are also envisaged, based on information transmitted back to the register by the programmes using it, however this is yet to be operationalized.

There is potential for developing 'shock responsive safety-nets' through the register: The harmonisation of long-term social protection and seasonal emergency assistance through the register can enable the government (or its partners) to develop targeting strategies for emergency assistance 'ex-ante' with potential to improve the efficiency of aid. Social protection programmes can be flexed and scaled to meet additional needs for shock response ('vertical' or 'horizontal' expansion) and both are considered potentially feasible options. The Tekavoul programme targets chronically food insecure households that are also among the most vulnerable to the effects of shocks, so vertical expansion of this programme in the event of a shock would be a priority before geographical expansion. Such choices however must be based on firm evidence, both concerning the effectiveness of social protection programmes in addressing vulnerability to shocks, and the enablers and barriers to scale up. The most appropriate choice or choices may vary between locations depending on the nature of the shock, and the strength of the underlying systems and processes of the Tekavoul programme.

Achieving accountability to affected populations requires consideration of less complex targeting strategies: It is well noted that for targeting to be well understood and accepted by communities, criteria should be simple, clear, and easy to communicate and reasons for targeting decisions must be communicated. The targeting approach on the Tekavoul programme is by proxy means test on household socioeconomic data in the registry to assign and rank scores. Ranking approaches (such as HEA) are also employed by humanitarian actors on their programmes, including through variables that are now available in the registry questionnaire. Whilst scoring systems have a theoretical value in terms of their ability to integrate multiple dimensions and generate more accurate lists, they are complex and fundamentally difficult to understand and communicate to populations which contributes to reduced acceptance of targeting decisions. In comparison, in the case of simple and easily measurable criteria (such as demographic criteria), observations indicate a good level of community acceptance and understanding of the choices made.

It is desirable to apply the principle of territorial continuity (at least within prioritized communes) to the targeting of shock response interventions, and the register can facilitate this approach: In humanitarian programmes, actors have commonly used geographical targeting to concentrate assistance in the areas considered most vulnerable, rather than operating in every commune in the affected locations, mainly for efficiency reasons given the costs and time involved in identifying households. In contrast, the social protection programmes follow a 'continuous geographic targeting' strategy, with the aim to reduce the risks of exclusion related to location and of perceived bias/preference of the government towards populations. Both approaches have inclusion and exclusion errors, and both generate costs. However, the political and equity benefits of a geographically continuous targeting strategy mean this is desirable (at least within prioritized communes). Targeting shock responses through the register offers potential to realise this.

The register would benefit from mechanisms to improve user engagement: The register's procedures to access or query data are generally considered satisfactory by users, though there is not currently sufficient feedback provided by users for registry implementers to understand bottlenecks and improve the service. On the other side, users do not communicate clearly about their requirements or always fulfil their co-responsibilities. Possible ways forward include establishing framework contracts between the register and users, improving communication about the responsibilities and obligations of users, adopting simpler targeting criteria for greater ease of communication with populations, and establishing clear procedures for users to contribute to updating data.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Study findings contributed to the elaboration of the methodological guidance, which was intended to be the main operational output of the consultancy. The guidance is intended for registry and programme implementers and outlines recommended actions for working with the registry for targeting programmes in response to natural disasters or economic shocks contributing to food and nutrition insecurity. It includes strategies for effectively using the registry for these purposes while ensuring efficiency, harmonisation and linkages between programmes, for optimum partnership relationships, and for ensuring accountability to affected populations. The guidance is underpinned by a set of principles informed by key conclusions of the research, outlined in Box 1.

⁸ Including lack of awareness of or confidence in the mechanism within communities, the short window to receive complaints, and access difficulties in rural areas.

Box 1: Principles underpinning the guidance

- 1. Efficiency and effectiveness.** Seeking efficiency and effectiveness of the targeting process in programmes providing assistance to affected populations.
- 2. Harmonisation.** Seeking harmonisation of targeting approaches and criteria and facilitating coordination of actors contributing to a response, while improving its equity across the country.
- 3. Geographical continuity of the response at the sub-municipal scale.** Programmes strive to assist all households meeting the targeting criteria, regardless of where they live in the targeted municipalities.
- 4. Priority to households registered in the registry.** Where they meet targeting criteria adopted by programmes using the registry, those households included in the registry should be the first target of a response to shocks.
- 5. Non-exclusivity.** Agencies can target households not included in the registry through complementary processes.
- 6. Accountability between the registry and its related programmes.** Managers of aid programmes undertake to transmit information from data collected from registered or non-registered households to the registry, as well as any complaints associated with the RS targeting processes or outcomes. Managers of the registry undertake to report on the use of information transmitted by these actors.
- 7. Independence.** Actors implementing programmes can check and verify the characteristics of households identified through the registry and can choose to assist or not assist identified households. Where there are discrepancies in the data, actors commit to share their data with the registry.
- 8. Transparency to affected populations.** Programmes undertake to communicate the targeting criteria used to local populations and other stakeholders.
- 9. Protection of personal data.** Programme will not disseminate the personal data transmitted by the registry and restrict use of this data only for activities or objectives covered in their memoranda of understanding with the registry.

NEXT STEPS

The process has been highly inclusive, and both the analytical report and the methodological guidance were

developed in close consultation with the Government and partners under the supervision of the technical committee. The methodological guidance has now been approved by the committee, a major step to bridge the gap between the targeting approaches of development and humanitarian actors on the one hand, and of government and non-governmental stakeholders on the other hand. This step is being followed by a subsequent analysis aimed at identifying relevant “filters” to be applied when using the registry for shock-response.

The guidance has now been shared with all members of the food security sector and will be used at scale for the first time by actors (including WFP) planning lean season responses in 2019 in areas where the registry is available.

LESSONS LEARNED

Experiences highlight lessons for actors seeking to build similar linkages between social protection and humanitarian action:

- It is possible to develop linkages between social protection and humanitarian response without reducing implementation space for humanitarian actors. Developing common systems that can be accessed by both government social protection programmes and humanitarian agencies can enable harmonisation and leverage efficiencies and a more seamless support for households but still allow each party to implement programmes according to their respective mandates and expertise.
- Developing common systems is not easy. Such detailed technical feasibility studies should be considered a best practice, in order to fully understand issues and challenges, consider solutions and establish consensus between stakeholders.
- In order to have a direct added value and drive innovation, such studies should not remain of an exploratory nature and should be linked to clear operational outputs. This was the case with the elaboration of the methodological guidance, which somehow made actors with diverging views enter into a constructive dialogue, seek for common ground and ultimately agree on an immediately actionable consensus.

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