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ANALYSIS, PLANNING & PERFORMANCE

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Methodological Note on Targeting Errors Measurement

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This note aims at giving Country Offices a framework of reference for the planning, calculation, and understanding of targeting design and implementation errors.

Targeting errors occur when assistance fails to reach the intended beneficiaries, either by excluding eligible individuals or including ineligible ones. These errors stem from various causes, including flawed design, poor implementation, data limitations, and external interference. In humanitarian settings where WFP operates, challenges such as insecurity, limited

access, and underfunding make perfect targeting unfeasible. Therefore, targeting systems should incorporate realistic error thresholds and prioritize transparency, adaptability, and fairness.

This guidance note supports programme, VAM, and M&E staff in identifying, classifying, and addressing targeting errors to enhance the efficiency, fairness, and accountability of assistance. It is designed to remain relevant across diverse, complex WFP operational environments, including those with limited data and access constraints.

INTRODUCTION

Targeting errors refer to inaccuracies in identifying and reaching the intended beneficiaries of assistance. These errors can result in the exclusion of eligible recipients and the inclusion of ineligible ones. Targeting errors may result from different causes, including but not limited to inadequate data, flawed assessment methodologies, challenges in verifying eligibility, fraud, and undue influence of external stakeholders.

In many of the humanitarian contexts where WFP operates, factors such as access restrictions, insecurity, displacement, weak infrastructure, and chronic underfunding significantly limit the extent to which targeting can be comprehensively planned, implemented, and monitored. Hence, it is essential to adopt realistic error thresholds that acknowledge the operational limitations while striving for fairness and effectiveness. Rather than expecting perfect accuracy, targeting systems should be designed with a tolerance for a certain degree of error, balanced against the urgency of reaching those most in need. Key considerations include the feasibility of eligibility verification, the collection of reliable data, and the ability to adapt approaches as conditions evolve. Maintaining transparency around these limitations, while building in feedback loops and corrective mechanisms, is critical to preserving trust and accountability under complex conditions.

While no targeting or prioritization exercise can be entirely error-free, the objective is to minimize exclusion and inclusion errors to ensure the most efficient and effective use of resources. Targeting errors are typically classified into two main types, each with distinct causes and implications:

- **Design errors** occur when the targeting criteria or methodology are flawed or inappropriate for the context (such as using eligibility indicators that do not reflect the real drivers of vulnerability). These errors lead to the systematic exclusion or inclusion of the wrong groups from the outset.
- **Implementation errors** arise when well-designed criteria are poorly applied in practice. This may result from misidentification, data entry mistakes, or local interference during the beneficiary selection process.

These two types of errors are not directly comparable because design errors reflect structural flaws in the targeting framework, while implementation errors stem from operational weaknesses. Addressing them requires different approaches: the former needs analytical and contextual review, while the latter demands stronger oversight, training, and process controls.

This note is intended for programme, VAM, and M&E staff involved in designing, implementing, and monitoring targeting strategies. It provides practical guidance on how to classify, measure, interpret, and respond to targeting errors both at the design and implementation stages to support fairer, more accountable assistance delivery. This note also recognizes the diversity of WFP contexts and is designed to remain applicable even in environments with limited access, high insecurity, and constrained resources.

EVALUATING ERRORS WHEN DATA IS NOT AVAILABLE

Usually, identifying targeting errors is a **quantitative** process that requires stable conditions, access to affected areas, and—most importantly—reliable data. In the absence of these prerequisites, assessing targeting errors becomes significantly more challenging.

Qualitative methods, such as community consultations, key informant interviews, and secondary data analysis, can serve as proxies for direct data collection. However, their use comes with important caveats. First, these methods can only provide indicative insights and do not allow for precise estimation of inclusion or exclusion error rates. Second, their application requires thorough documentation and a transparent explanation of how the information was gathered, analyzed, and interpreted.

TARGETING ERRORS AND MONITORING

Monitoring targeting errors is particularly relevant for activities aimed at improving individual or household-level food security outcomes through direct assistance. In contrast, targeting errors are less critical in Food Assistance for Assets (FFA) activities, where the primary outcomes are derived from the asset itself, which is intended to benefit the broader community.

To enable meaningful tracking, monitoring exercises such as **Post Distribution Monitoring (PDM), Community Feedback Mechanisms (CFM), and other triangulated sources** should be intentionally planned to collect the data needed for error analysis, including the **eligibility criteria and vulnerability status for both beneficiaries and a representative sample of non-beneficiaries**.¹

Within the context of monitoring, it is essential to distinguish between design errors and implementation errors.

- **Design errors** are linked to the actual vulnerability status of the population. High levels of design error may indicate problems with the targeting approach or the definition of eligibility criteria.
- **Implementation errors**, on the other hand, reflect how well the targeting criteria were applied. They assess whether households that meet the agreed criteria received assistance, and whether those who do not meet the criteria were excluded.

Implementation errors should be minimized through careful planning, proper management of the targeting process, and the use of reliable data, in response to potential threats such as beneficiary list manipulation and the risk of undue influence.² While some margin of error is inevitable, regular **monitoring plays a key role** in identifying and addressing both design and implementation errors to improve the effectiveness and fairness of assistance delivery.

¹ Expanding the questionnaire to capture eligibility criteria and include a sample of non-beneficiaries may significantly increase the cost of the PDM exercise. When budgets are limited, COs are encouraged to adopt cost-saving measures such as streamlining data collection tools across programmes and limiting the questionnaire to only essential and mandatory indicators. If these mitigation strategies are not applicable, feasible, or sufficient to address budget constraints, COs should clearly document the measures considered and provide a rationale for why they were not effective or implemented. This ensures transparency and supports future planning and resource allocation.

² For additional details on mitigating risks of undue influence, please consult the [Targeting Assurance Framework](#).

TARGETING ERRORS AT THE DESIGN STAGE

Definitions	
Targeting Design	Design exclusion error – The proportion of the population who need assistance but are not included in the targeted group. This type of error implies that the criteria for identifying those in need are not sensitive enough to capture individuals who should receive benefits.
	Design inclusion error – The proportion of programme beneficiaries who do not need assistance but are identified as in need based on the chosen targeting method. This type of error implies that the criteria for identifying vulnerable households are not specific enough to exclude those who are not in need.

These errors tend to increase when prioritization decisions must be made due to funding or other constraints, which leads to selecting only a portion of the vulnerable population for assistance.

To reduce this risk, design errors should be reviewed **annually** or **before the start of a new programme cycle**, and anytime there are significant contextual changes (e.g., new assessment data, displacement trends, or shifts in vulnerability).

How are design errors calculated?

Eligibility Status	Vulnerability Status	
	Vulnerable	Not Vulnerable
Eligible	Correctly included	Design inclusion error
Not Eligible	Design exclusion error	Correctly excluded

Calculations Example

	Vulnerable	Not Vulnerable
Eligible	40	10
Not Eligible	30	20

Inclusion error: $10/(40+10)*100 = 20\%$

Exclusion error: $30/(40+30)*100 = 43\%$

TARGETING ERRORS AT THE IMPLEMENTATION STAGE

Definitions	
Targeting Implementation	Implementation exclusion error – The proportion of the affected population who meet the defined criteria for targeting and prioritization but do not receive benefits. This type of error implies that during programme implementation, individuals/households were incorrectly excluded.
	Implementation inclusion error – The proportion of the affected population who do not meet the defined criteria for targeting and prioritization but receive benefits. This type of error implies that during programme implementation, individuals/households were incorrectly included.

Since they occur during programme implementation, targeting implementation errors can be primarily measured **quantitatively** in the monitoring phase (when actual beneficiary selection can be compared against eligibility criteria), but they can be mitigated by carefully planning and conducting the targeting exercise

alongside cooperating partners³ and the communities, and by setting up a robust monitoring system.

Implementation errors should be measured **after each registration or distribution cycle** – typically **quarterly** or **biannually**, depending on the frequency of distributions – to allow timely correction of operational issues.

Involving cooperating partners in reviewing and responding to implementation errors is critical.

CPs should receive clear training on eligibility criteria, beneficiary list management, and how to apply targeting protocols consistently.

To accurately calculate implementation errors, PDM exercises must be designed to include both the **outcome indicators** or **indicators used in the vulnerability framework**, the **eligibility criteria** used to identify and select the beneficiaries, and a **sample of both beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries**.

Including these elements is essential to calculate the implementation exclusion errors. However, if a sample of non-beneficiaries cannot be included due to cost constraints or programmatic decisions, then only the **implementation inclusion error** can be calculated. If the eligibility criteria used to select beneficiaries are not included at all, then neither the inclusion nor the exclusion implementation errors can be calculated.

³ In line with the Targeting Assurance Framework, it is recommended to ensure segregation of duties among CPs.

How are implementation errors calculated?

Assistance Status	Eligibility Status	
	Eligible	Not Eligible
Assisted	Correctly included	Implementation inclusion error
Not Assisted	Implementation exclusion error	Correctly excluded

Calculations Example

	Eligible	Not Eligible
Assisted	900	350
Not Assisted	100	350

Inclusion error: $350/(900+350)*100 = 28\%$

Exclusion error: $100/(900+100)*100 = 10\%$

ERROR THRESHOLDS AND KEY CONSIDERATIONS

Ideal thresholds for targeting errors do not have a universally fixed value. They depend on a range of factors, including the context, the objectives of the targeting programme, the quality and availability of data, and the resources at hand. In practice, achieving zero targeting errors is extremely challenging due to the inherent complexities in assessing vulnerability and data limitations.

Rather than aiming for zero error, WFP prioritizes **minimizing targeting errors** through people-centered and evidence-based methodologies, supported by regular monitoring, evaluation, and continuous improvement.

As a general rule of thumb, design inclusion and exclusion errors are typically observed in the range of **5–20%** across Country Offices (COs). However, these benchmarks are **not prescriptive** and need to be **adapted** to the local context. Instead of relying on one threshold, COs are encouraged at the design stage of the targeting or prioritization process to identify **threshold bandwidth** for both design and implementation errors. COs must document the rationale behind their selection thresholds and link each error scenario with a

specific action plan (e.g., redesigning eligibility criteria, expanding the caseload, or improving CPs' oversight). They should be interpreted in light of specific programmatic objectives, the operational context, and data quality.

This bandwidth serves as a reference for evaluating whether the results of the targeting process are acceptable or require adjustment. It consists of:

- **A lower threshold:** This represents the ideal or minimum acceptable level of error, often close to zero, indicating highly accurate targeting.
- **An upper threshold:** This defines the maximum tolerable level of error, beyond which the targeting criteria may need to be revised or justified due to operational constraints. Importantly, this upper threshold can never be equal to or above 50%, otherwise the targeting process would be equal to random selection.

Establishing this bandwidth in advance allows for more structured, evidence-based decision-making once the targeting design errors are calculated, helping COs balance technical accuracy with

practical feasibility. What matters most is the presence of a clear decision-making framework when assessing and interpreting targeting errors. Although not exhaustive, the table below offers a

simple reference framework that each CO can tailor to align with local context, operational challenges, and practical limitations during the targeting process.

TARGETING DESIGN ERRORS			
Inclusion Error	Exclusion Error	Interpretation & Action	
<= Lower Threshold	<= Lower Threshold	Interpretation	The vulnerability framework and eligibility criteria correctly identify the most vulnerable household.
		Action	The targeting design fits vulnerability patterns, and it can be implemented.
<= Lower Threshold	> Lower Threshold and <= Upper Threshold	Interpretation	The targeting design fits vulnerability patterns, but the planned beneficiary caseload may be too small considering the overall vulnerability.
		Action	If feasible, reconsider the caseload allocation; otherwise, the targeting design is good to move forward.
<= Lower Threshold	> Upper Threshold	Interpretation	The targeting design is not sensitive enough to the vulnerability of the targeted population.
		Action	Repeat the targeting design analysis to ensure it fits the vulnerability framework.
> Lower Threshold and <= Upper Threshold	<= Lower Threshold	Interpretation	The targeting design fits vulnerability patterns, but it may include eligibility criteria that do not correctly identify the most vulnerable, or the beneficiaries' caseload may be too large compared to the actual vulnerability.
		Action	If feasible, reconsider the caseload allocation; otherwise, the targeting design is good to move forward.
> Lower Threshold and <= Upper Threshold	> Lower Threshold and <= Upper Threshold	Interpretation	The targeting design may suffer from incorrect eligibility criteria or a mismatch between overall vulnerability and caseload allocation.
		Action	If feasible, reconsider the caseload allocation and design; otherwise, ensure a thorough community validation process.
> Lower Threshold and <= Upper Threshold	> Upper Threshold	Interpretation	The targeting design likely underestimates vulnerability, risking inclusion of less vulnerable households and exclusion of those in need
		Action	Reassess the eligibility criteria against the assessment data and validate with community feedback.
> Upper Threshold	<= Lower Threshold	Interpretation	The targeting design is not sensitive enough to the vulnerability of the targeted population.
		Action	Repeat the targeting design analysis to ensure it fits the vulnerability framework.
> Upper Threshold	> Lower Threshold and <= Upper Threshold	Interpretation	The targeting design does not match vulnerability trends and may be driven by poorly calibrated criteria.
		Action	Reassess eligibility thresholds and targeting criteria to ensure alignment with vulnerability data.
> Upper Threshold	> Upper Threshold	Interpretation	The targeting design does not effectively identify the most vulnerable.
		Action	Fully review the targeting design and vulnerability framework. Potentially re-evaluate the targeting methodology and/or switch to blanket.

TARGETING IMPLEMENTATION ERRORS			
Inclusion Error	Exclusion Error	Interpretation & Action	
<= Lower Threshold	<= Lower Threshold	Interpretation	The implementation process was well done, the eligibility criteria correctly identify the most vulnerable.
		Action	No adjustments required.
<= Lower Threshold	> Lower Threshold and <= Upper Threshold	Interpretation	The implementation process was well done, but there may have been issues with the application of the eligibility criteria.
		Action	Review the PDM data and update the targeting design, review/cross-check internal beneficiary list creation processes.
<= Lower Threshold	> Upper Threshold	Interpretation	The targeting process was not effectively implemented, the eligibility criteria may have been poorly understood or inconsistently applied.
		Action	Evaluate the ability of CPs to conduct the targeting process or re-evaluate the precision of the eligibility criteria.
> Lower Threshold and <= Upper Threshold	<= Lower Threshold	Interpretation	The eligibility criteria correctly identified the most vulnerable, but the process had issues, such as misinterpretation of the criteria or manipulation of the final lists.
		Action	Conduct a re-evaluation of the targeting process, re-train the CPs, to reduce the chance of manipulation during the next round.
> Lower Threshold and <= Upper Threshold	> Lower Threshold and <= Upper Threshold	Interpretation	The targeting implementation may not have been applied consistently or transparently, leading to a misalignment between intended and actual beneficiary selection.
		Action	Review the implementation process for inconsistencies or deviations. Strengthen field-level guidance and re-train CPs to improve application of eligibility criteria.
> Lower Threshold and <= Upper Threshold	> Upper Threshold	Interpretation	The targeting process was not effectively implemented, and the eligibility criteria may have been poorly understood or inconsistently applied.
		Action	Reassess the eligibility criteria against the assessment data and validate with community feedback.
> Upper Threshold	<= Lower Threshold	Interpretation	The targeting process was not effectively implemented, the eligibility criteria may have been poorly understood or inconsistently applied.
		Action	A full investigation of the process is required due to risk of potential undue influence. Evaluate the ability of CPs to conduct the targeting process or re-evaluate the precision of the eligibility criteria to correctly identify the most vulnerable.
> Upper Threshold	> Lower Threshold and <= Upper Threshold	Interpretation	The targeting process was not effectively implemented, the eligibility criteria may have been poorly understood or inconsistently applied.
		Action	Conduct a comprehensive review of the implementation process. Re-train CPs on eligibility criteria and strengthen supervision mechanisms to ensure consistent and accurate application.
> Upper Threshold	> Upper Threshold	Interpretation	The targeting process experienced issues during the implementation.
		Action	A full re-evaluation of the targeting implementation and the IDM processes is required.

LIMITATIONS OF ERROR ANALYSIS DURING TARGETING

Targeting errors, while useful for assessing performance, do not fully capture the nuances of vulnerability or the diverse needs of affected populations. These errors are closely tied to the quality and scope of available data and may overlook the effectiveness of other aspects of the targeting strategy. For this reason, targeting approaches must incorporate **feedback from affected communities**.

The development of targeting criteria should include validation through community consultations.⁴ After an initial error analysis, consultations may lead communities to suggest adjustments to the proposed criteria. While such changes might increase measured errors, they can **ultimately improve the relevance and fairness of the criteria**. This process supports the achievement of a reasonable and acceptable level of targeting accuracy, ensuring that assistance reaches those most in need in a timely and equitable manner.

The process of community validation goes hand-in-hand with the design of the targeting approach and the definition of acceptable error thresholds. However, under no circumstances should community consultations justify error rates exceeding 50%, as this would undermine the fairness and overall effectiveness of the targeting process.

UNDERSTANDING TARGETING ERRORS IN A SITUATION OF PRIORITISATION

When funding is insufficient to meet assessed needs, country offices need to make difficult prioritization decisions. In prioritization contexts, the goal is to identify and assist the most vulnerable households within the broader vulnerable population. As a result, **some vulnerable households will inevitably be excluded**, not due to flaws in the targeting approach, but because of **limited funding or programmatic decisions**. These households are considered excluded by design and should not be included in the calculation of targeting errors.

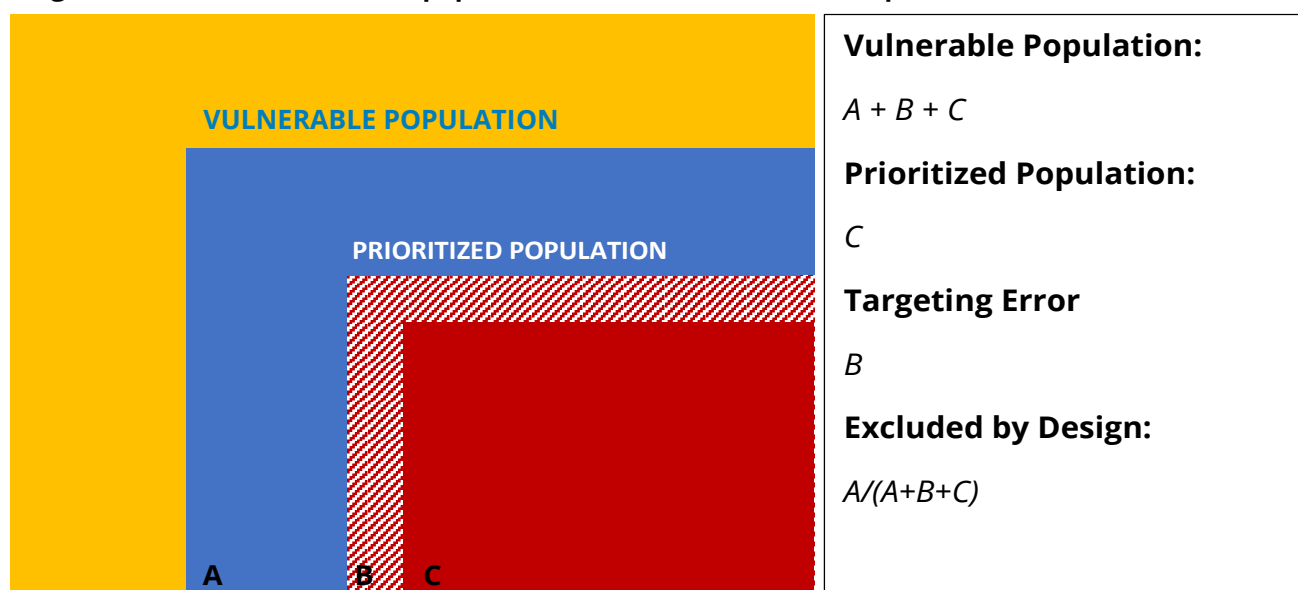
Excluding these cases from error calculations helps maintain the relevance and accuracy of targeting analysis, aligning it with the intended design and objectives of the prioritization strategy. However, it remains important to identify and report on households excluded by design, particularly for fundraising and advocacy purposes, as this information highlights unmet needs and can inform future resource mobilization efforts.⁵

Relying exclusively on targeting errors to assess the quality of a targeting approach has limitations, as it may not provide a comprehensive understanding of the effectiveness of the approach.

⁴ Community consultations are the process of validating the targeting or prioritization design with affected communities, i.e., reviewing the eligibility criteria in light of contextual realities. This process is different from community-based targeting.

⁵ To ensure transparency, facilitate data analysis, and enable future follow-up or retargeting as resources allow, it is recommended to generate a variable to identify households that would be eligible for assistance according to the targeting design, as well as one for those who have been prioritized.

Figure 1. Overview of assisted population and error calculation in prioritization scenarios



The figure above visually depicts how to interpret errors in the context of prioritization. The total vulnerable population consists of all groups: $A + B + C$. However, due to funding cuts or other programmatic constraints, only $B + C$ were intended to be assisted by the WFP.

- **Group C** was correctly reached.
- **Group B** should have been included, but was not – this is the targeting exclusion error and can be calculated as a proportion as $B/(B+C)$
- **Group A** was intentionally excluded – this is considered excluded by design, and its proportion is calculated as $A/(A+B+C)$

To summarize, **distinguishing between households excluded by design and those missed due to targeting errors is essential** for accuracy in prioritization contexts. Exclusion errors refer specifically to households that should have received assistance based on the programme's criteria but were not reached, while inclusion errors occur when households that do not meet the criteria are mistakenly included.

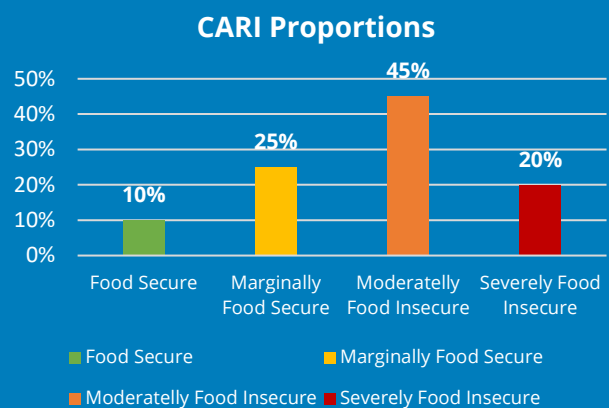
REPORTING ON TARGETING ERRORS

Reporting on targeting errors is not only a documentation requirement, but also a critical learning tool to improve future decision-making. Documenting errors (including background, interpretation and related risks in certain contexts) helps identify systemic issues, refine targeting approaches, and ensure that corrective actions are taken. It is recommended to include error reporting into **official assurance documentation** (such as SOPs or methodological notes) and the **targeting risk register**, to ensure that these issues are formally acknowledged, monitored over time, and addressed through structured mitigation measures.

By excluding households deliberately left out due to funding or programmatic limits from error calculations, we can ensure that the analysis remains focused on the actual effectiveness of targeting, beyond resource constraints.

TARGETING ERROR CALCULATION AND PROGRAMME IMPLICATIONS – EXAMPLE

Below, we present an example of how to calculate and evaluate targeting design errors, using the formulas and decision matrix described earlier.



In this case, Country A has conducted a comprehensive vulnerability assessment to inform its targeting approach. The assessment incorporated the full CARI module, which the Country Office (CO) identified as the most appropriate vulnerability framework for the context. Based on the CARI results, 65% of the population is classified as vulnerable (moderately and severely food insecure combined), while the remaining 35% is considered non-vulnerable. Following the development of eligibility criteria, the CO applied these criteria to the population dataset to estimate design inclusion and design exclusion errors. Before starting the analysis, and considering the operational challenges of collecting data in the field, the CO defined the following threshold bandwidth:

- **Lower threshold:** 15% — errors at or below this level are considered acceptable and indicate the design is ready for implementation.
- **Upper threshold:** 25% — errors above this level are not considered acceptable and would prompt a redesign of the methodology or re-evaluation of the targeting approach.

The goal is to estimate potential design inclusion and design exclusion errors, helping to evaluate whether the criteria appropriately align with actual vulnerability.⁶

	Vulnerable	Non-Vulnerable
Eligible	900 (A)	280 (C)
Non-Eligible	134 (B)	600

- **Design Exclusion Error** = $B / (A + B) = 134 / (900 + 134) \approx 12.9\%$
- **Design Inclusion Error** = $C / (A + C) = 280 / (900 + 280) \approx 23.7\%$

INTERPRETATION

- The design exclusion error of 12.9% is below the minimum threshold of 15%, suggesting that the targeting design performs well in capturing the most vulnerable households. This indicates the eligibility criteria are effective in identifying those most in need.
- The design inclusion error of 23.7% falls between the defined thresholds (15–25%). This means that while the error is not alarmingly high, it may warrant a closer review. Some of the eligibility criteria may allow non-vulnerable households to qualify for assistance, which could reduce precision. The CO could explore the use of specific exclusion criteria. However, the error remains within an acceptable range, and the design could be considered valid with minor refinements or additional justification based on programmatic needs.

In this scenario, the CO is recommended to proceed with the agreed targeting design. To strengthen its validity and acceptance, it is also recommended that the CO conducts consultations with affected communities to validate the eligibility criteria and ensure they comprehensively reflect local perceptions of vulnerability.

⁶ At this stage, communities have not been invited to validate the identified criteria, and the error analysis is done purely after the data-driven process.



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