



ANALYSIS, PLANNING & PERFORMANCE



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Concerns Regarding the Use of Outcome Indicators During the Targeting Process

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This note outlines WFP’s position on the use of outcome indicators in identifying beneficiaries for assistance.

While useful for monitoring trends and evaluating program effectiveness, outcome indicators are not suitable for targeting at the household level. These indicators reflect temporary conditions, are influenced by recent aid or seasonality, and lack reliability at the household level.

Instead, targeting should be based on stable vulnerability indicators—such as household demographics, access to resources, and recent shocks—identified through data analysis and validated with communities.

This approach aligns with WFP’s operational guidance and ensures assistance is fair, timely, and effective. Outcome indicators should remain tools for monitoring and evaluation, not for direct selection of beneficiaries.

INTRODUCTION

WFP uses outcome indicators to prioritize geographic areas or monitor the impact of interventions. However, to identify beneficiaries, it relies on vulnerability criteria that are statistically strong predictors of vulnerability or have been validated through community consultations, as determined by the programmatic objectives. This aligns with the [WFP Targeting and Prioritization Operational Guidance](#) and the [Targeting Assurance Framework](#), which state that targeting should be informed by factors that cause food insecurity, rather than the symptoms of food insecurity at a single point in time.

As a WFP evaluation observed¹ most of the traditional targeting literature is geared toward persistent outcomes (e.g., poverty) that are

potentially less useful for humanitarian interventions that aim to address transient outcomes, such as food insecurity. For this reason, WFP's targeting methods must account for the transient and rapidly evolving nature of food security. Outcome indicators², like the Food Consumption Score (FCS), are moving targets and insufficient on their own to drive fair beneficiary selection compared to using more stable underlying vulnerabilities.

The Assessment and Targeting Unit (APP-FA) has drafted this note to clarify WFP's position on using outcome indicators as criteria for the direct and final identification of beneficiaries during the targeting process. This practice has been observed in several Country Offices (COs) and has been suggested by donors and other stakeholders.



¹ Garcia, J., McCollum, K., Dunsch, F. A., Guariso, A., Holmlund, M., Karbala, G., Degla, S. A., & Heirman, J. L. (2024, June 17). *Optimizing targeting of humanitarian food assistance in the DRC: Precision and coverage*. WFP Evaluation. <https://wfp-evaluation.medium.com/optimizing-targeting-of-humanitarian-food-assistance-in-the-drc-precision-and-coverage-29c6d39d2ee9Medium>

² Outcome indicators include the Food Consumption Score (FCS), the reduced Coping Strategies Index (rCSI), and the Livelihood Coping Strategies Index (LCSI), among others. These indicators are typically associated with the symptoms of food insecurity rather than its causes. For instance, while the number of meals consumed daily is not a standard outcome indicator, it can still serve as a proxy indicator reflecting the severity of food insecurity.

DESIGNING ELIGIBILITY CRITERIA FOR PROGRAMME INCLUSION

CHARACTERISTICS OF GOOD ELIGIBILITY CRITERIA

In general, eligibility criteria should be:

- **Evidence-based:** Informed by vulnerability analysis.
- **Sensitive:** Correctly include the people most in need and exclude those in less need of assistance.
- **Specific:** Formulated clearly and unambiguously.
- **Feasible:** Given the time, resources, and capacities available.
- **Acceptable:** To the beneficiaries and their communities.
- **Verifiable:** So that targeting decisions can be checked and challenged by monitoring staff or community members.

By adhering to these principles, we can ensure that the eligibility criteria are robust, fair, and effective in identifying and assisting the most vulnerable populations. This approach not only enhances the credibility and transparency of the targeting process but also fosters trust and cooperation among all stakeholders involved.

Eligibility criteria should initially be derived from needs assessments using statistical analysis. This can be done by running cross-tabulations or regression analysis to identify statistically significant relationships between potential eligibility criteria and the vulnerability framework of interest. Once a list of possible eligibility criteria is drafted, it will need to be validated through community consultations.

Partners and other organizations that are more established in the communities than WFP may be better positioned to provide essential information and contribute to the development of communication approaches that are acceptable to the community.

Establishing or tapping into multi-stakeholder coordination bodies can help further refine these communication strategies to ensure all members of the community, even those who may be traditionally more marginalized, are aware of the targeting exercise.

Discussions with partners knowledgeable about the local context are crucial. If possible, protection, gender, and conflict advisers should be consulted to analyze potential protection risks associated with the eligibility criteria and identify possible mitigation measures to ensure that the most vulnerable and food-insecure groups are not left behind.

Criteria for inclusion in a programme should be based on characteristics of the vulnerable population that are observable and can be assessed without bias.

WHY OUTCOME INDICATORS SHOULD NOT BE USED AS DIRECT ELIGIBILITY CRITERIA

Using outcome indicators as targeting criteria can be problematic. These indicators often reflect past conditions and coping mechanisms derived from a sample population at a specific point in time and might be outdated at the time of targeting.³

Additionally, they are rarely available and up to date for the entire population, which makes them unreliable for ongoing eligibility determination and potential further prioritization⁴, leading to misallocation of resources through incorrect identification of beneficiaries.

In rare cases where targeting is conducted concurrently with data collection or through a census approach, it is important to consider the sustainability of the targeting approach. While outcome indicators at that moment may offer an accurate and current snapshot of food insecurity, relying solely on them may not support future replications of the process. If it is likely that targeting will need to be repeated, conducting a dedicated targeting analysis and identifying robust proxy indicators is preferable. This ensures that the targeting process remains consistent, scalable, and less resource-intensive over time.

Moreover, outcome indicators are highly dynamic and can fluctuate over time due to factors such as seasonality, household-specific events, and the provision of assistance. This variability makes it

impossible to consistently verify beneficiary selection based on these indicators.

Furthermore, outcome indicators are crucial for monitoring and validating the outcomes of targeting decisions. If they are used as direct eligibility criteria, they cannot serve this function. Additionally, when eligibility criteria are communicated to affected populations (in line with good [Accountability to Affected Populations \(AAP\)](#) practice), households might be more inclined to underreport outcome indicators to qualify for assistance.

Although it may seem like a way to reduce the complexity of the targeting process, using outcome indicators as selection criteria potentially undermines the goal of providing timely and accurate assistance to those most in need. The adoption of this methodology by various COs raises concerns about targeting effectiveness and appropriateness in the contexts where this is done.

To conclude, while socioeconomic and food security outcome indicators are valuable for understanding and validating eligibility criteria, they should not be used as the criteria themselves. Country Offices are encouraged to stick to the WFP Targeting Operational Note and the Targeting Assurance Framework documents as references for the identification of eligibility criteria. This ensures that the targeting process remains fair, accurate, and effective in reaching those most in need.

Outcome indicators measure the status of a household's food security (consumption or hunger level) rather than its intrinsic vulnerability.

³ For example, the FCS uses a 7-day recall period and lacks data on the quantity of food items consumed. As a result, basing household selection solely on the FCS restricts the validity of the targeting exercise to that brief window.

AN EXAMPLE OF WHY USING THE FCS IS NOT A SUITABLE TARGETING INDICATOR

The FCS is a composite score of diet diversity and frequency over the past 7 days, classifying households as having poor, borderline, or acceptable food consumption.

FCS is widely used by WFP and partners to monitor food security trends and assess severity, but it is not designed as a criterion for selecting beneficiaries at the household level. In targeting, the focus should be on indicators that predict who is likely to need assistance, not just those who have low consumption at a single point in time.

Below is an example of how the guidelines provided above can be applied to an example of the FCS being used as an outcome indicator and why it should be avoided:

- **Influenced by assistance and seasonality**

Using FCS as an eligibility criterion could create paradoxes. If a family's food consumption improves because they received aid, their FCS might rise above the cutoff, and if FCS were the targeting tool, they could be deemed no longer eligible, potentially losing assistance and slipping back into food insecurity. Similarly, FCS scores tend to be higher right after a harvest and much lower in the lean season; targeting only those with low FCS at one time might ignore those who will become food-insecure in the next season. Outcome indicators are thus **volatile**; basing targeting on them might result in constantly changing beneficiary lists or missing those who are one shock away from severe hunger. Agencies instead prefer more **stable indicators of vulnerability** (livelihood, assets, demographic risks) that indicate a household's propensity to suffer food gaps, rather than just whether they ate well last week.

- **Reflect current status, not underlying vulnerability**

Outcome indicators like the FCS capture a household's **immediate situation**, which can fluctuate due to temporary factors such as recent aid or a poor harvest. A low FCS indicates current food insecurity but may reflect a recent shock rather than chronic vulnerability. By the time a household's FCS is low enough to qualify for assistance, they may already be in crisis. This makes **targeting based on outcomes reactive rather than preventive**, and less effective at identifying those who would benefit most from early support.

- **Designed for population-level analysis, not individual targeting**

The FCS was originally developed to monitor food security trends across regions and populations, not to identify which specific households should receive aid. WFP uses it to assess food-insecure areas and inform broad program decisions, not for pinpointing beneficiaries. Applying it at the household level can therefore lead to inaccuracies and misallocation.

- **Ethical and practical concerns**

Relying on outcome indicators for targeting may create perverse incentives, where households might be tempted to reduce food intake or report worse conditions to qualify for assistance. Moreover, it conflicts with humanitarian principles: WFP aims to prevent severe food insecurity, not wait until people fall into it. Outcome indicators are better suited for early warning systems or high-level resource allocation, while targeting should be based on indicators of vulnerability that predict future risk rather than measure present hardship.

ANNEX I – EXAMPLES OF ELIGIBILITY CRITERIA

Below is a **non-exhaustive** list of socio-demographic and socio-economic eligibility criteria identified in past targeting analysis:

- The household head is a single woman with children under 5 years old
- The household head is a minor (under 18 years old)
- The household head is an elderly person with no other adults to support them
- Every member in the household is a dependent
- The household dependency ratio is above 2
- The household head has a disability that prevents them from earning an income
- The household head has a chronic illness that prevents them from earning an income
- The household is an IDP/refugee/recent returnee
- The household head is illiterate or has only a basic education
- The household is hosting an IDP/refugee/returnee family
- The household size is twice the size of an average household
- The household is composed of only one member, and it is an elderly person
- The household head is a single woman with a child under 5 years old
- The household head is a single woman with more than one child under 5 years old
- There are pregnant or lactating women or girls in the household
- The household has no access to safe drinking water sources
- The household has no access to electricity, not even a simple phone/torch
- The household does not have access to safe cooking methods
- The household lives in an unsafe dwelling
- The household has no access to safe latrines
- The household crowding index is above 3 (meaning that at least three members are sharing one room, excluding latrine and kitchen)
- The household has experienced recent natural/conflict/violent shocks (in the past 3 to 6 months)
- The household has no access to a market to sell or purchase the required food
- The household has no access to land or livestock



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