World Food Programme

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Targeting & Prioritization in Fragile and Conflict-Affected Contexts

A step-by-step technical guidance

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Targeting and prioritization (T&P) is central to WFP's efforts to ensure programme quality and uphold global assurance standards. In an environment of shrinking resources, evidence-based prioritization enables effective and transparent decisions on how assistance is allocated to the most vulnerable people when needs exceed available funding[1]. However, implementing these processes in fragile and conflict-affected contexts introduces significant risks, alongside difficult trade-offs, which can undermine programme effectiveness and fuel friction. **Embedding conflict-sensitive approaches throughout the T&P process is therefore essential to prevent the creation or exacerbation of conflicts, safeguard humanitarian principles and maintain trust among affected communities.**

WFP's **corporate commitments to Conflict Sensitivity** are rooted in the: Peacebuilding Policy; WFP Conflict Sensitivity Mainstreaming Strategy: WFP Strategic Plan 2026-2029 (mentioning CS as a new cross cutting priority area); and the mandatory CRF Conflict Sensitivity Indicator CC 1.6. This normative framework establishes a clear mandate to embed conflict sensitivity across all programmes and operations. Accordingly, this note aims to ground T&P processes in an **adequate understanding of the context, actors and power dynamics[2].** It builds on the Targeting Operational Guidance, and more recent progress to improve quality and assurance in all operations through the Targeting Assurance Framework and the Technical Note on Targeting and Registration in Emergency Contexts. Targeting being a cross-functional exercise, this note is thus addressed to VAM and all other functions involved in targeting decision-making, with the objective to **limit the potential for targeting decisions to have a negative impact on affected communities or exacerbate existing conflict/tensions**.

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Looking for a step-by-step view of conflict sensitivity risks across the T&P process? Click here and use it to complement targeting risk analysis from the Targeting Assurance Framework.

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Overview of conflict sensitivity

WFP defines Conflict Sensitivity as the ability of an organization to:

- **Understand** the context (including conflict drivers and dynamics, power dynamics between groups, and actors) in the communities WFP operates.

- **Understand** how assistance may interact with the context and create risks of having any unintended negative impact.

- **Adapt programmes** to **minimize negative impacts** and **avoid exacerbating tensions**, while safeguarding impartiality,
- neutrality, community trust and acceptance.

In practice, at the field level, **perceptions matter just as much as reality**. Both must be closely monitored and considered in decision-making to ensure effective and conflict-sensitive programming throughout the T&P cycle.

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[1] For further information on prioritization considerations, please consult Prioritization of Humanitarian Assistance.

[2] More information on how to assess the quality of conflict analysis can be found in the Conflict Sensitivity Indicator CC 1.6

Links between Conflict Sensitivity and Targeting and Prioritization

If CS risks are not carefully considered and managed, T&P processes can unintentionally create or exacerbate conflict through:

- **Perceptions of unfairness and erosion of trust**

  WFP's targeting can fuel exclusion and tensions when community engagement is limited and targeting decisions are misunderstood/cannot be contested. Such frustrations can generate animosity between beneficiary and non-beneficiary groups that can lead to conflict and incitement to violence. WFP must ensure its targeting is contextual and ensure two-way communications (CFM, appeal mechanism, etc.) is in place to address errors.

- **Reinforcement of unfair/unaccepted power structures**

  When WFP consults with community leaders that do not have community support or perpetrate unfair power structures[3], targeting can be seen as partial. Leaders/gatekeepers of deprioritized groups can incite their groups to violence towards those receiving assistance or humanitarians directly. WFP must assess the power structure and incentives before validating targeting processes and criteria with local actors.

- **Disruption of power (im)balances**

  WFP's assistance can shift local power dynamics, potentially creating instability. Power brokers may react to protect their interests in more or less aggressive ways[4]. WFP must avoid being seen as challenging power structures that could fuel conflict.

- **Contribution to war economies**

  WFP's assistance and other resources may be diverted into war economies or illicit activities or be taxed by non-state actors. This heightens the risk of fuelling and prolonging conflicts. WFP must ensure targeting for its programmes is mindful of these economic forces so that the assistance reaches the desired beneficiaries.

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[3] These risks grow when access is limited or when programmes rely heavily on intermediaries: local elites or gatekeepers have more room to interfere with beneficiary selection, especially when community-based approaches lack WFP oversight.

[4] This can be mitigated through community and leaders' engagement throughout the targeting process: map power dynamics and incentives before engaging power brokers constructively to explain the targeting rationale clearly and early. CFM must be implemented early to rapidly capture these risks. The design and communication should highlight how WFP's assistance brings value to the entire community, not only the targeted group.

Targeting and prioritization process, conflict sensitivity risks and mitigation measures

The table on page 5 to 8 outlines detailed steps in the Targeting and Prioritization (T&P) process, the conflict-sensitivity risks that may arise at each stage, and practical mitigation measures[5] **The mitigation measures can generally be grouped in these main categories:**

	1.	**Understand the context –** especially conflict and power dynamics – before and throughout the T&P process.
	2.	**Adapt T&P methodology, processes and criteria** based on this understanding.
	3.	**Engage the right partners – authorities, CPs – in the right way**, based on this understanding.
	a.	WFP activities involve significant resources, power and legitimacy/status. We need to ensure these partners will use these appropriately and avoid exacerbating conflict dynamics, tensions, vulnerabilities, exclusion. This requires: (i) selecting appropriate partners (ii) ensuring effective segregation of duties and (iii) putting in place adequate oversight (CFM, verification, monitoring, etc.)
	b.	Leverage local organisations and existing knowledge to understand and monitor the context and respond adequately to risks.
	4.	**Monitor community and conflict dynamics and related risks** continuously, capture lessons learned and adjust targeting accordingly.
	5.	**Ensure effective two-way communication,** as appropriate and safe, with transparency towards communities and authorities.

The following is a non-exhaustive list of risks and mitigation measures:

COs must reflect on their specific context.

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[5] In the consideration of risks and mitigation measures, COs should also be mindful of capacity, access constraints or other context-specific limitations to implementation.

T&P Sub-Step	Conflict Sensitivity Risks	Mitigation Measures Examples
NEEDS ASSESSMENT AND CONTEXT ANALYSIS		
Analysis of programme objectives, budgets, and targeting risks	• **Exacerbation of conflict-sensitivity risks,** when the context and associated risks are insufficiently understood.	• [I-CARA](#)[7], [CACSRA](#)[8], or lighter context scans leveraged to understand the contextual risks • T&P risks related to conflict sensitivity captured and followed up on in the CO and VAM specific risk registers
Identification of vulnerability frameworks	• **Conflict dynamics and tensions are not considered and support to social cohesion is not included as an objective of the programme,** when vulnerability framework solely focused on food security[9] or favours specific groups (historically more vulnerable).	• Vulnerability framework selected allows for holistic vulnerability assessment • Vulnerability frameworks reflect changes in conflict dynamics (e.g., displacements, territorial changes, market disruptions)
Assessment and analysis	• **Inability to assess conflict sensitivity with collected evidence**, when quantitative data collected (including for national social registries) is not inclusive of variables informing on conflict sensitivity aspects.	• Qualitative exercise (FGDs, KIIs) informed the design of the quantitative tools to include conflict-sensitive variables • WFP and CP staff trained on inclusion, dialogue and conflict transformation • Quantitative assessments triangulated with the [ICARA analysis framework](#) to include qualitative insights[10] on conflict dynamics in the analysis • Local organizations that can inform on contextual evolution and point out (real or perceived) mistakes, biases and risks consulted for a balanced localization • Organisations specialised in conflict-sensitivity consulted • WFP and CP staff trained on identifying and communicating contextual dynamics and evolutions

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[7] The Integrated Cross-Cutting Context Analysis and Risk Assessment (I-CARA) is a WFP framework designed to provide a holistic understanding of the contexts in which food and nutrition insecurity arises, integrating insights from protection (including disability and indigenous peoples), gender, and conflict sensitivity perspectives. It combines a two-step methodology—context analysis to identify underlying issues and operational risk assessment to pinpoint and mitigate potential harms—ensuring WFP's interventions are inclusive, do no harm, and effectively empower vulnerable communities.

[8] Conflict Analysis and Conflict Sensitivity Risk Assessment (CACSRA). A conflict analysis is an examination of the various levels and types of conflicts that exist in a given context. A conflict sensitivity risks assessment looks at how WFP programming could become caught up in conflict dynamics.

[9] For further discussion on this topic, please consult Inclusive Targeting and Prioritization Processes.

[10] Qualitative insights can come from existing analyses, communities, local associations and civil society and other key informants.

TARGETING DESIGN

Deciding whether targeting is appropriate	• **Reinforcement of existing conflicts and identity-based divisions from the decision to target**, when targeting does not mitigate risks of perceived unfairness, weakened social cohesion, and aid becoming a conflict resource. • **Contribution to war economies and/or exacerbation of conflict dynamics, tensions, vulnerabilities, exclusion**, when the decision to target does not assess if (i) the right partners, (ii) effective segregation of duties and (iii) appropriate oversight are in place or possible.	• Assessment and context analysis results used to determine if targeting is appropriate depending on how vulnerability and conflict-sensitivity present in the population • Cross-functional actors from the TWG[11] engaged and accountable for the decision to target • Stakeholder analysis performed to evaluate power and legitimacy/status of potential partners to involve in targeting • Decision to implement or not targeting justified and documented, highlighting reasoning from a conflict-sensitive and assurance standpoint
Selecting the targeting methodology	Each T&P methodology has its own specific CS risks and may unintentionally favour certain groups over others: • **Community-based | Heightened risks of undue influence**, when local elites and power authorities are involved. • **Self-targeting | Increased risk of discrimination**, when habit or freedom to express itself openly differ between groups. • **Status-based | Heightened risks of conflict,** when vulnerable people of other status are excluded. • **Data-driven methods | Social cohesion weakened, and rumours fuelled,** when complex data models are badly communicated.	• Assessment and analysis results used to select the best methodology in line with technical, managerial, logistical considerations and oversight needs and capacity • Pros and cons of each methodology assessed with partners, and reviewed by the TWG for endorsement • Segregation of duty and CFM imbedded into the targeting method design to limit risks of undue influence • Mapping performed to identify risks of undue influence across the process, and legitimate checks and balances implemented accordingly • Dialogue, negotiations and rotational participation in targeting committees considered to limit undue influence
Identification of eligibility criteria	• **Criteria ill-adapted to the context**, when power and conflict dynamics are not considered in criteria selection. • **Criteria reinforcing existing unfair social hierarchies or mirroring conflict cleavages**, when undue influence (e.g., local authorities, gate keepers or armed actors) plays in criteria selection.	• Criteria are identified based on available evidence, and are sensitive, specific, feasible, acceptable and verifiable[12] (not generic and/or the same for all contexts) • Criteria are context-specific, and targeting process adaptable to context shifts (e.g., conflict escalation, displacements) • CFM and monitoring insights considered as evidence for defining/reviewing eligibility criteria

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[11] TWG should include RAM/VAM as well as programme colleagues knowledgeable on conflict sensitivity, gender and protection. The TWG is chaired by management for accountability.

[12] For further information on targeting eligibility criteria requirements, please consult Targeting advisory – issue 1.

Validating the targeting methods and criteria	• **Misunderstanding of vulnerability structure and unintended strengthening of local power hierarchies,** when criteria presented without validation are misunderstood and/or aligned to conflict identities. • **Vested interest benefiting from status quo or other (including conflict) actors attempting to benefit their network,** when WFP's collaboration with stakeholders does not mitigate risks of undue influence • **Armed groups or parallel governance structures legitimized,** when WFP engages with de facto authorities to validate targeting methodologies • **CP selected include organisations linked to conflict actors,** when WFP does not carefully select its targeting partners.	• Community consultations on the targeting method and criteria conducted with representatives of a diversity of relevant groups • Criteria revised following community consultations • WFP and CP staff trained on neutral communication • Choice of authorities to work with is based on (i) official status and mandates, (ii) traditional functions and (iii) community-level legitimacy of each actor (assessment) • Choice of other actors to work with based on (i) competencies, (ii) networks and relationships, and (iii) community-level legitimacy

TARGETING IMPLEMENTATION

Implementation of appeal mechanisms	• **Certain groups are restricted, marginalized or barriers (digital, literacy) are reinforced,** when accessible and effective appeal channels are not set up. • **Fear of retaliation or other negative impact prevent communities from appealing**, especially when appeals are processed through local committees.	• Context-specific and accessible appeal channels are set-up • Information sessions with communities conducted on the use and duration of appeals • Roles and responsibilities for appeal management foster safety, trust, and open reporting • Formal appeal response plan established
Identification / profiling of beneficiaries	• **Risks of manipulation and biased enumeration**, when local gatekeepers can interfere in the beneficiary lists and/or control who is present during identification.	• Formal oversight mechanisms established ensuring WFP engagement in the process (and relevant partners) • Segregation of duties ensured across T&P steps
Verification of beneficiaries	• **Groups or households intimidated or physically prevented from participating in eligibility verification**, when influential actors control who is allowed to attend eligibility verification sessions or accompany teams on verification visits (verification outcome bias). • **Manipulation of verification lists**, when actors beyond WFP are involved in the process.	• Roles and responsibilities established to foster safety, privacy, trust, and honest data collection and reporting • Formal oversight mechanisms established, with WFP as the primary focal point of the verification process

Registration of beneficiaries (SCOPE)	• **Exacerbation of conflict sensitivity risks**, when registration locations or lack of privacy expose people to harm, and/or if the registration set up favours certain groups over others (e.g., highly mobile groups, distance to registration centre, gender considerations, physical ability).	• Data protection practices are implemented[13] • Registration practices aligned to IDM standards[14] • Fairness and access considered in registration practices

MONITORING AND EVALUATION

Monitoring	• **Impact of WFP's targeting on conflicts continued (fueling tensions and grievances),** when power, conflict and social cohesion dynamics are not monitored and T&P adjustments are delayed.	• Conflict-sensitivity aspects included in regular process and outcome monitoring[15] • Relevant findings related to conflict-sensitivity shared and discussed with the TWG to inform T&P adjustments

ACROSS THE PROCESS

Community engagement (CE), CFM and communication	• **Deepening misunderstanding, mistrust and perceptions of bias,** when conflict-analysis is not performed, community perspectives are not included and marginalized groups are excluded from community engagement strategy. • **WFP's reputational risks and conflict risks increased,** when functional and accessible CFMs are not available, or do not allow for timely escalation of sensitive reports.	• Formal community engagement action plan and communication strategy implemented and timely updated • Functional and accessible CFM in place[16]

COs should ensure that risks and mitigation measures are reflected in regular risk management procedures[17]. A risk register template is available to guide COs throughout this process: COs are encouraged to adapt the potential impact and likelihood to the specific cross-cutting nature of conflict-sensitive targeting risks[18]. A detailed VAM/Targeting risk register should be maintained, with most important risks also included in the CO's corporate risk register.

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[13] https://unsceb.org/privacy-principles

[14] For further information on registration practices and scenarios, please consult Targeting and Registration in Emergencies

[15] See CRF cross-cutting indicator 6.1 and ED Circular on Minimum Monitoring Requirements (MMRs) and Community Feedback (CFM) Mechanisms Standards in WFP Country Offices

[16] Refer to CFM Toolkit and the ED Circular on Minimum Monitoring Requirements (MMRs) and Community Feedback (CFM) Mechanisms Standards in WFP Country Offices

[17] OED2022/026

[18] Colleagues can refer to the draft Risk Register Template CACSRA - I-CARA.xlsm

Why ethnicity should not be used as an eligibility criterion in conflict-sensitive targeting	In conflict-affected and fragile contexts, vulnerability often aligns with ethnic identity due to historical marginalization, discrimination, forced displacement, or exclusion from institutions and basic services. Vulnerability indicators often correspond to this pre-existing divide and it can be tempting to use ethnicity as a shortcut or proxy for vulnerability[19]. However, **ethnicity should not be used as an eligibility criterion**.

Doing so could, especially in community-based approaches, reinforce social divisions and elite capture, exacerbate power asymmetries, fuel grievances, and expose communities to retaliation or stigma. It may also create perceptions of compromised neutrality and impartiality, particularly where ethnic identity is politicized or closely linked to conflicts. Key considerations for **conflict-sensitive practices** include:

- **Ensure neutral programme design logic:** Programme design forms the foundation for targeting decisions. Programmes that inadvertently create biases toward particular ethnic or social groups would see these biases reflected in the targeting approach. In contexts where programmes are intentionally designed to support specific segments of the population, robust stakeholder engagement and a thorough context analysis should be undertaken. Appropriate safeguards must be built in at multiple levels to ensure the approach is contextually sound and to prevent potentially high-risk situations, especially during targeting and prioritization.

- **Use context analysis, not ethnicity, to address systematic exclusion.** Analyses (e.g., I-CARA) should identify drivers of marginalization and guide targeting design. Qualitative methods (e.g., FGDs, KIIs, participatory mapping) are recommended *before* needs assessment data collection to help define proxies for exclusion to collect without making ethnicity part of eligibility rules.

- **Keep ethnicity analytical, not operational.** Ethnicity may be analysed as a background variable to test correlations with food insecurity, exclusion, or access barriers *without* informing eligibility decisions.

- **Be cautious with ethnicity data.** Collecting ethnicity, clan, or tribe data (or proxies[20]) is strongly discouraged. Ethnicity is often a highly sensitive subject, and such data collection can heighten protection and security risks for communities and staff. If absolutely needed for programme design, consider using secondary data for insights and complementary qualitative data collected in controlled environments, such as through key informant interviews. .

- **Prioritize vulnerability, not identity.** While focusing on *vulnerability considerations*, targeting should ensure marginalized groups can access assistance through tailored outreach, facilitation, language support, and verification — without explicitly categorizing people by ethnicity.

- **Continuously monitor conflict sensitivity.** Use oversight mechanisms, CFMs, and monitor public sentiment (e.g., through social media, monitoring, CFM) to detect ethnic bias or emerging tensions and adjust approaches as needed.

> **Bottom line:** While ethnicity may help explain patterns of vulnerability, it should not be used as an eligibility criterion in T&P. Instead, robust context analysis and risks assessments should inform targeting design, addressing potential ethnic-based exclusion risks without reinforcing the divisions that drive conflict.

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[19] Ethnicity may correlate with vulnerability, but correlation does not always define a criterion. Such correlations should be examined analytically, through context analysis and data review, rather than operationalized directly in eligibility rules.

[20] Language or livelihood activity (e.g., herding) can be proxies for ethnicity in certain contexts.

Concluding remarks

WFP actively commits to mainstreaming conflict sensitivity into all its programmes, operations and functions, including targeting and prioritization activities. Conflict sensitivity helps managing risks of negative impact and conflict-fuelling and preserves principled access in fragile and complex environments. This approach also aligns the Global Assurance Framework, ensuring our assistance is considerate of the people we assist and supports WFP's operational independence.

For it to be effective, **every targeting and prioritization exercise must be informed by a context analysis and conflict-sensitivity.** This includes systematically identifying gender, disability and ethnicity related risks, monitoring- their differential impacts, and adapting T&P processes to prevent reinforcing inequalities or fueling conflict. **The resulting risks and adequate mitigation measures** should be implemented throughout the targeting and prioritization process. An inherently iterative process, embedding conflict sensitivity across all steps — from understanding context and designing inclusive eligibility criteria to monitoring T&P dynamics and inform adjustments — is recommended as a **practical and achievable best practice**.

Particularly in contexts affected by conflict, COs and FOs should ensure a deep **understanding of the context** they are working in, a thorough **documentation of conflict-sensitivity related risks**, and an efficient **implementation of mitigation measures.** This guidance should offer practical steps to minimize chances of fuelling tensions through our targeted assistance.

Acronyms

CACSRA	Conflict Analysis and Conflict Sensitivity Risk Assessment	**FO**	Field Office
CC	Cross-cutting	**I-CARA**	Integrated Cross Cutting Context Analysis and Risk Assessment
CE	Community Engagement	**IDM**	Identity Management
CFM	Community Feedback Mechanisms	**KII**	Key Informant Interview
CO	Country Office	**MMR**	Minimum Monitoring Requirement
CP	Cooperating Partner	**RAM**	Research, Assessment and Monitoring
CRF	Corporate Result Framework	**TWG**	Targeting Working Group
CS	Conflict Sensitivity	**T&P**	Targeting and Prioritization
ED	Executive Director	**VAM**	Vulnerability, Analysis and Mapping
ENA	Essential Needs Analysis	**WFP**	World Food Programme
FGD	Focus Group Discussion		

Additional Resources

TARGETING: WFP_Assessment_Targeting@wfp.org

• Targeting and Prioritization Operational Guidance Note

• Targeting Assurance Framework

• Targeting and Registration in Emergency Contexts (posters)

CONFLICT SENSITIVITY

• CS & CtP portal on WFP GO

   o Minimum standards on Conflict Sensitivity

   o Conflict Analysis and Conflict Sensitivity Risk Assessment (CACSRA)

• Integrated Cross-cutting Context Analysis and Risk Assessment (I-CARA): Protection, Gender & Conflict Sensitivity

• CACSRA / I-CARA Risk register

• CRF CC Indicator 1.6 - Conflict Sensitivity