

# COVID-19 TIPSHEET: Evidence-based Participant Selection and Targeting

## Deep Dive: COVID-19 and Cash Voucher Assistance (CVA) Tipsheet No5

This guidance note offers a brief summary on how to approach targeting and participant selection in data scarce and restricted access environments. It builds on previous CVA guidance,<sup>1</sup> though it can be used for other types of programming. The measures proposed below are designed to allow you to preserve as much of your conventional approaches to targeting and participant selection as possible, while offering alternatives to growing restrictions posed by COVID-19.

Remember: how you decide who is eligible for assistance based on vulnerability, and who isn't, is the most important aspect of your programme. We urge you to carefully consider all possible avenues, and reach out to discuss any and all challenges you're facing.

We are ready to work with you to tailor advice. If you have questions or need support, please contact us:

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As a final reminder, all team members are strongly encouraged to follow Mercy Corps' general COVID-19 guidance carefully, including: [Annex 11 Working in the Field During an Infectious Disease Outbreak](#). This is intended to keep you, other team members, and program participants safe and healthy.

### ***Step 1. Carefully consider your approach***

- **Your selection criteria should not change unless you have evidence that the selection criteria are no longer appropriate or exclusion errors run high.** Avoid introducing untested approaches. If you think that pre-existing criteria are no longer appropriate or that new vulnerabilities exist, add new or adapt existing criteria to your vulnerability scoring process; we can help you adapt these to your needs. As Step 2 and 3 below will likely involve more fragmented and inconsistent data than "normal" settings, you may want to move away from overly complicated indexes for vulnerability criteria that would be hard to verify over the phone or with fragmented data sources.
- **Remember that cash transfers and other forms of assistance are not a substitute for income.** The economic crisis brought about by physical distancing and movement restrictions may result in job or income loss, and worsen pre-existing risks and drivers of household vulnerability. Do not frame targeting **only** as a way to help those who have recently lost their jobs and income sources; the risk of exclusion with this approach runs extremely high. Instead, **include loss of income as one of several eligibility criteria you would typically use.**

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<sup>1</sup> [Covid-19 and CVA](#), [Payments and Digital Data Management](#), [Door-to-Door Distributions](#), [Group Distributions](#) and [CVA and Social Protection tipsheets](#).

- **Remember that targeting works best when good household data is paired with community-based approaches.** Where this is done, inclusion and exclusion errors<sup>2</sup> are small, community buy-in is greater, and programmes are more successful.

## **Step 2. Obtain information about potential participants from as many different sources as possible**

- **Assume that you will lose in-person access to the information sources you use to obtain participant data normally,** whether in-person surveys, community meetings, a community-based organization, intra-agency or internal referral mechanism, or government department or official. In anticipation of this, **begin establishing a new *potential* participant list using your sources now.** Be sure to obtain contact information for as many sources that have phones/internet as you can, so you can maintain communication later.
- Relying on a single source of information creates bias, and is something to avoid. **Options to diversify your information sources/referral mechanisms include:** Outreach to community leaders, CBOs, local authorities, local businesses, health clinics, schools, partner agencies, clusters/working groups and any local or national safety nets to establish partnerships ASAP. Keep in mind that it will be necessary to establish a data sharing mechanism with some actors before obtaining their data. Internal Mercy Corps data from other existing or past programs to determine potential participants.
- If participants have access to mobile phones and/or the internet, **collect as much participant contact information** as possible. This will let you conduct eligibility surveys<sup>3</sup> and communicate remotely.
- Ensure that **the different community-based mechanisms (i.e. community committees, entities, and/or key individuals) are representative of the community,** such as gender, age, ethnicity and displacement status. This will help ensure that you are using diverse perspectives and information sources while developing your initial list.
- If you work in a country with a social safety net, **establish data sharing mechanisms with the government now, so you can prepare to deliver transfers to their unserved caseload.**

## **Step 3. Applying Targeting Methods**

- **Triangulate the information on potential participants provided from diverse sources.** If multiple information sources include the same people on a participant list, then you can have more confidence in the data you have collected. If not, you may need to communicate again with your information sources to clarify Mercy Corps's interests and selection criteria, and place even more of an importance on verification.
- Conduct eligibility surveys with each household to gather data on vulnerability criteria to calculate vulnerability scores. **Conduct eligibility surveys remotely if in-person surveys are not feasible.**

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<sup>2</sup> **Inclusion and exclusion errors:** occur when your eligibility criteria don't capture every driver of vulnerability and essentially don't tell the whole story of vulnerability. Inclusion error occurs when your eligibility criteria mistakenly identify a household as vulnerable when they're well off. Exclusion errors occur when a household which is vulnerable is not captured by your criteria and thus not included in your participant list. Other forms of overt inclusion and exclusion can occur when a programme is manipulated or captured to include preferred family members or members of a community by stakeholders involved in the process, for example.

<sup>3</sup> Eligibility surveys are conducted to determine if a household is eligible for assistance, based on the targeting criteria.

- Where there is limited phone/internet coverage in your area of operations to conduct remote surveys on household-level vulnerability criteria, conduct *remote* surveys with as many households as you can and work with the community-mechanisms, information sources and data you have available to select participants according to vulnerability from your list. Remember that this type of approach is not ideal; so move forward carefully.
- Either through eligibility surveys (preferably) or through community-based mechanisms, **obtain household-level data on the selection criteria that the household meets to create a vulnerability score**. Points-based eligibility systems, which assign a weight or score to individual household characteristics, are one of the most robust approaches to take. If you have such a system in place, please keep using it. If you do not, we can help you develop one using global guidance; contact us.
- **CARM feedback channels must be established and communicated during the selection process to the best of your ability**, so that participants and community members can share feedback or concerns. See the [CARM Tipsheet](#) for ideas on no- or low-contact feedback channels. **Review CARM feedback on participant selection, and follow up on reports that a household has been incorrectly excluded or included in the participant list.**
- **There may come a point where there are so many vulnerable households in a given community you're working with that evidence or criteria-based targeting becomes impossible**. If this situation occurs, you will need to be careful about how your next steps are structured. Our advice is not to resort to blanket distributions right away; the risks of blanket transfers are high under normal circumstances, and entirely unpredictable during a pandemic. Talk to us if this issue is something you expect to develop.

## Step 4. Verification

- **Verification is the process used to check that the people / households selected to be participants actually meet the targeting criteria, and that the data collected on these households is accurate.** Typically, the Programs team selects the participants, and the MEL team verifies a percentage of them to **keep duties are segregated**. Where your target population is small (up to 1,000 units), a sample size between 10% and 20% is acceptable. For bigger populations, MEL teams should calculate an appropriate sample size using the [Mercy Corps sample size calculator](#). To reduce the number of verification surveys needed, consider increasing the margin of error to 10% and decreasing a confidence interval to 90%.
- **MEL team should conduct verification remotely if possible.** MEL may opt to conduct a simplified survey with only the eligibility criteria. If responses match between the eligibility surveys in Step 3 and verification surveys, that household is eligible. Limited connectivity and access to mobile devices may result in an under-representative sample. Consider running lists of phone numbers based on the attributes you want to capture (e.g. a list of female-only participants to reach women in the sample). Other limitations, including sample bias towards participants owning a mobile phone, should be documented and included in reporting. Remember to adapt the verification survey when shifting from in-person to remote in line with phone-based considerations found in the [Remote MERL Guidance](#).