

# Including the excluded: Lessons learned from the poverty-targeting strategies used by microfinance providers

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## Introduction

The Micro-Credit Summit convened in Washington DC in 1997 brought together practitioners in non government, government and private sectors to discuss the potential of microfinance to combat poverty. Representatives at this Summit set an ambitious goal: access to credit for 100 million of the world's poorest families by the year 2005. Though controversial, this goal set in motion a rapid expansion of the microfinance industry, much of it driven by donor agencies who established goals for targeting the poor for their services. Consequently, in 1998 the Coady International Institute, under the auspices of the Consultative Group to Assist the Poorest (CGAP), collected information on the poverty-targeting strategies of 25 microfinance providers around the world and summarised the data in a compendium for use by practitioners in the microfinance field.<sup>1</sup>

This article examines the strategies employed to target the poor and provides an analysis of how they differ, depending on the mandate and the development paradigm of the provider. Examining the context of microfinance service provision is useful for understanding trends in poverty targeting, especially the current pressures for organisations to demonstrate financial self-sufficiency. On the one hand, the goal of achieving a broader outreach to the poor seems to strain against the goal of financial self-sufficiency (Otero 1994). On the other hand, the achievement of such self-sufficiency is seen by others (Accion International 1998, Seibel 1998) as essential for sustainable and cost-effective poverty reduction.

The relevance of this debate on poverty targeting is analysed by examining the research conducted for the compendium. The contributions illustrate how different targeting *methods* combine to form particular *strategies* that are in tune with the mandate and rationale of each microfinance provider. These contributions imply that a narrow view of the costs and effects of targeting is of limited usefulness when considered in isolation from the added-value of targeting, and the non-financial services that may accompany microfinance service delivery.

## The context

Microfinance service delivery has been promoted as a key strategy for reducing poverty, as well as for stimulating sustainable economic growth through self-employment and small enterprise development. Access to these facilities is assumed to provide the poor with the means to cushion themselves against economic

shocks, to attain self-reliance through entrepreneurship, and to achieve social empowerment. Non government organisations (NGOs) have been active promoters of this strategy, acting locally in the delivery of microfinance services, while simultaneously participating in the global debate about the possibilities for, and implications of, integration of these services into the commercial banking sector.

This debate is rooted in paradigmatic differences, couched in terms of 'the need for economic efficiency' versus 'the need for social equity' (Dunford 1998:2), 'market-led growth' versus 'poverty alleviation' (Kantor 1998:3), or the 'financial market paradigm' versus the 'directed credit paradigm' (Vogel and Adams 1997:361). These in turn have informed heated discussions about the relationship between the financial self-sufficiency of the microfinance industry and its outreach to the poor, particularly the poorest. Thus, although the financial market paradigm proponents argue that only financially sustainable providers can maximise outreach on an ongoing basis (Accion International 1998, Seibel 1998, Vogel and Adams 1997), supporters of directed savings and credit – often with additional services ('credit plus') – argue that such a market-driven paradigm fails to provide the poor with the skills and resources required to ensure sustained impact (Dawson and Jeans 1997).

## The debate on outreach versus impact and efficiency

Under scrutiny are two issues: the extent to which microfinance services have reached the poor clients for whom they are intended; and the impact that such outreach is likely to have. An important distinction is that, although microfinance programmes may have the social objective of reducing poverty, the intention of many is to achieve this by targeting not the poorest of the poor, but the poorest of the economically active. Many of these potential clients could fall into the category of the bottom 50 per cent of those whose income is below the poverty line ('the poorest of the poor' by CGAP's definition), but the microfinance provider rarely targets the full range within that category or restricts services exclusively to it. This caveat aside, various studies now indicate the limited extent to which providers that intend to reach the poorest are able to do so (Hashemi 1997, Hulme and Mosely 1996, Mosely and Hulme 1998, Seibel and Parhusip 1997).

On the issue of impact, Gulli (1998) points to the synergy effects of financial service outreach and other services and supports.

Without this synergy, the positive impact of access to financial services may be hard to realise. Also, to examine the impact of targeting strategies without an appreciation of the institutional context of microcredit delivery can be dangerously short-sighted. Targeting the poor shifts attention away from the broader benefits of member/client-owned institutions. These have 'a much more holistic view of community and are much less focused on selective (and in many cases artificial and divisive) targeting'.<sup>2</sup>

When the donors of microfinance providers fund programmes on the understanding that the poor are being targeted, and are benefiting, the question arises of how the providers target the poor. The effectiveness and value-added dimension of these strategies become a subject of keen interest. The poverty-targeting strategies documented in the compendium shed light on this question.

## The compendium of poverty-targeting strategies

With the collaboration of CGAP working group members, information on poverty-targeting strategies was solicited from 35 microfinance providers. The 25 institutions that responded employ a range of strategies in 20 different countries in Asia, Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East. These different strategies are presented in the compendium on an institution-by-institution basis, illustrating the choice of strategy in the context of the provider's mandate, its rationale for poverty targeting, the additional benefits associated with that strategy, and the challenges faced in its application.

Of the 25 providers, 15 are non profit organisations implementing microfinance programmes only, 5 are non profits with multisector programmes, and 3 are for-profit institutions. Two are special cases: DID in Mali is a non profit arm of the credit union Desjardins; and Trickle Up is a non profit which provides savings services and small grants (not credit) in Guatemala. Despite solicitations, we were unable to collect information from government-backed schemes (such as Bank Rakyat, Indonesia), or to increase the number of contributions from the commercial sector.

## The rationale for poverty targeting

The term 'targeting' has been associated with *delivering* a particular service or intervention to an identifiable set of clients. For this reason, contributors were encouraged to view their methods of *attracting* particular clients as targeting methods, equally relevant as methods of identifying and reaching clients in more conventional targeting approaches. From these contributions, five elements of a poverty-targeting strategy become clear: identifying the poor; reaching the poor; attracting the poor; excluding the non-poor; and discouraging the non-poor. Thus, the rationale for poverty targeting can be expressed in three broad categories:

- It is justified on the grounds of equity: For all respondents, there is an underlying moral imperative expressed as a desire to help those in need; to enable

the poor to break out of a poverty trap induced by drought, civil war and neglect; to alleviate extreme poverty; to restore dignity to a segment of the poor who are exploited and impoverished; to reverse the process of marginalisation of the poor, particularly in the face of the impact of structural adjustment programmes; and to empower poor women. In other words, the rationale is in the redistributive paradigm of including the otherwise excluded.

- It is essential for broad-based development: In the case of Grameen Bank and its replicas, the rationale for stringent targeting of the poor is that broad-based social and economic development cannot occur unless poverty is reduced. The Association for Social Advancement (ASA), Bangladesh, expresses a similar sentiment: 'Social development is contingent upon economic emancipation'. Targeting is seen therefore as a way of mobilising the poor through incremental savings and credit so that they can contribute to, and benefit from, a growth economy.
- It is a way of ensuring high repayment rates: Exclusive targeting of the poor may also have a financial rationale. Because the poor are more likely to accept the discipline required of participating members, the microfinance provider can expect a good repayment rate (Grameen, Bangladesh) if the poor are actively targeted. The reliability of poor women in terms of loan repayment is cited as an additional reason for a gendered targeting strategy (Kalanjiam, India).

## Methods of poverty targeting

The poverty-targeting strategies of most of the 25 microfinance providers include all five complementary targeting components. It is important to recognise that, although some providers may emphasise one component over another, to a greater or lesser extent all components are combined to achieve maximum effect. Also, some providers use different targeting strategies depending on the local economic and social circumstances, as documented by Friends of Women's World Banking (1998), for example in the case of Kalanjiam. Note that some providers, especially those which are oriented to a financially self-sustaining operation, do not target the poor exclusively but endeavour to include a mix of non-poor and poor and to provide customised financial services.

## Identifying and reaching the poor

The first stage is identification of the geographic areas in which poverty is concentrated. The use of government statistics, for example, can enable the microfinance provider to identify areas as extensive as the Northern Areas and Chitral of Pakistan, or as limited as pockets of poverty in the West Bank of Palestine, or in metro Manila in the Philippines. At a higher level of precision are

methods requiring local and subjective identification, or the use of objective indexes to both identify the poor and simultaneously exclude the non-poor.

Local and subjective methods include the identification of the poor by their peers who are forming, for example, a savings and credit group (CRS, CAM, ASA). Eligibility criteria may be set down by the microfinance provider for use by community members to identify candidates for group membership (for example, the criteria prescribed by ASA are landlessness, income of less than \$US45 per year, capability to work in income-generating activity, married status, and female gender). Typically, judgements of eligibility are made not just on the basis of poverty status, but also on criteria unrelated to poverty, such as trustworthiness ('character referencing'). Also in this category are participatory wealth ranking methods by which reference groups in the target communities rank households according to their relative wealth on the basis of community-defined poverty/wealth criteria. SEF in South Africa and Kalanjiam in India are proponents of this approach.

Objective indexes identify the poor by employing criteria applicable across different sites and are typically administered by field staff. Examples of these are the housing index (DECSI, SHARE, Project Dungganon, Nirdhan, AIM) and the poverty assessment tools administered by Trickle-Up, using locally determined, observable characteristics of poverty. The next level of precision, if required, is the means or assets test that serves to both confirm eligibility and to identify the precise degree of poverty.

Identification of the poor has to be combined with active outreach for targeting to be effective. The promotion and encouragement of eligible clients by fieldworkers are standard practice. For example, house-to-house promotion, community meetings, outreach to existing informal women's groups, the employment of female staff, and the facilitation of their fieldwork are all promotional strategies that are an integral part of the targeting process, and are a conscious policy of the microfinance provider (see Baydas et al. 1997 in relation to the commercial banking sector).

### **Attracting the poor**

Another aspect of targeting is when the customised design and marketing of financial products attract the target group to the provider. This self-selection is a key component in any targeting strategy and takes the form of removing constraints so that the poor select themselves as clients.

Microfinance providers attract the very poor and the poorest by removing the constraints that have deterred them from using commercial financial services. They may be attracted by the opportunity to save voluntarily, to take out a small-sized loan or to borrow for 'non-productive purposes' in times of crisis, or by the opportunity to purchase insurance. They may also be attracted by the security that group-lending schemes provide. A case in point is AKRSP where individuals can only borrow against their savings, thus protecting other members in the village organisation (which takes out a group loan) from default by an individual borrower. The poor may also be attracted by the fact that group guarantee

schemes replace the collateral that women, in particular, are unable to provide, the simplicity and convenience of application procedures, the size and types of loan available, and the flexible repayment terms. TSPI, for example, takes customised lending to the point of targeting a very particular client group: their 'fixed asset loans' are strictly for street vendors for the purchase of a bicycle.

### **Discouraging or excluding the non-poor**

Although a diversified clientele and diversified portfolio are characteristic of many microfinance providers, others have found that the participation of the non-poor in a microfinance programme discourages the poor from participating for reasons of low self-esteem.<sup>3</sup> Programmes that encourage self-selection by the poor are often complemented by measures to discourage the non-poor:

- **Self-exclusion:** Small loan size, high interest rates, and high opportunity costs of frequent group meetings are ways in which the provider screens for a client's level of commitment and her or his opportunities to access alternative financial service options. In most instances, the non-poor do not tolerate the high financial costs and the time commitments (transaction costs) of group meetings. In some situations, however, these measures are not sufficient; for example, SEF found that where the availability of credit is very limited, the non-poor were prepared to tolerate small loans and frequent meetings in the hope of eventually graduating to bigger loans in subsequent loan cycles.
- **Eligibility criteria:** Some eligibility criteria are sensitive with respect to including the poor, whereas others are more specific and exclusive of the non-poor. For example, gender and geographic criteria can allow inclusive targeting of the poor, but they are not specific to the poor and exclusive of the non-poor. Observable housing characteristics and minimum poverty or income levels are examples of criteria that have this specificity. As a result, it is possible to exclude the non-poor on the basis of tools using these types of criteria.

### **Combining methods to form a targeting strategy**

Typically, the microfinance provider combines a number of different methods to form a unique poverty-targeting strategy. Three cases illustrate this point.

AIM, Malaysia, is a specialised microfinance provider. First, the area of highest density of poverty is identified using government statistics. Second, trained field staff apply a housing index, followed by a means test to exclude the non-poor. During this time, the purpose of the programme and the microfinance product features (customised to poor clients) are promoted to attract the poor.

Eligible members are invited to form a savings and credit group and are provided with training.

AKRSP, Pakistan, is a multisectoral NGO. First, an area of widespread poverty is selected for a multisectoral programme, for example 'the Northern Areas' of Pakistan. Village organisations are promoted as a mechanism for community development, with separate organisations promoted exclusively for women. Savings and credit programmes operate through these organisations, which act as the contact point for all AKRSP's programmes and services. People are attracted to the savings and credit programme because of the group insurance, the opportunity to save and to borrow very small amounts, and the availability of loans for non productive as well as productive purposes. The groups have significant discretionary power over issuing loans, as long as the overall operations of the savings and credit groups operate within stipulated guidelines. Over time, AKRSP introduces a more diversified range of financial products to cater to an increasingly diversified client market. At the same time, it extends its geographical outreach to start the process again.

SEF, Southern Africa, is a microfinance and small enterprise development. It had originally used an objective index (the Visual Indicator of Poverty Test) to identify the poor, combined with product design features such as high interest rates and small initial loan size, to discourage the non-poor. Realising this method of identification was not accurate and that the disincentives to the non-poor were not effective, poverty targeting was redesigned. In the new strategy, a participatory wealth-ranking exercise is conducted within the target area. Not only has this yielded more accurate results, it has also provided an opportunity for awareness raising and motivation.

## Targeting costs and benefits

The main intention of targeting is to increase usage of the organisation's services by those most in need. However, the process can increase operation costs; the benefits of value added and effectiveness of efforts can contribute to an analysis of the cost/benefits.

### Cost considerations

Cost considerations are important for several reasons. First, of targeting influence the degree to which the provider can achieve financial self-sufficiency, either because of the costs of poverty identification and outreach, or the transaction costs of administering small savings and loans, or both. Second, the costs of targeting the poor vary. Should the provider serve as many poor people as possible for the least cost (where infrastructure is in place, for example), or spread itself thinly in more remote areas, or work more intensively and over a longer period of time with the hard-core poor?

Respondents in our study noted a number of ways in which costs had influenced their targeting strategy. The cost of staff time to administer poverty identification tools was frequently mentioned. Project Dungannon, for example, has simplified its

housing index for routine screening and now uses a means test only in the third and fifth borrowing cycles. The costs of reaching remote areas were also taken into account – ASA, for example, explicitly restricts its operations to areas where there is adequate infrastructure.

In contrast, Grameen Bank points to the costs of *not targeting*. This argument rests on the assumption that non-poor clients are less reliable because they are less desperate for the service and therefore a greater risk in terms of repayment. Their participation thus threatens the financial viability on which the poor depend. Other contributors draw attention to the leakage if resources designed for the poor are diverted to the non-poor, especially in donor-subsidised programmes. Several NGOs that apply targeting strategies that exclude the non-poor are particularly concerned about potential leakage.

### Value-added considerations

Contributors to the compendium were asked to consider the additional benefits of their targeting strategy. Several were mentioned:

- Community empowerment in cases where participatory methods for identifying the poor were used. In the case of SEF and Kalanjiam, an additional outcome of the targeting process was a sense of ownership of the programme and a greater appreciation of its purpose.
- Empowerment of women, which simply by targeting them is an affirmation of their importance.
- The enhanced effectiveness of programmes can result from a more precise understanding of local perceptions of poverty (SEF, Kalanjiam, Trickle-Up).
- The use of data collected for targeting can be used as baseline data for future impact studies (CAM, FINCA, KMBI, SHARE).
- The contribution the targeting process makes to other components of a multisectoral programme can be useful (AKRSP).

### Effectiveness considerations

Effectiveness of targeting implies the degree of success in reaching desired group of persons. Although effectiveness data are hard to verify, contributors estimated effectiveness by indicating the number of clients who fall into the 'poorest of the poor' category at the time of their first loan. AKRSP was exceptional in also being able to estimate its extent of coverage by indicating the proportion of potential clients actually served.

### Weighing the costs and benefits

Contributors were not asked to explain precisely how costs and benefits were weighed; however, the patterns that emerge from the data are worthy of further investigation. While all contributors are to some extent influenced by pressures to achieve financial self-sufficiency and to be cost effective in their targeting, there is

less pressure when programmes are less mature and when the mandate of the organisation is both to focus on the poorest and to provide additional complementary support services. In many cases, the costs of targeting for the microfinance sector are difficult to separate from routine outreach of various services. Also in question are the criteria for effectiveness. The effectiveness of targeting can be measured by the proportion of clients reached who fall into the target category, but such a measurement does not give an indication of coverage – the proportion of the total potential of the target group who access the service. Where targeting practices are an integral part of service delivery (informing clients, helping them to participate in targeting, forming groups, providing educational services) the more appropriate questions might be: how does targeting contribute to more effective programme delivery and sustained impact? How does this get included in the costs/benefits ratio?

## Conclusion: What kinds of providers do what kind of targeting?

Differences in poverty-targeting strategies appear to depend on how much pressure there is for microfinance service delivery to be financially self-sufficient, and also on whether it is one of several complementary services.

All contributors in the compendium research used a combination of methods, leading me to conclude in an earlier report (Mathie 1998: xiv–xv) that ‘targeting has as much to do with tailoring products to suit the client market as it does with identifying who is and who is not eligible for services’. Further analysis, however, reveals two broadly different orientations:

- Targeting-plus (borrowing from, and complementary to, the expression ‘credit-plus’): Here targeting is integrated with programme delivery. CREDO, for example, has targeting and training going on simultaneously, as do others using the group solidarity approach to microfinance provision (such as MEDA, CAM, and the Grameen replicas). Depending on how it is defined, targeting is seen as low cost because it is built into the costs of delivery, or a cost that is justified by the additional benefits it brings to service delivery (enhanced group solidarity, enhanced appreciation for the programme, enhanced understanding of the precise nature of poverty). Typically, providers using this approach are operating in the redistributive paradigm of directed credit; they assume that financial services by themselves are not sufficient to enable the poor to move out of poverty.
- Targeting by attraction: Here the marketing model predominates. Products and services are designed to attract clients to the provider. These methods are less intrusive and less costly; they are favoured by providers committed to the financial market paradigm. Although more active targeting methods

are also used, the main emphasis of the strategy is product design: products are customised to different client markets, and through such diversification, a self-sufficient system operates. Providers favouring this approach are more likely to be client-owned providers such as SANASA and DID, or those NGOs approaching financial self-sufficiency. AKRSP is one example of a provider using this approach; it is an NGO operation that is now close to being fully integrated with the commercial banking sector.

The costs of targeting by attraction may be less; however, some researchers (Dunford 1998, Otero 1994) raise concerns that outreach may be compromised by such a market-driven approach. The concerns are related not only to the special financial services (such as savings and insurance services) that the very poor require over a long period of time until they are confident enough to take credit, but also to the training and educational activities characteristic of targeting-plus that may have to be carried out by other programmes and service providers. Such piggybacking may be formalised within a programme or between two programmes. AKRSP, for example, successfully fosters group organisation and management of economic development by the target group, while stimulating the growth of a sustainable, inclusive (catering to both poor and non-poor) financial system integrated into the commercial banking sector. An example of collaboration between two agencies, one non profit and the other commercially oriented, is the relationship between DID and FFH in Mali. DID uses credit-product design to attract the poor, which is complemented by FFH’s outreach, training and education programme.

Clearly, the rationale for a particular strategy is influenced by assumptions about the dynamics of economic and social change that underlie the design of each provider’s policies and programmes. According to Ruttan (1998), there is still debate on the particular relationship between poverty alleviation, sustainable economic growth and income distribution, and the conditions under which a financial system can be extended without prejudice or further damage to the poorest of the poor. Moreover, challenges continue to be made to an economic paradigm in which income, rather than a composite quality of life index, is the dominant indicator. Nevertheless, whether the poor are seen as a market niche or as the casualties of an exploitative financial system, the conclusion suggested by the compendium contributions is that they will continue to need more than financial services for there to be a sustained impact. The targeting strategy is therefore no longer an additional cost to financial service delivery, but value added to the successful delivery of services.

The question remains as to who will bear this cost, and this will depend on external social and economic conditions as much as on microfinance provider policy. The bottom line is that, ultimately, effectiveness has to be measured in terms of the sustained impact of financial services on the livelihoods of the poor, including the poorest. The contributions to the compendium imply that this cannot be achieved by delivering financial services alone, however accurate the targeting strategy.

## Notes

1. The Coady International Institute was funded by the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) to work on this study in collaboration with the CGAP Working Group on Poverty Yardsticks and Measurement Tools.
2. Anthony Scoggins, pers. comm., June 1999.
3. Hashemi (1997:253) notes that the hard-core poor 'self-select' themselves out of the Grameen Bank schemes because 'they are so destitute that they consider themselves not credit worthy'.

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## Acronyms

AKRSP	Aga Khan Rural Support Programme, Pakistan
AIM	Amanah Ikhtiar Malaysia, Malaysia
ASA	Association for Rural Advancement, Bangladesh
BRAC	Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee, Bangladesh
CAM	Centro de Apoyo a la Microempresa, El Salvador
CGAP	Consultative Group to Assist the Poorest
CIDA	Canadian International Development Agency
CREDO	Christian Relief and Development Organization
CRS	Catholic Relief Services
DECSI	Dedebit Credit and Savings Institution, Ethiopia
DID	Developpement International Desjardins, Mali
FINCA	Finca, Ecuador
FFH	Freedom from Hunger Foundation, Ghana
Grameen	Grameen Bank, Bangladesh
IPMF	Ibn Khaldoun People's Monetary Fund, Egypt
KMBI	Kabalikat Para Sa Maunlad Na Buhay, Inc., Philippines
Kalanjiam	Kalanjiam Foundation, India
KWFT	Kenya Women's Finance Trust, Kenya
MEDA	Mennonite Economic Development Associates, Nicaragua
NWTF	Negros Women for Tomorrow Foundation (Project Dunganon)
Nirdhan	Nirdhan, Nepal
Sanasa	SANASA, Sri Lanka
SC/USA	Save the Children, Palestine
SEF	Small Enterprise Foundation, South Africa
SHARE	Society for Helping and Awakening Poor through Education, India
Trickle-Up	Trickle-Up, Guatemala
TSPI	Tulay Sa Pag-Unlad, Inc., Philippines