
Rethinking efficiency in poverty-targeted social protection: Evidence from Cambodia and the Philippines

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Résumé

The paper critically engages with and investigates the efficiency argument behind poverty-targeted social protection programmes especially in developing countries. The efficient use of limited fiscal resources is one of the strongest and most popular rationales for targeting the ‘deserving poor’, a notion that has been buttressed and legitimised by donors and other multilateral organisations in their aggressive drive to promote across developing countries, in the last two decades, the consolidation of national poverty targeting systems-cum-social registries of poor households and the implementation of conditional cash transfers (CCTs), their preferred social protection and poverty alleviation scheme.

An important question that must be asked pertaining to poverty-targeted social protection is, ‘Is it truly efficient?’ The short answer is no. Through extensive documentary analysis and interviews of key actors conducted during fieldwork in Cambodia and the Philippines in 2017 and the first quarter of 2018, I find, first of all, that challenges and discrepancies in updating the social registries, which in turn, exacerbate the exclusion and inclusion errors inherent to poverty targeting, belie the efficiency argument behind such modality in social provisioning. And since the social registries are the backbone of CCTs and many other poverty-targeted schemes in terms of beneficiary selection, they do not only render the coverage of these schemes inaccurate, but also diminish their supposed ability to channel limited public resources only to the most needy. What is more concerning is the exclusion of a huge proportion of the poor from these schemes. How can a scheme be judged as efficient if it fails to reach most, if not all, of its target population? Secondly, I find that both the social registries and CCTs are costly to carry out. They are financially and administratively costly, particularly in Cambodia and the Philippines, which, in the beginning, had limited experience and/or technical capacity related to these instruments. The battery of consultants contracted to ‘accompany’ relevant government ministries, the institutions and systems put in place, the additional human resources (tenured and contractual) hired, and the studies commissioned all to support the implementation of these instruments indicate that poverty targeting entails costs-substantial costs at that-contrary to the tendency of protagonists to depict it as relatively cheap and simple. Further, I find that these instruments are equally costly for the beneficiaries. It takes money, effort, and time on their part to comply the requirements and conditionalities in order to qualify for and deserve the often marginal benefits.

While most studies on the efficiency question are quantitative in nature, this paper brings in qualitative evidence that contributes to arguments challenging the efficiency rationale of poverty-targeted social protection, or social provisioning in general. Moreover, it intends to

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highlight the fact that ensuring the welfare of society is never cheap. Even the supposedly cheap schemes, like CCTs, are never cheap. That said, it is a mistake to make efficiency the main concern of social provisioning. It should not supersede or replace equity and social-cohesion goals of social provisioning.

Mots-Clés: efficiency, poverty targeting, social protection, poverty alleviation, conditional cash transfers, equity