Social Protection Programme
Rapid Assessment Framework

Quantitative analysis for evidence-based social assistance policymaking

Vision

ESCWA, an innovative catalyst for a stable, just and flourishing Arab region

Mission

Committed to the 2030 Agenda, ESCWA's passionate team produces innovative knowledge, fosters regional consensus and delivers transformational policy advice.

Together, we work for a sustainable future for all.

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UNITED NATIONS
Beirut

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Introduction

Social assistance programmes targeting poverty provide cash transfers and other benefits to selected households, and usually manage vast databases containing information on programme beneficiaries and beneficiary candidates. These programmes can vary, but some questions are common to all of them:

Is it possible to identify groups with similar sociodemographic characteristics that can be used to improve programme outcomes and deliver services relevant to these groups?

Are all eligibility criteria of relevance to the enrolment decision or are any of them redundant and can be omitted?

Are there substantial inclusion and/or exclusion errors that need to be addressed?

Is it possible to identify the characteristics that make a beneficiary more likely to improve their conditions and graduate from the programme?

The newly developed **Social Protection Programme – Rapid Assessment Framework (SPP-RAF)** of the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) addresses the above questions, by applying publicly available statistical tools to the administrative records used by the social protection programmes. SPP-RAF consists of four analytical steps: (1) **beneficiary profiling,** (2) **targeting characteristics evaluation,** (3) **coverage and enrolment evaluation** and (4) **beneficiary evaluation.** The statistical techniques used to implement SPP-RAF are **replicable** (the results are independent of the individual calculating them), **scalable** (the same tools can be used even if the programme expands), **standardized** (the same analytical procedure can be applied to different programmes) and **adaptable** (as priorities of a programme evolve, the analytical tools reflect these changes and inform policymakers accordingly). By removing the need for beneficiary surveys, SPP-RAF enables low-cost regular assessments to inform policymakers of the key points affecting the effectiveness and efficiency of social assistance programmes.

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Figure 1: Overview of SPP-RAF

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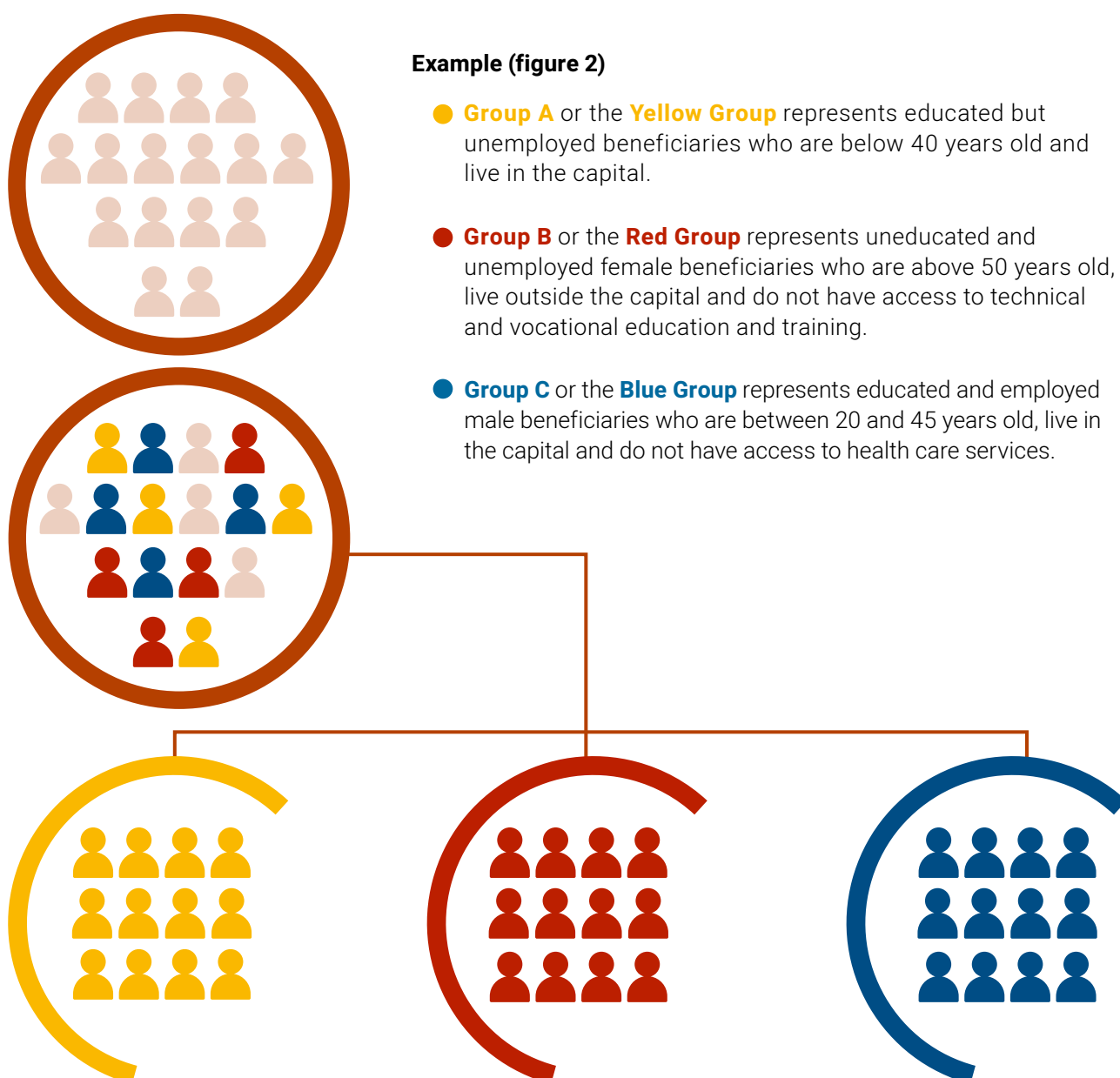
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1. Beneficiary profiling

Different groups of beneficiaries need different types of support to develop their productive potential. How do we identify these profiles?

Beneficiary profiling is the first dimension of the SPP-RAF framework. The analysis identifies and visualizes characteristics that are common to different subgroups of beneficiaries. They can therefore be grouped into *clusters* of common characteristics. Eventually specific policies and interventions can be tailored in support of each *cluster*.

This clustering based on common characteristics enables policymakers to understand (a) which beneficiaries are likely to benefit most from the programme, (b) what are the needs of those who benefit less, and (c) how to create policies that use programme resources more efficiently.

Figure 2: Profiling beneficiaries based on their distinct characteristics

Example (figure 2)

- **Group A** or the **Yellow Group** represents educated but unemployed beneficiaries who are below 40 years old and live in the capital.

- **Group B** or the **Red Group** represents uneducated and unemployed female beneficiaries who are above 50 years old, live outside the capital and do not have access to technical and vocational education and training.

- **Group C** or the **Blue Group** represents educated and employed male beneficiaries who are between 20 and 45 years old, live in the capital and do not have access to health care services.

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2. Targeting characteristics evaluation

Social assistance "targeting" formulas like those applied in proxy means tests (PMT) are frequently quite complex and administratively costly to apply. The *targeting characteristics evaluation* **dimension of the SPP-RAF analysis allows policymakers to identify and eliminate redundant variables from beneficiary recertification – while maintaining the accuracy of the targeting – and thereby reduce data collection and processing costs.**
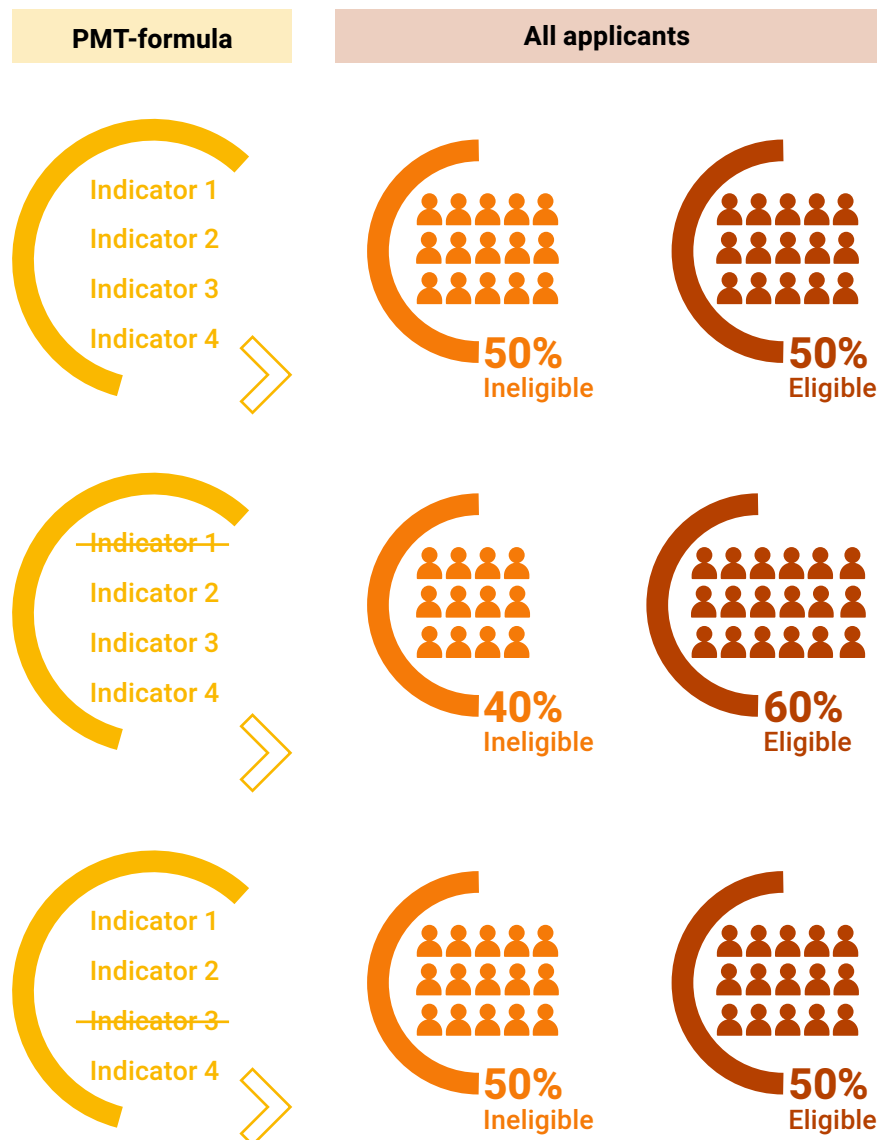
Targeting characteristics evaluation is therefore a cost-effective analytical approach that allows policymakers to evaluate which variables are driving the selection process of beneficiaries and which ones are insignificant. In this way, policymakers can better understand what individuals benefit from programmes and what is the minimum set of information required to identify them.

Example (figure 3)

Assuming that the original formula includes four indicators, 50 per cent of the applicants are ineligible for the programme while the other 50 percent are eligible.

Removing indicator 1 gives a different result: Now 40 per cent of the applicants are found to be ineligible while 60 per cent are eligible. This means that indicator 1 affects beneficiary selection and should not be eliminated. However, removing indicator 3 does not affect the outcome: the same applicants are found to be eligible and ineligible as with the original criteria. This means that indicator 3 is likely to be insignificant and can be eliminated without distorting beneficiary selection.

Figure 3: Checking for redundant or insignificant variables

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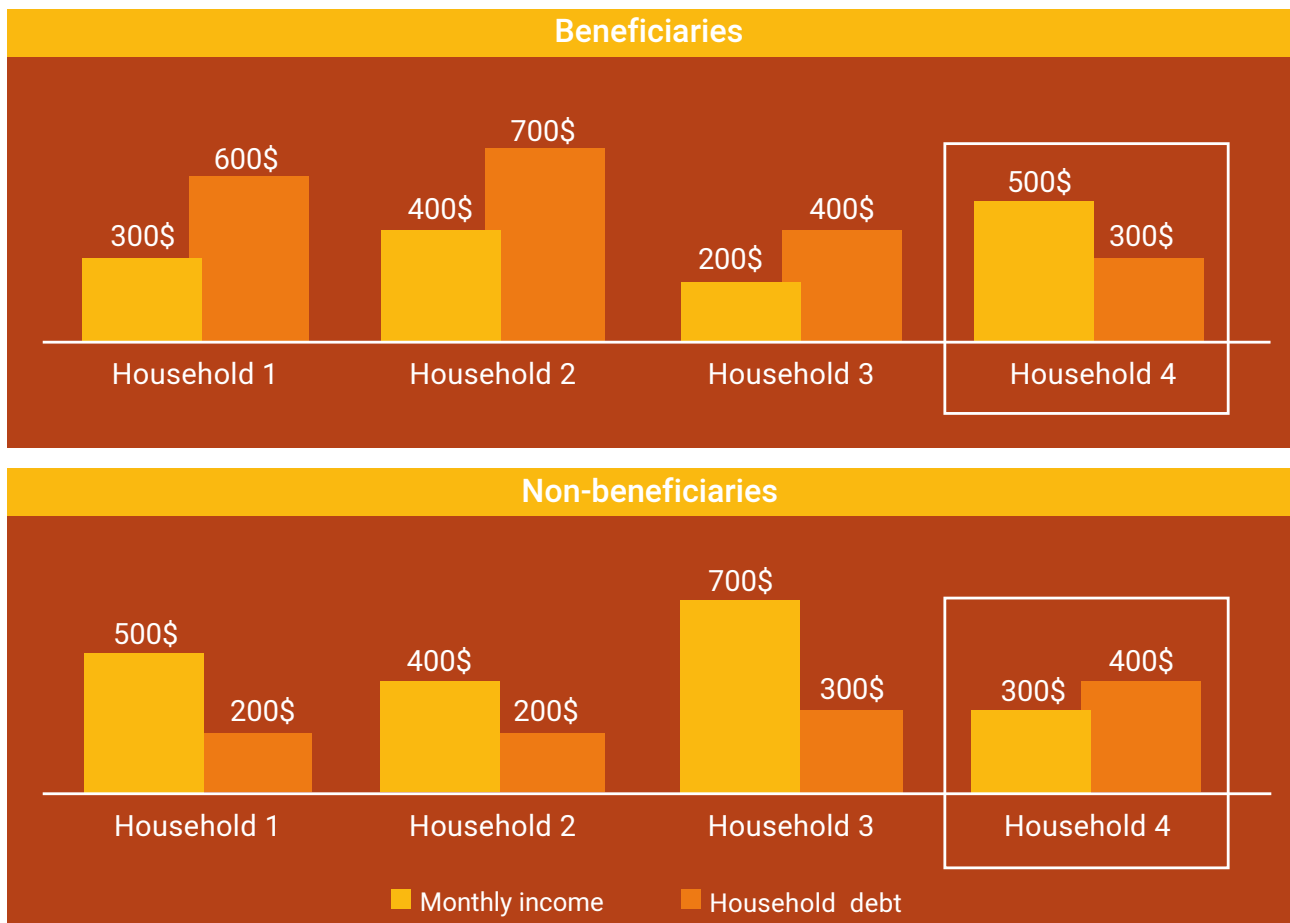# 3. Coverage and enrolment evaluation

Enrolling non-eligible beneficiaries (inclusion errors) and excluding eligible ones (exclusion errors) lead to ineffective resource allocation and undermine the legitimacy of social assistance programmes. Therefore, policymakers and programme managers frequently ask how to efficiently identify inclusion and exclusion errors without relying on costly beneficiary surveys.

The **coverage and enrolment evaluation** dimension of SPP-RAF enables policymakers to rapidly identify and address inclusion and exclusion errors. It also helps determine beneficiaries whose characteristics differ from the regular pattern, since this may indicate an issue with the data collection process. Coverage evaluation also guides policymakers in establishing social and demographic traits that have a systematic sub-registry of beneficiaries and allows them to consider better ways to improve their outreach strategy in this area.

Example (figure 4)

For a household to be selected as a beneficiary, its monthly income must be less than its monthly debt. Among the beneficiaries, one household's monthly income exceeds its monthly debt. Per the programme's eligibility criteria, this household should not be enrolled. This is an example of an ineligible beneficiary (i.e. inclusion error). On the other hand, among the non-beneficiaries, one household's monthly debt exceeds its monthly income and should be enrolled into the programme. This is an example of an exclusion error.

Figure 4: Coverage evaluation

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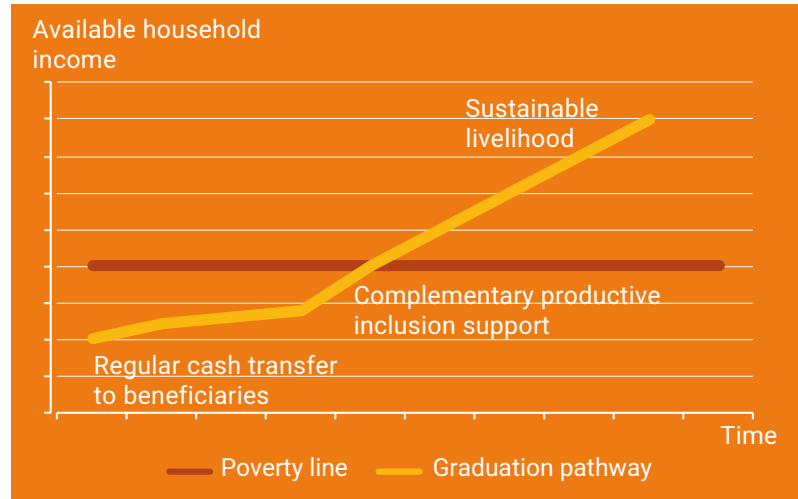
4. Beneficiary evaluation

Social assistance programmes ideally prepare beneficiaries to overcome poverty and thereby exit the programme. How do we identify the factors that enable them to do so?

The SPP-RAF dimension on beneficiary evaluation guides policymakers in detecting the underlying factors that enable beneficiaries to graduate from programmes (figure 6). By identifying the main "tracking variables" and following beneficiaries over time, it is possible to determine if individuals are benefitting from programmes in ways that consolidate their livelihoods.
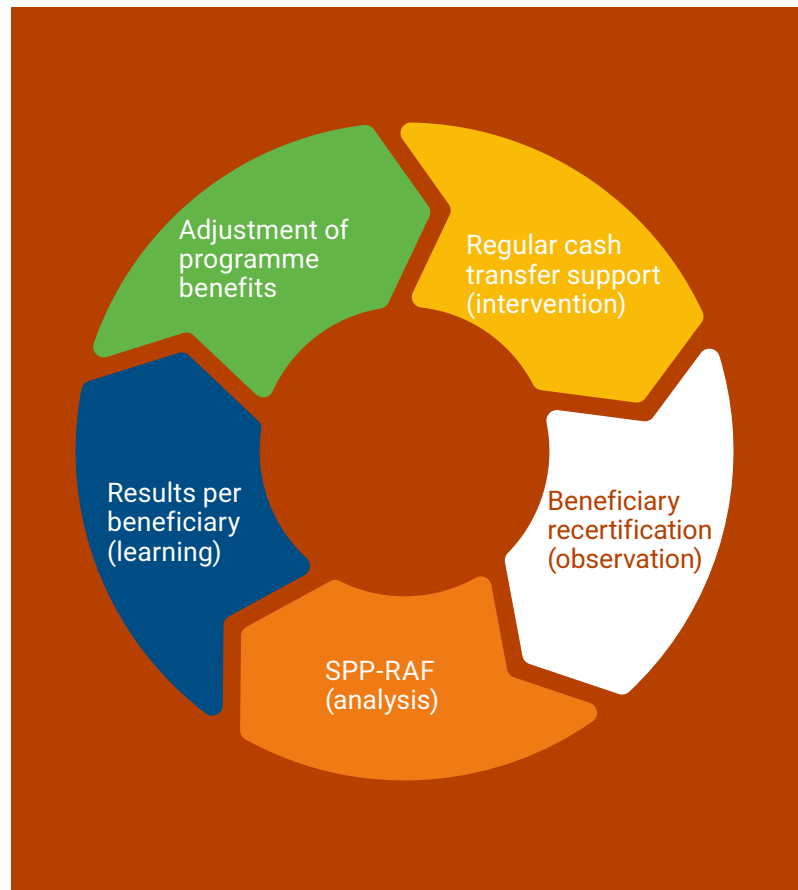
Figure 6: Out-of-poverty graduation & programme exit

Available household income

Sustainable livelihood

Complementary productive inclusion support

Regular cash transfer to beneficiaries

Time

Poverty line   Graduation pathway

Example (figure 7)

Consider individuals receiving non-contributory unemployment benefits. Analysing key indicators can identify which beneficiaries are acquiring additional skills to successfully apply for gainful employment, and which ones are not taking advantage of this opportunity. Based on this outcome, policymakers can adjust the programme to provide additional incentives.

Figure 7: Beneficiary evaluation cycle

Adjustment of programme benefits

Regular cash transfer support (intervention)

Beneficiary recertification (observation)

Results per beneficiary (learning)

SPP-RAF (analysis)

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5. ESCWA support for SPP-RAF

ESCWA provides technical assistance to empower programme managers to undertake sophisticated data analysis that improves social assistance programme performance by:

- Analysing social assistance beneficiary databases (e.g. single or social registries) along the four SPP-RAF dimensions, aiming to substantiate social policy advice based on data-driven insights.

- Conducting tailored SPP-RAF training sessions when requested that also provide an introduction to the free software R for statistical computing and graphics that can be easily downloaded, installed and adapted to existing databases.

- Providing a detailed training manual – including codes and datasets – to generate and analyse results throughout the training (the SPP-RAF training manual applies to any type of social assistance programme beneficiary database).

Country example: SPP-RAF for the National Aid Fund of Jordan

The Government of Jordan provides social assistance support mainly via its National Aid Fund (NAF). Since early 2021, ESCWA supports the management of the NAF through the SPP-RAF:

- Analytical results from applying SPP-RAF to the Takaful 1 programme's beneficiary data. This has enabled NAF managers to evaluate the programme's performance efficiency and effectiveness, identify potential shortcomings and discuss possible solutions.

- In tandem with its analytical work, ESCWA provides upon request SPP-RAF training workshops for entry level staff as well NAF staff and trainers targeting the expert level. This support – which is provided both at the central and decentral level – aims to build NAF in-house capacities to extract and analyse programme data and ultimately to enhance the programme's performance.