National Social Register: An approach to Social Protection and Poverty Reduction in Nigeria.

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Abstract: *Nigeria is challenged by growing level of poverty and vulnerabilities in the face of economic growth. In 2004, Nigeria's absolute poverty measurement stood at 54.7%, but increased to 60.9% in 2010 (NBS 2012), as of 2019 the national poverty rate stood at 40.1%, equivalent to 82.9 million Nigerians. Giving an average GDP growth rate of (2%) and high population growth rates of (3.2%); and coupled with recent spate of insurgencies, banditry, herdsmen clashes, recession and the impact of COVID-19, more vulnerable people would be expected to fall into poverty. Previous efforts with social protection had been fragmented, unstructured and mired by both technical factors and political interest. Documentation had also been lacking on coverage, design and implementation of the programs or a clear articulation of the processes for targeting poor and vulnerable households (PVHHs). Current efforts, though slow and tedious, are building verifiable systems for targeting which minimizes errors of inclusion and exclusion, while building concrete evidence of the population of interest. This paper presents a working approach to building a national and sub-regional single register of PVHHs using geographic targeting, community ranking, community-based targeting and proxy mean testing (PMT). To this end, Nigeria is building the body of knowledge around targeting approaches that is workable in sub-Sahara Africa using accurate, cost effective, sustainable, and justifiable mechanisms to guide long term investment across all social protection floors for various programmes. Thus, as of March, 2021, the National Social Register (NSR) has a total of 7,653,684 PVHHs households, out of which 61% male are heads of household while 39% are female heads of households. The households translate into 32,682,171 individuals (49% male and 51% female). This achievement was not realised without the challenge of tackling the errors of inclusion and exclusion.*

Keywords: Targeting, single register, intervention, poor and vulnerable households

1. Background and Context

Poverty is a global phenomenon, and every country bears the share of its attendant consequences. In Nigeria, despite strong economic growth in the past, the number of absolute poor in 2004, rose from 54.7% to 60.9% in 2010 (NBS 2012), by 2019 it was estimated that Nigeria had 40.1%, equivalent to 82.9 million Nigerians (NBS 2019). Life expectancy stood at 53.5 in 2016, and 54.8 in 2019 (UNDP 2020). Similarly, human development index rose from 0.482 in 2010 to 0.539 in 2019. Accordingly, the UNDP (2009) as reported in the ODI Social Protection in Nigeria (2012) reported that approximately 20% of Nigerians own 65% of the national wealth; and the gini coefficient was as of 2019 was 35.1%. Compared to South Africa, which has a gini coefficient of 0.65 as of 2015[1] and Egypt with 31.5% as of 2017, Nigeria and Egypt are very unequal society. This reality amid abundant resources, underscores the fact that, relatively high and stable economic growth in recent years has not translated into economic opportunities and income for poor households. It also implies that, the plethora of social protection programs implemented in the past failed to achieve their desired results, hence, leaving the preponderance of Nigerians under the poverty line (Victor, 2018).

The abysmal performance of past social protection interventions was a source of concern to the government of Nigeria, and of course Nigerians in general. Thus, in 2016, the Nigerian government, took a decisive step with the assistance of the World Bank to address poverty in a more strategic and scientific approach through the establishment of the National Social Safety Nets Programme (NASSP). NASSP, in turn, through the World Bank Loan Facility supported the establishment of the National Social Safety Nets Coordinating Office (NASSCO) at the federal level to coordinate and establish the building blocks for social safety nets interventions. NASSCO is also saddled with the responsibility of targeting and registering poor and vulnerable households into the single National Social Register (NSR), which is aggregated from States Social Registries (SSRs) to be used for pro-poor interventions, namely among others: (a) targeted regular cash transfers to poor and vulnerable households identified through the NSR (b) Labour-intensive public workfare for poor youths ages 18–35 whose

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[1] https://www.statista.com/statistics/1127890/gini-coefficient-in-south-africa-by-area/#:~:text=According%20to%20the%20latest%20governmental,most%20southern%20country%20of%20Africa.

education level is below Junior Secondary 3 (c) Skills for jobs for low-income youth of 18–35 years with at least a Junior Secondary 3 education (d) one-time or occasional cash transfers to displaced persons identified through existing IDP registries who are returning home or being resettled.

The objective of this paper is to: share experience on building a single registry; the targeting mechanism adopted by Nigeria; status of the NSR; showcase demographic characteristics of the poor and vulnerable households; illustrate the interventions mining from the NSR; and identify challenges confronting the project as well as policy implications deriving from community profile.

2. Why Social Protection in Nigeria?

With a population of approximately 190 million people, Nigeria has the largest population in Africa and the 7th largest in the world (World Bank, 2017). It is the 12th largest producer/exporter of petroleum worldwide with an annual Gross Domestic Product of USD262.6 billion in 2013 and an annual growth rate of around 6.6% (National Health Demographic Survey, 2014). However, Nigeria has one of the highest numbers of people living in poverty and inequality. According to the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) National Poverty Index report, 2012, about 112 million Nigerians (or 67.1 per cent of the country's total population) live below poverty level, living below US$1.00-US$1.25 per day. Nigeria ranked at the bottom 152 out of 158 countries with low Human Development Index (HDI), as of 2015.

Poverty and vulnerability in the country are highly influenced by several factors. Closer study of poverty dimensions in Nigeria show that income inequality is just one aspect of poverty. Poverty and vulnerability are also highly influenced by social and other factors, gender, ethnicity, geography, and age. Other influencing factors are socio-cultural and religious norms and the prevalence of conflict and instability in the northern region (such as the Boko Haram crisis) and slowly crawling towards the southern region is the spate of insecurity. Similarly, poverty and vulnerability level has also been aggravated by economic recession and the more recent food, fuel and financial crisis. This has resulted to widening of inequality and poverty gap between the poor and rich in Nigeria, hence increasing the population of the poorest of poor, and making their condition more precarious.

In response to a recognized increase in poverty and vulnerability, social protection (SP) emerged in the early 2000s in Nigeria and has advanced with incredible speed. According to the International Labour Organization (ILO, 2007), SP is a set of public measures, provided by the government for its citizens, to shield them against economic and

social distress that would be caused by the absence or a substantial reduction of income from work due to various contingencies such as illness, unemployment, old age, and death of the breadwinner. SP systems help individuals and families, especially the poor and vulnerable, cope with crises and shocks, find jobs, improve productivity, invest in the health and education of their children, and protect the aging population (World Bank, 2014). It protects the most vulnerable from shocks and stresses throughout their lives. SP is today widely seen as an important component of poverty reduction strategies and efforts to reduce vulnerability to economic, social, natural, and other shocks and stresses (Sanfilippo et al., 2012).
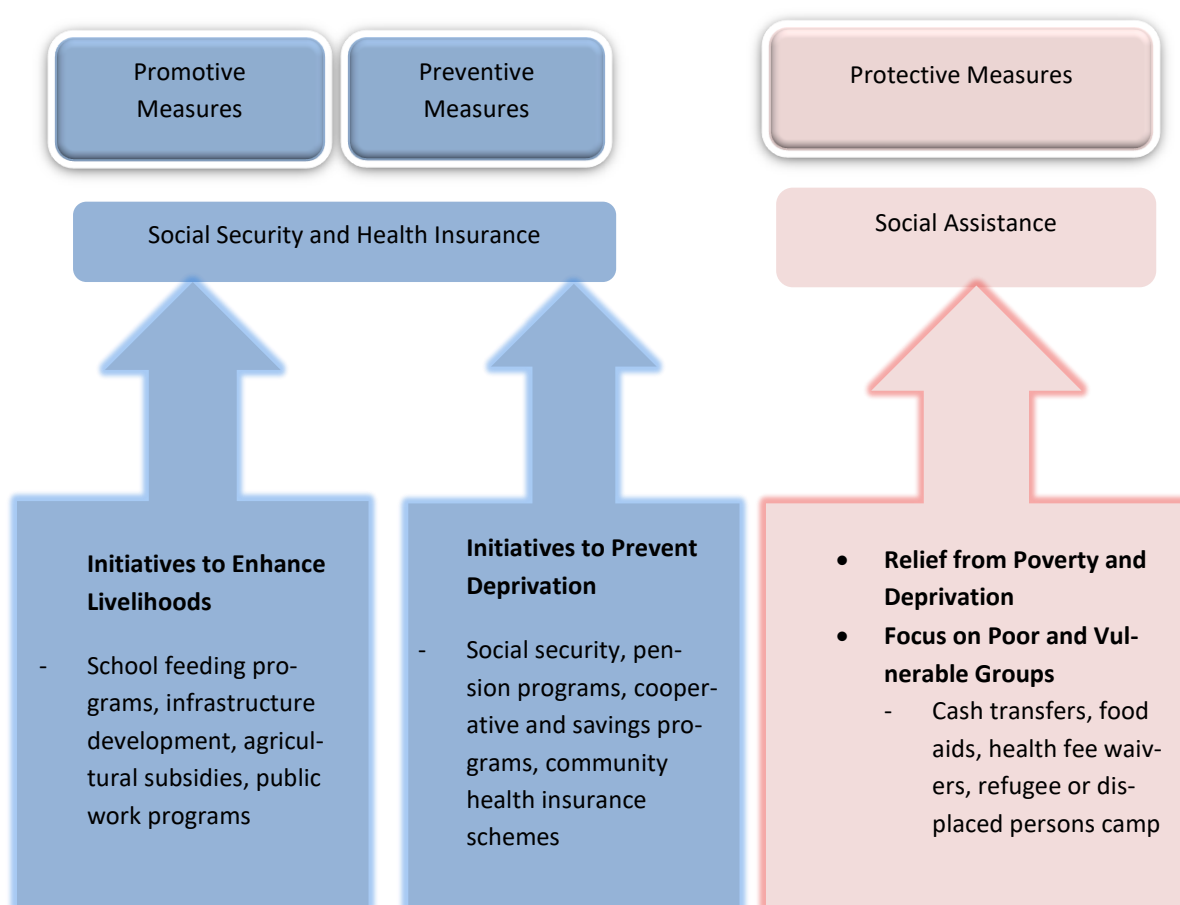
Promotive Measures	Preventive Measures		Protective Measures
Social Security and Health Insurance			Social Assistance
Initiatives to Enhance Livelihoods - School feeding programs, infrastructure development, agricultural subsidies, public work programs	**Initiatives to Prevent Deprivation** - Social security, pension programs, cooperative and savings programs, community health insurance schemes		• **Relief from Poverty and Deprivation** • **Focus on Poor and Vulnerable Groups** - Cash transfers, food aids, health fee waivers, refugee or displaced persons camp

Figure 1: Social Protection Measures

According to ILO, SP can be distinguished as promotive, protective and/or preventive mechanisms utilized to address the complex, interrelated and multi-dimensional issues of poverty (Devereux et al., 2014: 4). As shown in the Figure 1, social protection measures are interrelated and can have an impact in the lives and livelihoods of an

individual or groups of individuals. Protective measures (also known as social assistance initiatives) are utilized to support those dealing with poverty and vulnerability, as well as assist in provision of support particularly for those without the means to earn an income or other means of subsistence. Promotive and preventative measures do differ as instruments of social protection, but measures utilized can overlap as initiatives could both prevent individuals from shocks in addition to promoting opportunities for them to find sustainable means to become less vulnerable and more capable to establish and maintain livelihoods (Thakur, 2009: 168).

A well-designed and implemented SP system can powerfully shape countries, enhance human capital and productivity, reduce inequalities, build resilience and end inter-generational cycle of poverty. Such systems and tools are transformative as they not only help the poor and most vulnerable mitigate economic and fiscal shocks but also help ensure equality of opportunity by giving them a chance to climb out of poverty and become productive members of society.

Sustainable poverty reduction can be achieved through targeted SP interventions, which take the form of cash or food transfer (Devereux, 2014). Over the last decade and a half, the most popular form of social protection across diverse developing countries is the provision of conditional/unconditional cash transfers; although these are increasingly combined with other interventions targeting human development (Gertler and Fernald, 2004). It is argued that SP is the set of public as well as private policies targeted at mitigating the economic and social vulnerability of children, women, and families to guarantee their access to an acceptable standard of living (UNICEF, 2012).

2.1 Overview of the National Social Safety Nets Project

Upon the assumption of office by the current administration of the Federal Government of Nigeria in May 2015, it embarked on implementation of social investment initiatives that are targeted at reducing poverty and empowering millions of Nigeria. The thrust of implementing these initiatives is based on the Federal Government Social Protection Programme plan, which also has one of its main pillars of implementation in the introduction of the National Social Safety-Net Programme (NASSP) in 2016.

The Government of Nigeria has now prioritized SP interventions as a key strategy towards reducing poverty and socio-economic vulnerabilities in the population; and in line with this, has partnered with the World Bank to design the National Social Safety Net Project (NASSP). This is aimed at dedicating national resources to improve the lives of citizens and strengthen the role of social protection in helping to distribute resources

more broadly. NASSP involves two components: (i) establishing systems for social safety net that would serve as a robust platform for effectively targeting and delivering social assistance; and (ii) implementing cash transfers to targeted poor and vulnerable households. The program has national coverage, with all states eligible to participate. The systems developed for social safety net in Nigeria will be used across the country's different safety net programs, irrespective of funding source or targeted beneficiary group. Different stakeholders, such as governments, development partners, or civil society, will be able to use the systems for delivering social assistance programs in Nigeria.

To ensure proper coordination and support to NASSP, the Government established the National Social Safety Nets Coordinating Office (NASSCO), at the federal level, to coordinate all social safety nets (SSNs) interventions, including the Conditional Cash Transfer (CCT), the Youth Empowerment and Social Operations (YESSO) and the Community Social Development Project (CSDP); and set up standards to support SSN interventions in the country.

NASSCO was thus, established to coordinate and drive the implementation of SP interventions in Nigeria. Having implemented its activities of building a single social registry for the country to a reasonable extent, NASSCO is disposed to further entrench SP by building capacities of target stakeholders as well as create enabling environment for the involvement of academic field in various institutions. To achieve this, it will require enormous collaborative efforts and successful leadership from the Nigerian Government, agencies, and other partners.

3. **Targeting of Poor and Vulnerable Households for Social Protection Programs in Nigeria**

Targeting is a means of increasing program efficiency by increasing the benefit that the poor can get within a fixed program budget. The case for targeting is relatively simple - imagine an economy with 100 million people, 30million of whom are poor. The budget for a transfer program is $300 million. With no targeting, the program could give everyone in the population $3. If the program could be targeted only to the poor, it could give each poor person $10 and spend the full budget, or it could continue to give each poor person $3 for a budget of only $90 million. Although, targeting itself, particularly for development programmes, can be influenced by external constraints, such as power dynamics, high cost of administration, security considerations, political interference, and limited time; and if the targeting process is not

properly implemented, it may become ambiguous to recipients. Nevertheless, considering the population and cultural dynamics in a society like Nigeria, where previous programmes have been politicized, targeting brings some efficiency to an ethically generated list of poor and vulnerable households and a programme approach that is backed by scientific evidence, given the dearth of resources.

Targeting methods all have the same goal - to identify which households correctly and efficiently are poor or which are not. More generally, the motivation for targeting arises from the following three features of the policy environment:

i.   **Objective**: the desire to maximize the reduction in poverty or, more generally, the increase in social welfare/shared prosperity.
ii.   **Budget constraint**: a limited poverty alleviation budget; and
iii. **Opportunity cost**: the trade-off between the number of beneficiaries covered by the intervention and the level of transfers.

Currently, NASSP uses a hybrid of targeting methods to determine the eligibility of households for social interventions. First, a geographical targeting, also otherwise referred to as "poverty mapping", used to identify and select the poorest Local Governments (LGAs) in the state. This involves using existing ground classifications on the poverty situation across states to define poverty incidence and provide the basis for the classification, ranking, and selection of participating LGAs based on their poverty status. It is to be understood, however, that the targeting approach is just meant to prioritize the start point for the registration of poor and vulnerable people across the country, nonetheless, the programme principle is to achieve saturation in the registration of all eligible people across communities, wards, and local government areas.

The second is the community-based targeting approach, which uses community members to prepare a preliminary list of extremely poor and vulnerable households within their communities, who can be potentially eligible for social interventions. While this place a lot of power in the hands of 'community members' who may or may not act in the interests of all in poverty, especially people considered non-indigenous to the locality, or other minority groups that may not be considered, the community engagement process creates a check by breaking the community into homogenous groups of men, women, youths, and minority or other special groups to avoid potential exclusion errors. In addition, potential errors of omission are further minimized by providing opportunity for grievance redress, through either the community grievance redress persons or through the grievance redress mechanism of the programme, where eligible people

omitted could present their case directly to the program for review from the community level right to the national level, the same mechanism is used for whistle blowing to correct errors, fraud, and corruption.

The third approach at the point of programming and extraction of the list of beneficiaries is the proxy means test (PMT), which is applied to households in the preliminary list to verify their eligibility for interventions. The PMT is generated for actual household welfare through observable household and individual characteristics such as the location and quality of the household's dwelling, its ownership of durable goods, economic assets, its demographic structure, and the education and occupations of its adult members.

This combination of targeting tools aims to ensure that interventions are targeted only at the poorest communities, uses community knowledge to reach the poorest households within the selected communities to minimize exclusion errors, and verify selection of beneficiaries at the household level using a PMT to minimize inclusion errors.

4. The National Social Register (NSR)

"Social Registries are information systems that support outreach, intake, registration, and determination of potential eligibility for one or more social programs". They have both a social policy role, as inclusion systems, and an operational role, as information systems. They provide a "gateway" for potential inclusion of intended populations into social programs.

The National Social Register (NSR) targets Nigeria's poor and vulnerable population and is part of the Government's national social protection strategy focused on poverty eradication to identify poor populations, their needs and centralize information/database. The social register is the main tool used by Nigeria to select poor families for provision of social services. It collects details, which can be used by various social programs to lift people out of poverty and to improve human dignity.

As earlier stated, Nigeria adopted four targeting mechanism namely; geographic targeting, community ranking, community-based targeting and proxy means testing to identify the poor and vulnerable households (PVHHs).

- Geographic targeting: - using a poverty map across States to provide a basis for the classification, ranking and selection of participating LGAs.

- Community Ranking is the process that relatively places communities in an order by nature of their poverty incidence, to ensure transparency inn reaching out to the most vulnerable communities.
- Community Based Targeting: - Allows the community to use their subject knowledge of poverty and vulnerability to identify, validate and select households that are deemed fit to be poor and vulnerable.
- Proxy Mean Test: - allows ranking of households based on pre-determined criteria from the poor to the poorest for targeted interventions. This combination of targeting tools aims to ensure that interventions are targeted only at the poorest communities, uses community knowledge to reach the poorest households within the selected communities to minimize exclusion errors, and verify selection of beneficiaries at the household level using a PMT to minimize inclusion errors.

5. The Rapid Response Register

As part of the effort to scale up the National Social Safety-Nets Program (NASSP) and the need to rapidly cushion the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic and ensure standard livelihood of lifting 100 million Nigerians out of poverty in 10 years as envisioned by President Muhammadu Buhari in 2019 during his inaugural speech, The Federal Ministry of Humanitarian Affairs, Social Development and Disaster Management in collaboration with the World Bank have initiated and designed the RAPID RESPONSE REGISTER (RRR).
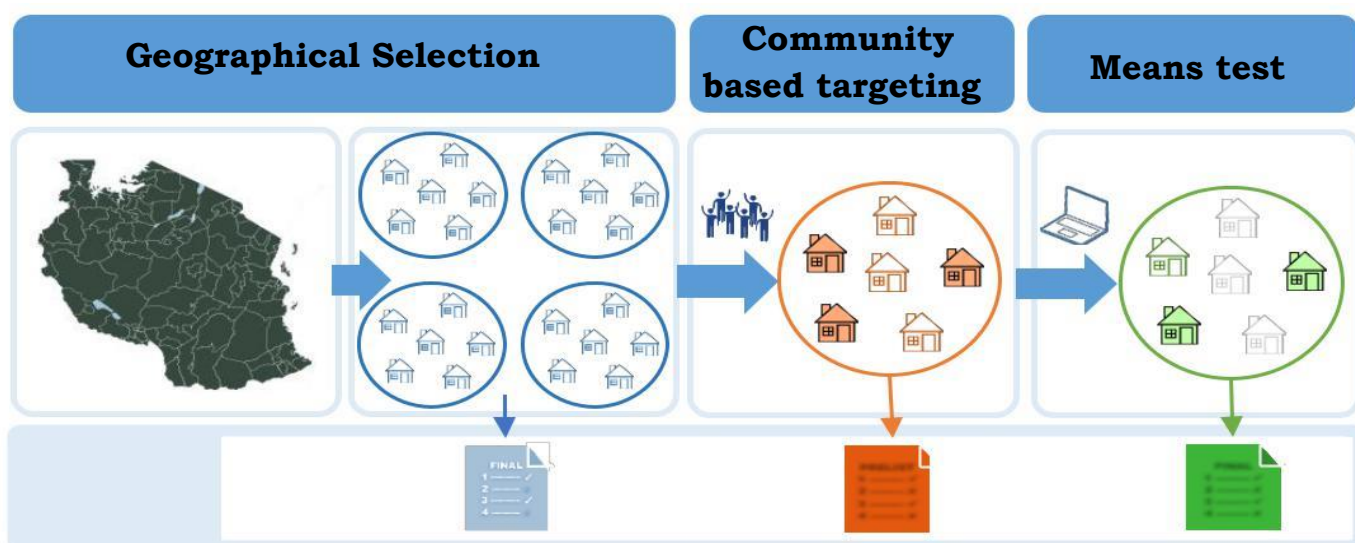
Figure 2: Targeting Mechanism

As at March 2021, the NSR has a total of 7,653,684 PVHHs, out of which 61% male are heads of household while 39% are female heads of households. The households translate into 32,682,171 individuals (49% male and 51%female). On the average, statistics available from the NSR shows that household size for the PVHHs is 4.8 persons.
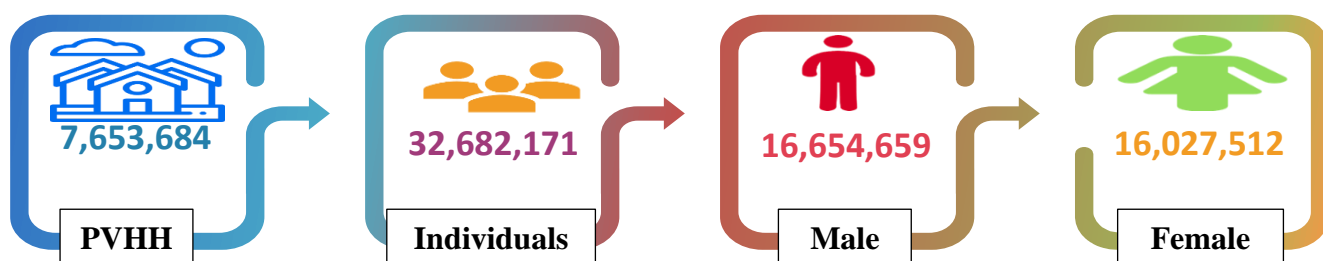

Figure 3: Disaggregation of the NSR as of March 2021

The Rapid Response Register aims to urgently identify, and capture excluded groups, made vulnerable by the economic impact arising from the COVID-19 pandemic and to **establish a shock responsive framework for accessibility and intervention of poor and vulnerable households in Nigeria during emergencies such as pandemics, flood, economic downturn and other natural and manmade**

disasters that may be beyond the immediate control of the Federal and State Government laydown structures. The specific objectives are;

- To carry out an online payment to 3 Million Poor and Vulnerable Households as an intervention to cushion the effect of COVID-19 pandemic
- To utilize satellite remote sensing technology, machine learning algorithm and big data analysis for targeting poor and vulnerable settlements in urban poor wards for interventions
- To utilize the TELCOS (Telecommunication Companies) digital platform for application of potential beneficiaries with field validation and enumeration for the purpose of social protection interventions

The Target areas of the Rapid Response Register is focused mainly in the Urban Poor wards selected using scientific validated methods of satellite Remote Sensing Technology, machine learning algorithm and big data analysis, which provided the basic platform for ranking the wards according to their respective poverty index and the availability of resources.

The machine learning algorithms that produce these maps accurately "learn" the hallmark patterns of wealth and poverty that are visible in overhead satellite images as well as other "Big Data" sources. This includes characteristics like the material that roofs are made from, nighttime lights, the size of farm plots, and the quality of roads. The machine-learning algorithms were trained using geo-coded "ground truth" data on household wealth from the 2018 Demographic and Health Survey (DHS). Thus, the generated satellite map provide a perspective on wealth and poverty that is much more fine-grained than could be achieved using traditional data alone.

The estimated poverty and wealth perspectives emanating from this machine learning approach are found to be strongly correlated with estimated poverty and wealth coming from the 2018/19 NLSS. The NLSS dataset was used as an independent validity test for the accuracy of the satellite imagery. To this extent this "Big Data" based poverty maps provided consistent rankings of poverty at the state level. Using the satellite imagery – and "Big Data" – based estimates in conjunction with official ward-level rural-urban classifications, makes it easy to categorize and rank urban wards based on their level of poverty (from the poor to the poorest). By using estimates of population constructed from a combination of satellite imagery and other data sources, a simulation is made on how to target support to the poorest urban wards, based on the complete ranking of the wards, and each ward's population estimate.

Similar to the geographic targeting and poverty mapping exercise, the process of identification for the rapid response register, uses phone-based technology infrastructure. Unstructured Supplementary Service Data (USSD) code is transmitted through the telecommunication service phone towers (masts) in each community to allow self-registration and enrollment of beneficiaries, which is then matched against cell phone data to confirm the profile of individuals targeted for the program – this process uses location-based targeting (Ward level); location specific phone information to identify and invite individual subscribers who live in the areas prioritized for the support to self-register by responding to a mass text sent out to residents of the delineated areas preselected for the program support who fulfil the required criteria (poor and vulnerable and can be identified through phone data profile) – phone ownership and density in urban ward is almost universal. The project is nonetheless mindful of potential threats of fraud through repeated registration or multiple registration by other means, as such the systems has built adequate safeguard measure including firewall, mitigating strategies as well as in-person enumeration of potential beneficiaries through home-visit, post-registration back-check of registered beneficiaries, capture and use geo-coordinates as part of the unique identity of beneficiaries as well as to track and trace beneficiary location.

Proposed Steps for the targeting of the potential beneficiaries
- Selection of the priority wards for assistance
- Prepare a detailed targeting and rollout plan (communication, team mobilization, logistics, training, implementation timeline, etc.)
- Sensitization and community awareness at each Ward level, and with concerned state and local government authorities.
- Telecommunication companies will be used to identify subscribers whose "home location" is in the priority-targeted areas (Wards)
- Agreement on the content of the Mass SMS to be sent out, including the purpose, criteria for eligibility, notification of location for registration and the calendar for registration etc.
- Telecommunication companies (TELCOS) send SMS messages asking if the subscriber wants to participate. The subscribers who would like to register can respond dialing short code sent through the text.

Special arrangement for categorical targeting of eligible beneficiaries is made to identify people with special needs and marginalized groups who may be challenged or not have access to cell phone SMS messages (using CSOs, database for social groups and CBOs, etc.) through the

registration of beneficiaries who use the project grievance redress mechanism to lay their complaints, registration of populations in disability camps, etc. We also have a separate mechanism for identification and registration of internally displaced person camps in fragile/conflict affected areas like the north-west and north-east of Nigeria

Once the registration is completed, the database is subjected to proxy means test (PMT) to as a rule prioritise the poorest households. As necessary, the final list of the selected beneficiaries will be posted in community identified public places for the purpose of transparency, and complaints that may arise can be handled through the grievance management procedure of the program.

At the completion of the exercise, about 20,196,650 population in 1,181 urban poor wards out of 2651 urban wards across the country in the first instance of the intervention has been established as the sample frame. This is to be followed by digital identification using the Unstructured Supplementary Service Data (USSD) link of TELCOS facility by dialing a unique code to access the application portal. The identification exercise will also be followed by validation, enumeration and subsequent payment.

The pilot phase of the Rapid Response Register has been completed in FCT and Lagos in January 2021 with a record success of 95% and the learnings from the result of the exercise have been tangible with the view of tremendously improving the full scale up of the Rapid Response Register.
It is noteworthy to mention that this social protection method of targeting is the first strategy developed and tested in the sub-Saharan African region and Nigeria will be the first country for the implementation with flag off ceremony of the Vice President of the Federal Republic Nigeria on 19th January 2021. Furthermore, the framework for the Rapid Response Register will serve as a sustainable tool for the rapid deployment and scale up of the Nation's Social Protection program and interventions.

6. Why is Nigeria Investing in Building a Single Register of Poor and Vulnerable Households?

Many programmes offer a myriad of social benefits and services to meet the diverse needs of poor people. Many of these benefits and services involve Social Protection and Labour (SPL) programs, which provide buffer to the poor against shocks. It also equips them to improve their

livelihoods and create opportunities to build a better life for themselves and their families.

In this context, a key question is "how?" How and where do people register for potential inclusion in these programs? How is eligibility determined? How do programs make enrolment decisions? How are benefits channelled to beneficiaries? How are services provided? These are all critical implementation phases for social programs, with citizens, institutions, and information systems interacting all along that delivery chain.

The Social Register targets Nigeria's poor and vulnerable population and is part of the Government's national social protection strategy focused on poverty eradication to identify poor populations and their needs and centralize information. The social register is the main tool used by Nigeria to select poor families and include them in social programs. It collects details, which can be used by various existing social programs to improve the lives of poor population.

Single Registry does not manage social programs but is restricted to identifying the potential beneficiaries. From a development perspective, the social registry could be used as the reference registry for the whole social protection system (including contributory schemes) in the country.

The collection and compilation of data on Nigeria's poor and vulnerable population will enable local governments and policymakers to develop a better understanding of this population and develop appropriate and coordinated programmes. The installation of a single registry for these population will increase social assistance programme outreach and mitigated the risks of data manipulation, fraud, and clientelism. Progressive adjustments and improvements to the single registry will allow for better transparency and traceability of the social protection system, notably through online access and automatic controls with other existing administrative databases.

7. Challenges

The combination of targeting mechanisms used by Nigeria aims to ensure that interventions are targeted only at the poorest communities, using community knowledge to reach the poorest households within the selected communities, to minimize exclusion errors; and verify selection of beneficiaries at the household level using PMT. One of the main challenges identified, however, in this project has to do with tackling

the errors of inclusion and exclusion; especially now that community members could link the community-based targeting exercise with the ongoing National Cash Transfer.

8. Conclusion

The collection and compilation of data on Nigeria's poor and vulnerable population will enable local governments and policymakers to develop a better understanding of this population and direct programmes and resources appropriately. The development of a single registry for these population sub-group will increase social assistance programme outreach and mitigate the risks of data manipulation, fraud, and clientelism. Progressive adjustments and improvements to the single registry will allow for better transparency and traceability of the social protection system, notably through online access and automatic controls with other existing administrative databases.

In spite of the teething challenges, the NSR in Nigeria has become a reality. Ministries, Department and Agencies (MDA), State governments, Development partners and international donor agencies have demonstrated high level of confidence by mining from the NSR for various interventions.

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