

Persistence in the Face of Deficiencies: External Interests and Centralised Decision-Making in Cambodia's IDPoor

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Abstract

This article critically examines the political forces and processes driving the persistence of the Identification of Poor Households (IDPoor) programme, the Cambodian government's poverty targeting system and social registry. The IDPoor was established and institutionalised with strong support from donors. Despite its problems, such as significant targeting errors and how easily its data can become obsolete, the IDPoor continues to be deployed and used in multiple programmes, thus perpetuating and reproducing these problems. Based on fieldwork in Cambodia and extensive document analysis, I argue that external forces and interests represented by donors and international institutions, together with so-called “transnationalised” policy actors, are driving the continued use of the IDPoor social registry. The research found that the politics in and around the social registry is marked by centralised and top-down decision-making, excluding important voices like those living in poverty, labour groups, and programme implementers on the ground. The case of the IDPoor exhibits the dominant agendas that continue to shape Cambodian social protection.

Keywords

Cambodian social protection; external influence; IDPoor; poverty targeting; social registry; transnationalised actors

1. Introduction

The Identification of Poor Households (IDPoor) programme is the official poverty targeting system and social registry of the Cambodian government. It was launched in 2007 as the beneficiary selection mechanism of the health equity fund (HEF), Cambodia's primary social health insurance programme for the poorer sections of the population. Households that are deemed poor by the IDPoor qualify for the HEF.

Literature on Cambodia's HEF programme, cash transfers, and social protection in general tend to treat the IDPoor superficially. The few studies centred on the IDPoor generally focus on its history, processes, and performance, and are mostly celebratory assessments. For example, some studies commended the community participation component, which was integral in the IDPoor's original design, i.e., the preselection of poor households. Community participation supposedly enhanced targeting accuracy while keeping programme costs low (deRiel, 2017; Kaba et al., 2018). Also, the unified registry of poor households supposedly helped address administrative fragmentation across programmes (Kaba et al., 2018; WHO, 2022). Some studies also credited the IDPoor for the roll-out of various government schemes during the pandemic, especially the Cash Transfers for the Poor and Vulnerable Households During Covid-19. The on-demand approach, the IDPoor's new design, supposedly identified poor households in a timely manner, allowing for the faster delivery of assistance (Birdsall, 2022; Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade [DFAT], 2023; Pagnathun et al., 2021).

There have been studies showing the challenges and deficiencies of the IDPoor. For instance, a 2011 World Bank-commissioned evaluation found high levels of exclusion errors, ranging from 25 to as high as 56 percent, depending on the benchmark used to measure targeting performance (World Bank, 2011). Studies on programmes using the IDPoor also indicated significant targeting errors. A study on the HEF, the biggest IDPoor user, found that, as of 2017, only 26 percent and 17 percent of households in the poorest and second poorest quintiles reported being covered by the HEF (Jithitikulchai et al., 2021, p. 29). The data imply significant exclusion errors in the HEF and, by extension, the IDPoor being the HEF's beneficiary selection mechanism. The shift to a completely on-demand approach since the pandemic was, in fact, based on the realisation that the IDPoor list of poor households was obsolete and less useful at such a critical time (Birdsall, 2022; Chhoeung et al., 2022; Shrestha et al., 2021; Wahyudi et al., 2022). However, instead of reconsidering the relevance of the IDPoor, it has been sustained, albeit with further improvements for better targeting performance.

In spite of development partners being clearly embedded in the IDPoor from inception to institutionalisation, relevant literature tends to ignore this. At best, the role of donors is acknowledged, but not scrutinised. Considering the implications of external influence for policy autonomy and the long-term trajectory of social protection in developing countries, it is crucial to investigate the role of external actors and, more generally, the politics of externally backed reforms in the Global South.

This article addresses two gaps observed in the literature on the IDPoor, namely, the lack of analysis on the politics surrounding the IDPoor and the dominance of favourable assessments of the targeting system-cum-social registry. In particular, the article answers the question: Why has the IDPoor persisted despite its deficiencies? By looking into the evolution of the IDPoor, including its challenges and problems, I argue that its persistence is underpinned by the intersecting interests and agendas of donors and the Cambodian government, buttressed by the centralised and top-down decision-making characterising the politics in and around the targeting system.

I elaborate my argument in five sections. Section two, which follows this introduction, reviews the state of research on social registries in general and on the IDPoor in particular. Section three outlines the research methodology. Section four discusses the evolution of the IDPoor and demonstrates the deep involvement of donors in the various phases and processes of the targeting system. Section five sheds light on the

limitations of the IDPoor by discussing the two major periods of its 18-year implementation, namely, the pre-identification and on-demand periods. The section also discusses the powerful interests driving the persistence of the targeting system. In the conclusion, I reflect on the broader politics around the IDPoor and the possible implications of its continued use in various programmes.

2. Examining Narratives on Targeting Performance

Along with cash transfers and other poverty-targeted programmes, the poverty targeting system-cum-social registry is an important element of the social protection model that international development actors have promoted across developing countries since the 2000s. A World Bank paper describes social registries as “information systems that support outreach, intake, registration, and determination of potential eligibility for one or more social programmes” (Leite et al., 2017, p. 5). Based on this definition, social registries should be understood not in the conventional sense of a registry of all citizens or residents of a country, but as a partial registry of potential recipients of poverty-targeted programmes. Social registries are called many names, including single registries, unified registries, “social cards,” beneficiary systems, and household targeting systems (Leite et al., 2017). In this article, I use the terms poverty targeting mechanism/system and social registry interchangeably to refer to the IDPoor.

There are several types of poverty targeting mechanisms (see Kidd & Athias, 2019), but the one that is based on the proxy-means test (PMT) has been increasingly implemented in the Global South. More than 50 developing countries are reportedly using PMT-based targeting mechanisms, collectively holding data of over a billion people (Aiken et al., 2023; Guven et al., 2025). The PMT methodology was developed to address concerns that conventional means testing might not be effective in developing countries due to the large number of people in the informal economy, which makes it difficult to determine their incomes (Kidd et al., 2017, p. 1). The PMT methodology predicts income and welfare levels of households rather than individuals using a statistical model and proxies that are commonly based on household characteristics, housing conditions, and ownership of assets (Kidd & Athias, 2019, p. 8).

As observed by Aiken et al. (2023, pp. 1–2), the PMT methodology is widely studied in the economics literature, where evaluations typically quantify exclusion and inclusion errors and generally find that, despite its imperfections, including the sometimes-significant targeting inaccuracies, the PMT often performs better than other targeting approaches that are viable to pursue. Such findings, however, should be taken with a grain of salt. Aiken et al. (2023, p. 2) themselves note that most of these evaluations look at a single point in time, namely, the period from household assessments to the generation of a list of poor households and the initial use of this list in programmes, which is also when PMT performance is at its peak. Over time, PMT performance weakens even as household conditions and poverty status change. Beyond the technical issues, critical social policy scholarship cautions against the political-economy implications of targeting, notably on how it widens fragmentation of provisioning across social groups or classes, thus limiting the possibility for cross-class alliances and solidarities (Fischer, 2010, 2018; Franzoni & Sánchez-Ancochea, 2016; Mkandawire, 2005).

Meanwhile, studies on social registries, especially those associated with international organisations like the World Bank, focus on the merits and potentials of these instruments. Recently, the concept of “dynamic social registries” as a critical element of “adaptive social protection” was proposed (see, e.g., Alberro Encinas

& Geschwind, 2025; Azad, 2022; Guven et al., 2025). The term “dynamic” refers to the on-demand, continuous, and all-year-round registration of poor households (Azad, 2022, p. 2). The term “adaptive” ties social protection to disaster risk reduction and climate change adaptation, in that social protection, particularly safety net programmes, helps poor and vulnerable households build their capacities to prepare for, cope with, and adapt to shocks (T. Bowen et al., 2020). A key building block of adaptive social protection is a robust data and information system, which includes the social registries. According to T. Bowen et al. (2020), such a system underpins the design and implementation of safety net programmes and allows for adjustments or scaling-up of support during shocks.

Even though powerful forces and agendas are an important driving force of the diffusion of social registries in the Global South, there is a dearth of studies on the politics around these instruments. Clearly, these forces include donors and other international entities, whose role in social protection expansion in developing countries is widely acknowledged in relevant literature. Scholarships on policy diffusion (e.g., Béland, 2014; Debonneville & Diaz, 2013; Foli, 2016; Howlett et al., 2018; H. Kwon et al., 2015), global social policy (e.g., Deacon et al., 1997; Yeates, 2014), and political settlements (e.g., Lavers & Hickey, 2015) analyse in varying degrees the role of external forces and the ways they wield influence in policymaking processes and outcomes in developing countries. Some of these works examine specific programmes like cash transfers, but only indirectly look into the social registries.

The emphasis on external influence does not preclude the role of domestic policy actors. Dadap-Cantal (2025), for instance, argues that external influence works with and through “transnationalised” actors, which she defines as domestic actors who are simultaneously external due to their ideational or ideological affinity with external forces. These actors are produced and reinforced through their close engagement with global actors and participation in global policy networks (Dadap-Cantal, 2025). The close relationship between external and transnationalised actors was evident in the evolution of the IDPoor in Cambodia. However, studies on the IDPoor reflect the state of research on social registries at the international level, which, as earlier noted, mostly discounts the politics and powerful agendas driving these instruments.

To begin with, studies on the IDPoor are scarce. Even if the social registry is the backbone of beneficiary selection in major social protection programmes in Cambodia, relevant literature tends to examine the IDPoor superficially, if not ignore it completely. Reports on the different social assistance measures in the country during COVID-19 illustrate this point (see, e.g., Chan et al., 2023; Chhim et al., 2023; Chhoeung et al., 2022; Im & Ford, 2024; Im & Oum, 2021; Levy, 2021). In these works, the IDPoor and some of its issues are acknowledged but not thoroughly investigated.

Meanwhile, the few studies on the IDPoor tend to delve into the history, design, and performance of the targeting system. In terms of performance, existing studies generally emphasise the purported success of the IDPoor in identifying poor and vulnerable households, and its role in providing the basis for designing different social protection programmes (see, e.g., Birdsall, 2022; deRiel, 2017; Kaba et al., 2018; WHO, 2022). Community participation, which used to be a defining component of the IDPoor, often figured in these studies (more on this in Section 5). This component supposedly helped improve targeting accuracy—albeit mostly unsubstantiated—while keeping costs relatively low (deRiel, 2017; Kaba et al., 2018). Also, the unified list of poor households supposedly enabled collaboration across sectors, paving the way for “complementarity and greater alignment of efforts, even without active coordination among actors” (Kaba et al., 2018, p. 3).

This point found support in a paper by the World Health Organisation highlighting that the harmonisation of poverty targeting helped reduce administrative fragmentation of programmes in the Cambodian health sector (WHO, 2022, p. 6).

There have been indications of the challenges and deficiencies of the IDPoor. However, extant literature on the programme is dominated by celebratory reports on the social registry (see, e.g., Birdsall, 2022; deRiel, 2017; Kaba et al., 2018; Pagnathun et al., 2021). Relevant literature stopped short of looking closely into the problems of the social registry, like the targeting errors and the issue of obsolete data. As such, the extent of the problems and their consequences remains obscured.

Furthermore, despite the apparent embeddedness of the so-called “development partners” in the introduction and institutionalisation of the IDPoor, accounts on the development of the targeting system treat donor involvement as a given and unproblematic (see, e.g., Birdsall, 2022; Bliss, 2017; deRiel, 2017; Kaba et al., 2018). Many of these accounts, though, are (co-)authored by people who are associated with or commissioned by the implementing ministry and/or donors. As a result, the dynamics and agendas driving the uptake of the targeting system and its persistence in the face of deficiencies have escaped scrutiny. Given the implications of external influence for policy autonomy and the long-term trajectory of social protection systems in developing countries, investigating the role of external forces and the broader politics of externally supported reforms in these countries is imperative. This article addresses this gap in the literature, just as it provides a counter-narrative to the mostly favourable reading of the IDPoor.

3. Methodology

The research applied a qualitative case study methodology to gain an in-depth understanding of how and why the social registry has come to be adopted, institutionalised, and ultimately sustained, despite its persistent problems and limitations. Following the insights of Yin (2009), the case study is “an all-encompassing method” (p. 18) that seeks to explain the “‘how’ or ‘why’...about a contemporary set of events over which the investigator has little or no control” (p. 13). With the kinds of questions that the research explored, the case study was the fitting methodology to employ.

Data were collected through key informant interviews, along with extensive document analysis. Key informants or “key knowledgeable,” as Patton (2015, p. 430) prefers to call them, are people who possess particular knowledge, experience, or expertise on certain topics. The key-informant-interview technique was chosen for this research in order to gather in-depth insights into and perspectives on the adoption, institutionalisation, and mainstreaming of the social registry, and other relevant themes, such as the role of particular ministries and donor organisations, domestic and external financing of the IDPoor, programmes that adopted the IDPoor for beneficiary selection, and the IDPoor’s outcomes and challenges. The interviews ($N = 39$) involving government and donor representatives, private consultants, and NGO staff were conducted using interview guides, which were developed based on the aforementioned themes. The interviews took place mainly during fieldwork in Cambodia from August 2017 to January 2018.

Ethical research standards, particularly on informed consent and confidentiality, were strictly followed during fieldwork. Accordingly, most of the interviews were recorded with informed consent from participants. For participants who did not want to be recorded, interview notes were taken instead. Finally,

the author assured the participants that anonymity would be observed in the reporting of the research findings, thus, in this article, interviewee names are withheld.

Along with interviews, the research also employed document analysis. According to G. A. Bowen (2009, pp. 30–31), documents are an important data source that “provides background and context, additional questions to be asked, supplementary data, a means of tracking change and development, and verification of findings from other data sources.” Bowen adds that documents may be the most effective data source, especially when events are no longer observable or participants have forgotten the details.

Document analysis in this research started as an exploratory endeavour aimed at helping the author understand the functioning of Cambodia’s social protection system and the country’s broader political-economy context. Later in the research, document analysis became purposive, intended to supplement or verify some interview data, and trace the evolution of and reforms in the IDPoor. The document analysis ($N = 158$) included 80 donor reports and publications, 41 government policy documents, and 37 media reports and features. Collectively, the interviews and document analysis allowed for an in-depth investigation of the politics driving the persistence of the IDPoor.

4. Donor Support From Inception to Institutionalisation

The IDPoor began in the mid-2000s and was closely tied to the HEF, which was introduced in Cambodia in 2000 (deRiel, 2017; Kaba et al., 2018). The IDPoor has served as the beneficiary selection mechanism of the HEF. Households identified as “poor” by the IDPoor automatically become HEF recipients. Meanwhile, the HEF is a fee-exemption initiative that entails reimbursing health facilities for a standard set of assistance and services they provide to beneficiaries (Annear, 2010; S. Kwon & Keo, 2019; Ministry of Health, 2009; OECD, 2017). The HEF was conceived as a response to the underutilisation of user fee exemption schemes intended for the poorer sections of the population and was implemented following the imposition of user fees in public health facilities in 1996–1997 (Ministry of Health, 2009). These user fees were part of earlier health sector reforms in Cambodia and were meant to mobilise additional resources for public health facilities, which, in the pre-existing system, provided free services (Ministry of Health, 2009). The introduction of user fees was based “on the advice of leading international agencies” like UNICEF, the World Bank, and the World Health Organisation (World Bank, 2008; see also Health Economics Task Force, 2000).

The idea to develop standardised criteria or procedures to identify the poor derived from fragmentation in the identification of beneficiaries among poverty-targeted programmes, and the confusion and inefficiencies ensuing from such fragmentation (deRiel, 2017; Kaba et al., 2018). In the early 2000s, different poverty-targeted initiatives in Cambodia, including the HEF, employed their own mechanism for selecting recipients (deRiel, 2017). This led, among others, to overlaps in project sites and households going through different selection processes, in which some were deemed eligible for certain schemes but not for others (deRiel, 2017).

In February 2005, the Ministry of Planning (MoP) held a forum on poverty reduction, with representatives of line ministries and major development partners as attendees (MoP, 2009). According to a senior IDPoor official, there was a consensus among participants on the need to have a standardised poverty targeting mechanism, given that back then the poverty data of various ministries and organisations were not

“shareable and comparable,” and “there was a huge wastage of resources over poor identification” (Personal interview, September 25, 2017). In June 2005, an interim working group on the identification of poor households was formed, with MoP as chair and the erstwhile German Technical Cooperation Agency (GTZ) providing technical assistance (MoP, 2009). The GTZ was a precursor of what is now the German Corporation for International Cooperation (GIZ), a development agency and service provider that is fully owned by the German Government (GIZ, n.d.)

Since its inception, the IDPoor has had the backing of development partners. The first and most prominent among them is GIZ. From the creation of the aforementioned interim working group to the official launch of the IDPoor in 2007, its institutionalisation as the government’s official poverty targeting system via sub-decree 291 in 2011, and its restructuring in 2021, GIZ has supported the IDPoor with financial and technical assistance. In terms of funding, GIZ allocations based on available data include 390,000 USD for the period 2012–2016 and 1.1 million USD for the years 2016–2022 (Doetinchem, 2014, 2015). Moreover, GIZ has a strong presence in the MoP central office in Phnom Penh. I remember that the first time I visited the IDPoor office in 2017, I was a bit confused to see the GIZ logo by the office door, and even more so when I was greeted by a German intern upon entering. Analysis implies the deep embeddedness of GIZ in the IDPoor process.

Another major donor of the IDPoor is the Australian Government DFAT. Together with GIZ, DFAT embarked on a project titled “Support to the Identification of Poor Households Programme” (deRiel, 2017), where it contributed about 800,000 USD between 2010 and 2012, 6.2 million USD from 2012 to 2016, and 5.4 million USD from 2016 to 2022 (Freeland, 2023). Previously, the European Union also provided funding of roughly 2.7 million USD, which helped fund the project “Identification of Poor Households in Rural Areas of Cambodia to Improve Food Security and Access to Essential Services,” jointly implemented by GIZ and the MoP from 2009 to 2011 (Hansen, 2010). In recent years, especially during Covid-19, the United Nations Development Programme in Cambodia provided tablets to facilitate the digitalisation of the IDPoor data collection and household registration (UNDP Cambodia, 2025).

Donors were fully funding the IDPoor until 2012. In line with this, an important target of the GIZ-DFAT project was an increase in government contribution to the IDPoor, as evident in this quote from two GIZ reports:

Indicator 5: In 2014, about 60 percent of the operational costs of the IDPoor Programme are allocated to MoP through the national budget law. (Baseline: allocation of 25% from government counterpart funds in 2012. Source: MoP budget 2014). (Doetinchem, 2014, p. 10, 2015, p. 11)

The above quote reflects the intent and effort of donors to persuade the Cambodian government to fund the IDPoor to ensure programme sustainability. This target was achieved. In 2012, the government began co-funding the IDPoor, contributing 25 percent (555,000 USD) of the two million USD annual operational cost. This funding increased to 40 percent (800,000 USD) in 2013, 70 percent (1.14 million USD) in 2014, and reached 100 percent in 2015 (Doetinchem, 2014, p. 10, 2015, p. 11). Note that until 2015, the IDPoor only covered rural areas. Consequently, the government was fully funding only the so-called “Rural IDPoor.” When the IDPoor started expanding to the urban areas in 2016, donors funded the pilot initiative. As with the Rural IDPoor, government contribution increased over time (Doetinchem, 2017).

Another key target of the GIZ-DFAT project was the wider use of the IDPoor data (Doetinchem, 2014, 2015). This target was also met. The German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) reported that as of 2015, 136 initiatives were using the IDPoor (deRiel, 2017). This means that, besides HEF benefits, households in the IDPoor social registry received a host of assistance from other schemes. In this regard, the IDPoor has been considered “a lifeline for the poor” (deRiel, 2017, p. 6).

Analysis indicates that the significant involvement of donors in the IDPoor, as expounded in this section, helps explain why it is important for donors that the social registry is sustained. The next section exposes how problematic the IDPoor has been, confronting issues of substantial targeting errors, data obsolescence, and futility in moments of emergency and great need. However, even as these problems cast doubt on the social registry’s ability to identify poverty and help people living in poverty, these have been tolerated, if not ignored, ensuring the IDPoor’s continuity.

5. Persistence Despite Deficiencies

The 18-year run of the IDPoor (2007–2025) is marked by two periods, the first one being the pre-identification period (2005–2020) and the second one the on-demand period (since 2020). “Pre-identification” refers to the original design of the IDPoor, where periodic household assessments were conducted to identify poor households. Meanwhile, “on-demand” means that people themselves voluntarily submit to assessment if they want to be included in the IDPoor social registry.

5.1. Pre-Identification Period

In this period, the IDPoor combined PMT and community participation, and hence was dubbed a “hybrid” model of poverty targeting (deRiel, 2017; OECD, 2017). As with any PMT, the IDPoor uses proxies or predictors of income, each of which is assigned a corresponding score (MoP, 2012). In the IDPoor, the higher the total score a household gets across the different proxies, the higher its chance of being included in the social registry. A total score of 59–68 points is deemed “very poor” (IDPoor 1), while a score of 45–58 points is “poor” (IDPoor 2) and 0–44 points is “non-poor” (MoP, 2012, p. 19).

Meanwhile, community participation occurred through village volunteers who were charged with important tasks on the ground, namely, deciding which households to include in/exclude from the assessments, conducting household assessments, formulating preliminary lists of poor households, and holding community meetings that served as a grievance mechanism and a venue for vetting the tentative households lists (see MoP, 2012, 2017). Household assessments in this period were held yearly but only covered a third or eight to nine of Cambodia’s 25 provinces (GIZ, 2016). This means that the lists of poor households per province were updated every three years.

In 2011, the World Bank, through funding from DFAT, commissioned an evaluation of the IDPoor processes and implementation. The World Bank did not publish the report online, but I got hold of it, along with the peer review document and response from DFAT, through a social protection expert who was privy to DFAT’s work in social protection in Cambodia and who voluntarily furnished me a copy of the documents. According to this expert, one reason why the report had not been published was that the author, peer reviewer, and the IDPoor implementers and donors could not agree on the report’s key messages.

Although the report is dated, it remains a valuable resource because, unlike the mostly laudatory reviews of the IDPoor, it was critical and showed important limitations in the IDPoor design and implementation. The report also offers a glimpse into whose agendas prevail and whose voices are put aside vis-à-vis the IDPoor. For instance, the report showed substantial targeting errors.

The evaluator created three benchmarks, namely, consumption, predicted consumption, and household perceptions, against which the accuracy of the IDPoor was measured. Figure 1 shows that, when compared against the per-capita and predicted-per-capita consumption benchmarks, exclusion errors among “very poor” and “poor” households (first and second sets of bars) are high, ranging from 44.5 to about 57 percent. The IDPoor performs slightly better in the household-perception benchmark, with exclusion error among very poor households at about 14 percent, although quite high among poor households at 42.5 percent. The inclusion errors (third set of bars) are also quite high at 25 to 26 percent based on the consumption benchmarks and almost 12 percent in the household-perception benchmark.

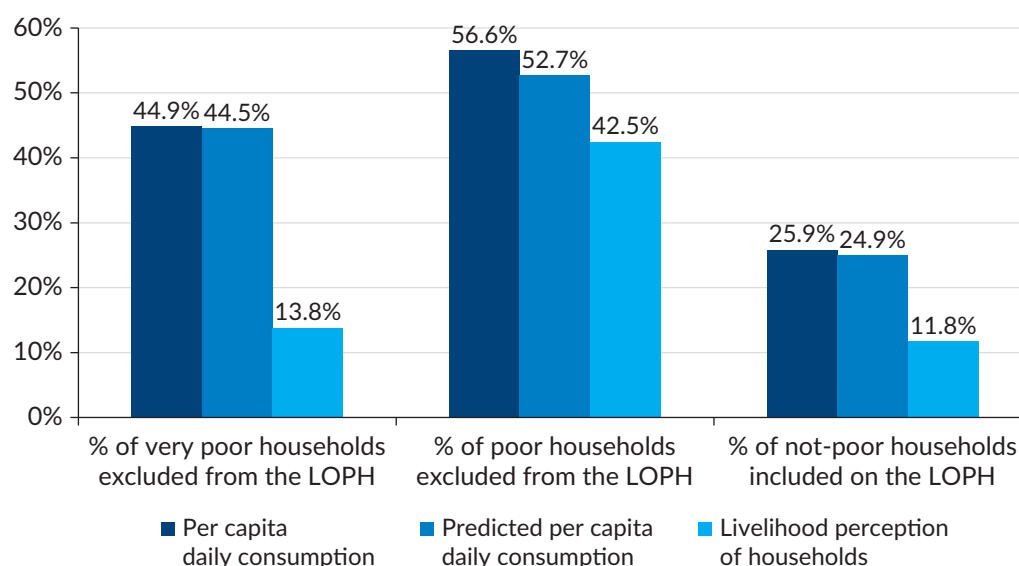


Figure 1. IDPoor exclusion and inclusion errors, by external benchmark (adapted from World Bank, 2011, p. 28).

The peer reviewer took note of the significant targeting errors, concluding that the IDPoor was “an inaccurate targeting methodology” and that “significant caution should be taken in using [it] given the inaccuracies in its targeting” (as cited in the peer-review document of 2011, p. 1). GIZ disagreed and responded on the margins of the peer review document, emphasising that the IDPoor performed well based on household perceptions and that it was “designed to identify poor in a way that closely matches the perceptions of local people” (as cited in the peer-review document, p. 5). This claim is only partially true. As Figure 1 shows, exclusion error among poor households is more than 40 percent based on household perceptions. Moreover, it should be noted that the World Bank itself normally uses consumption to measure targeting performance.

Interestingly, despite the significant targeting errors, the message that was highlighted and reproduced over the years was that the IDPoor performed well relative to the targeting systems of other countries (see Bliss, 2017; deRiel, 2017). Kaba et al. (2018, p. 3) even underlined the point related to the household-perception benchmark, noting that the “World Bank assessment determined that, on average, surveyed households rated

the accuracy and implementation of the IDPoor process as high.” This implies that the laudatory narrative on the IDPoor continued, while the criticisms were sidelined. Importantly, this means that the deployment of the IDPoor across various programmes has been sustained. Considering the significant exclusion errors of the social registry, this further means that a large number of poor households have been systematically excluded from multiple programmes.

Indeed, reports on schemes that use the IDPoor for selecting beneficiaries reveal significant exclusion errors. One such scheme is the HEF, the biggest IDPoor user. An OECD review of the Cambodian social protection system in 2017 found that as of 2014, the HEF covered 2.9 million people or about 18 percent of the total population of 16 million that year (OECD, 2017). The review emphasised that 90 percent of HEF recipients were poor according to the 2014 Cambodia Socio-Economic Survey (CSES). However, it also underlined that there were 7.3 million people identified as poor and vulnerable by the 2014 CSES, while barely three million were HEF recipients. The review concluded that the HEF, and thus the IDPoor—being the HEF’s beneficiary selection mechanism—excluded a large proportion of poor and vulnerable people (OECD, 2017, p. 79). A recent study on the HEF supports the OECD finding. The said study found that, in 2017, only 26 percent and 17 percent of households in the poorest and second poorest quintiles, respectively, reported being covered by the HEF (Jithitikulchai et al., 2021, p. 29). As with the OECD finding, these numbers suggest significant exclusion errors in the HEF, and thus in the IDPoor.

Since the mid-2000s until at least 2021, donors and implementers celebrated the community participation component of the IDPoor (see Birdsall, 2022; Bliss, 2017; deRiel, 2017). Community participation supposedly helped increase accuracy and keep programme costs relatively modest. The claim on accuracy, however, lacks substantiation. The significant targeting errors alone throw this claim into question. Regarding programme costs, recall that the IDPoor relied on the marginally remunerated labour of village volunteers who performed crucial tasks on the ground. This certainly helped lower the costs of running the programme. Finally, it should be pointed out that community participation was happening at the lower tier (i.e., implementation on the ground) of the decision-making ladder. Major decisions in and around the IDPoor, such as on setting up the targeting system in the first place, its general design, the reforms it pursued, and sustaining it amidst limitations, have always been centralised and top-down, involving only key actors in government and donor organisations. This manner of decision-making came to light during the pandemic, when the IDPoor went through a major reform.

5.2. On-Demand Period

The pandemic was a key moment for the IDPoor. The government launched the Cash Transfer Programme for Poor and Vulnerable Households During Covid-19, among other responses to the socio-economic impact of the lockdowns (Pagnathun et al., 2021). The programme was intended for households in the IDPoor social registry and, alternatively, was called the Covid-19 Cash Transfers for IDPoor Families/Households (see Samheng, n.d.; Sun, 2020; UNDP Cambodia, 2021; UNICEF Cambodia, 2020). GIZ and DFAT (2020, p. 1) described the initiative as “Cambodia’s first large-scale cash transfer programme.” As of January 2024, the cash transfers reportedly benefited 710,000 IDPoor households or about 2.9 million people, accounting for 17.2 percent of the total population in 2023 (Socheata, 2024). The centrality of the IDPoor in such a major initiative validated the support of its long-time donors, GIZ and DFAT. During the launch of the cash transfer programme on 20 June 2020, GIZ and DFAT released a joint statement describing the occasion as “a historic

moment for Cambodia,” and, in a way, congratulating themselves: “We are proud of our longstanding support for the Ministry of Planning’s [IDPoor] Programme, which will enable the implementation of this important initiative” (GIZ & DFAT, 2020, p. 1).

While the cash transfer programme was celebrated by development partners, it also exposed serious shortcomings of the IDPoor. During the pandemic, both the government and donors realised that the IDPoor was unable to promptly identify households that recently fell into poverty, not to mention that the available IDPoor data at that time was already two to three years old (Birdsall, 2022; Chhoeung et al., 2022; Shrestha et al., 2021; Wahyudi et al., 2022). A technical report by the Asian Development Bank noted:

Some households lacked continuous updates since many households kept slipping into poverty. For this reason, the government received only not fully up to date data and had to rely on it to create the programme of direct assistance to the poor in rural and urban areas [i.e., Covid-19 cash transfers]. (Chhoeung et al., 2022, p. 4)

The evidence points to the IDPoor’s failure to capture the churning in and out of poverty of many households, which would have been critical at the height of the pandemic.

To address the static tendency of the IDPoor data, the government and donors developed the On-Demand IDPoor in the years before the pandemic. The urgency to have an updated IDPoor data during the pandemic accelerated the nationwide roll-out of the On-Demand IDPoor, which was, in fact, used as the main beneficiary selection mechanism of the Covid-19 cash transfers (Birdsall, 2022; Chhoeung et al., 2022; Shrestha et al., 2021; Wahyudi et al., 2022).

Barely two months into the implementation of the Covid-19 cash transfers and the roll-out of the On-Demand IDPoor, the government decided to replace the IDPoor’s pre-identification approach with a completely on-demand process. A GIZ report stated that the government was “convinced by the speed, efficiency, and power of the on-demand approach, [and] decided in August 2020 that, henceforth, IDPoor would be fully on-demand” (Birdsall, 2022, p. 24; see also Asian Development Bank, 2021). This major change means the discontinuation of the periodic household assessments and the community participation component of the IDPoor, albeit it remains PMT-based.

Evidence gathered from donor publications illustrates that donors generally frame the reform as further improvement to the targeting system, thus continuing the laudatory narrative on the IDPoor. Accounts on the reform emphasised, for example, that the on-demand approach allowed for the collection of real-time data on poor and vulnerable households, which would enable the delivery of assistance more quickly (see Birdsall, 2022; DFAT, 2023; Pagnathun et al., 2021). However, analysis reveals that behind these pro-IDPoor accounts, the reform actually entails changing, if not abandoning, some processes and tools that the government and especially donors have funded and nurtured since the mid-2000s. A case in point is the community participation component of the IDPoor, which was rendered redundant by the shift to the on-demand approach. Further analysis reveals that the reform actually reflects the futility of the original IDPoor design (i.e., pre-identification approach) at such a crucial time as the pandemic. That moment would have been a good opportunity to showcase the IDPoor’s role in facilitating the provision of assistance via its pre-identified list of poor households. Yet, it failed to do so because such a list proved obsolete. Many years

of investments resulted in data sets that were futile. Nevertheless, instead of reconsidering the relevance of the IDPoor amidst its weaknesses, donors have supported further “improvements” to the targeting system.

I argue that this recent reform embodies the centralised and top-down decision-making in and around the IDPoor. It also supports my earlier claim that community participation, a vaunted component of the IDPoor, was happening at the lower tier of the decision-making ladder. Just as the decision to embark on a unified social registry was only made by a few government and donor actors, so was the decision to change the IDPoor into a completely on-demand approach. The community is at the receiving end of the decisions made at the top. These points, however, do not dismiss the possibilities for empowerment on the ground. The community participation component may have allowed community members to voice out their concerns, and on the part of the village volunteers, to make decisions and exercise some level of authority. Perhaps the recent shift to the on-demand approach would be empowering for potential recipients in the sense that they decide whether or not to have their households assessed. Without ruling out these possibilities, my observation stands: Major decisions in and around the IDPoor come from the top.

5.3. Explaining Persistence

Throughout fieldwork and analysis, it was found that the persistence of the IDPoor could be explained by the fact that it serves certain interests. First, it is in the interest of donors that the IDPoor is sustained, as it justifies their longstanding support for the targeting system. Understandably, it would have been difficult to imagine, and even more so to acknowledge, that their financial and technical support since 2005 was in vain. Donors maintain that “continuous investments in the institutions, human resources, information systems, and processes, which underpin IDPoor have laid the foundations of a comprehensive social protection system that can serve the country well in the long term” (Birdsall, 2022, p. 4). Analysis suggests a sense of optimism that, at least, they are doing something important even if imperfect. Such optimism, however, has important welfare implications. Notably, it perpetuates a selective and poverty-centric model of social protection that, by its nature and as shown by the evidence presented earlier, excludes a significant number of people who are also in need of assistance (e.g., people just above the poverty threshold).

Second, it is also in the interest of the government that the IDPoor is sustained. The IDPoor has become a regular government programme and a cornerstone of Cambodia’s social protection (Birdsall, 2022). Already, it has built a constituency that includes not only recipient households but also bureaucrats and state officials who are involved in the programme and have benefited from this involvement in terms of career prospects, networking opportunities, and skills training and upgrading, among other incentives. Reflecting on this, the IDPoor is, to a degree, politically entrenched, and thus sustaining it makes sense in order to justify the millions-worth of government investments in the programme and to avoid possible political consequences.

Third, as a donor-promoted instrument, the social registry contributes to Cambodia’s standing within the donor community and international social protection circles. The expanding evidence base on the merits of the IDPoor puts Cambodia on the map of good practices in social protection, potentially facilitating access to material benefits. Analysis suggests that the IDPoor functions as an important, though not singular, policy instrument that helps strengthen the government’s position in negotiating projects or securing external funding for critical national needs. The insight from an official of the Cambodian Ministry of Economy and Finance supports this point. My interviewee revealed that, due to limited government resources, the

Cambodian government has welcomed the assistance of donors and other entities in sectors or communities that could otherwise only receive marginal, if any, support from the national budget (Personal interview, November 25, 2017). This statement suggests that sustaining the IDPoor serves as a strategic move of the Cambodian government to mobilise support, especially funding, for the country's critical needs, such as in the areas of healthcare, emergency response, etc.

Fourth and closely related to the previous analysis, the IDPoor helps the government project an image of caring for its people, even if limited and imperfect. The extent to which this lends to regime legitimacy or stability is an empirical question. However, at the very least, the IDPoor allows the government to claim to its constituencies and the international community that it is doing something for its citizens, especially those who are living in poverty.

6. Conclusion

The politics driving the IDPoor is marked by a strong presence of donors, working closely with and through domestic policy actors with whom they share interests and policy paradigms, including a faith in poverty targeting. Findings imply that donor involvement in social protection impeded policy autonomy, as illustrated, for instance, by donor targets that entailed deliberate attempts to persuade the Cambodian government to increase its contribution to the IDPoor and to mainstream the social registry in the wider social protection system. That deep donor involvement has important implications for policy autonomy is an insight that applies not only to Cambodia but also to other developing countries where donors are deeply embedded.

Furthermore, decision-making in and around the IDPoor has always been centralised and top-down. The research found that the beginnings of the programme were not backed by social mobilisation. There was no demand for it from below, which means that the adoption of the IDPoor and its subsequent institutionalisation and continuity did not really reflect what people wanted or needed. This finding speaks to the wider politics of social registries and other donor-promoted reforms in social protection in the Global South. Such politics is technocratic and steered by a few actors, which risks the reforms failing to address people's needs and leaving them vulnerable to shifts in the domestic political climate or donor priorities.

Moreover, the IDPoor was found to be problematic, marred by significant targeting errors, data obsolescence, and futility during emergency and great need. These problems, however, are not unique to the IDPoor. They resonate with the perennial problems associated with poverty targeting as experienced and seen elsewhere (see Dadap-Cantal et al., 2021; Kidd & Athias, 2019; Kidd et al., 2017). These problems render the social registry ineffective in addressing poverty and its dynamic nature, as well as reinforce tendencies towards differentiation and fragmentation in the wider social protection system.

Finally, the research found that the deficiencies of the IDPoor did not trigger a serious rethinking of its relevance. Instead, the IDPoor is sustained. Interestingly, the same dynamics were observed in the Philippines, where the social registry persists despite serious limitations (see Dadap-Cantal, 2025). The continued use of the social registry perpetuates the problems of poverty targeting. It also reflects the dominant voices and interests, notably those of donors, that continue to shape social protection in developing countries.

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