WHAT IS WRONG WITH SELF-TARGETING?

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Abstract:
Self-targeting (ST) is a method used to allocate social transfers toward specific households. This method is an alternative to classical targeting (T) based on selecting specific areas or villages, selecting specific categories of households, or relying on the persons in charge of local communities. The principle of ST is very simple: the transfers are proposed to all households in the community but conditions are created to discourage households that are not in need to ask for them. Three basic methods are used: low quality food is distributed; queues are created intentionally when distributing the food or the cash; a matching contribution in the form of work is asked. Many experts are enthusiastic with ST because it proves to be much more effective than T. However, others persons are horrified by ST. The paper addresses three puzzles: identify what drives the feeling (felt by many people) that there is something wrong with self-targeting; explain why some people are horrified by self-targeting while others do not see any problem with it; specify who is wrong and who is right, i.e. clarify if there is really something wrong with self-targeting. To solve the first puzzle, we compare ST with T by using different criteria proposed by ethics and related to endowments, welfare and freedoms. We also mobilized empirical results produced by anthropologists of development showing the numerous unintended effects of targeted cash transfers implemented in Niger in 2005. This led us to propose a hypothesis that explains not only the first puzzle but also the two others.

Keywords:
social transfer ; food aid; targeting, self-targeting; ethics ; anthropology of development

The first time I heard about self-targeting (the topic was the self-targeting of food aid), I was horrified. Since then, I asked many people what they feel about it. And you know what? It seems humanity can be divided into two parts: those who are horrified and those who “don’t see where the problem is”. But I should first explain what is self-targeting.

1. SELF-TARGETING
Self-targeting is a method used to allocate social transfers toward specific households. Social transfers can be made of cash, food, voucher or other goods (for instance agricultural inputs). They can be implemented on a permanent basis (with the aim to reduce poverty or chronic malnutrition) or only when a crisis occur. In both cases, the challenge is to channel the transfers toward households who need them. And only toward these households: because, otherwise, the cost of the transfer program would be huge. And also because transfers may generate market distortions: cash transfers may distort the labor market, food transfers the food markets and fertilizer transfers the market for
fertilizers. This is the reason why it is usually considered necessary to restrict the group of recipients to household in needs.

The problem is that targeting households in needs is highly complicated. Several methods exist such as geographical targeting (based on identifying affected areas), administrative targeting (based on specific household-related criteria) or community-based targeting (based on relying on the persons in charge of local communities). All these methods are costly and, even when combined, they are also imperfect: part of households in needs are not covered (exclusion error) whereas part of households who don’t need the aid receive it (inclusion error), see matrix 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Recipients?</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>A: rightly included households</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No</td>
<td>C: wrongly excluded households (exclusion error)</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Empirical studies show that, for many transfer programs, the inclusion and exclusion rates are high, meaning not only that there are significant “leakages” (high percentage of non-poor or non-food insecure households included) but also (and this is much more problematic) that a high percentage of poor or food insecure households are not covered (Banerjee, 2016; Brown et al., 2016). Moreover, almost all empirical studies deal with permanent transfers, which are the type of transfers for which the targeting is less difficult because the persons in charge of designing the transfer program can implement large household surveys and build a database of households with detailed information on their needs and incomes. The case of emergency transfers is more complicated. When a food crisis or a famine occurs, you have very little time to implement the distributions and your means (including logistical means) are often limited. Although we have very few data for emergency transfers, it seems reasonable to assume that the targeting effectiveness is even (much) lower for them. With dramatic consequences, as targeting errors may result in strong deficiencies in calories or nutrients that may entail –directly or indirectly- the death and endanger the development of young children’s brain.

The practical issue is reducing the inclusion error and exclusion error rates. A way to proceed is applying less restrictive criteria to select the recipients. By so doing, you will reduce the exclusion error rate but increase the inclusion error rate. An alternative is to apply more sophisticated targeting methods (based, for instance, on detailed household surveys). Then, you may be able to reduce both types of errors. But the cost of the targeting will increase. If your budget is limited, this means that you will have to reduce accordingly the amount transferred (the number of recipients and/or the amount per transfer). There is in fact a kind of trade-off between the inclusion error rate, the exclusion error rate and the cost: reducing one of them often implies increasing at least one of the two others. A complicated puzzle. Even more complicated by the fact that the difficulties of targeting are not only (sometimes not mainly) technical: targeting is also likely to generate political economy issues, as decision-makers are likely to receive pressures to provide transfers to specific social groups.

Here comes self-targeting (ST). ST has been proposed as a solution to overcome the poor efficiency of classical targeting methods (T). The principle is very simple: the food aid is proposed to all households in the community but conditions are created to discourage households that are not in
need to ask for it. Three basic methods are used: low quality food is distributed; queues are created intentionally when distributing the food or the cash; a matching contribution in the form of work is asked. Of course, the “low quality food” distributed is always safe and nutritive: it is just that it does not fit with local habits and preferences. When a participation to public works is asked as a matching contribution (like in the “food for work” and “cash for work” programs), the wage should be low enough to discourage non-food insecure households from participating. But, of course, households who are not able to provide the work (because they are old, seek or with deficiencies) are exempted from this requirement.

The rationale of ST can be represented as follows. To get the transfer, you should accept an “inconvenience”: the matching contribution in work, the time spent in the queue or the reluctance of having to eat a food you do not like (depending on the modality of ST used). The utility generated by receiving a transfer can be expressed by $U = U(A) - C(I)$, $U(A)$ being the utility related to the amount $A$ received and $C(I)$ being the cost of the inconvenience intentionally introduced through the self-targeting method used. Why should this cost result in households self-selecting themselves in an effective way? Let us consider two households: a household $i$ that needs food aid and a household $j$ that does not need it. Their utility when receiving the transfer is given by: $U_i = U_i(A) - C_i(I)$ and $U_j = U_j(A) - C_j(I)$. We may reasonably expect $U_i(A) > U_j(A)$: the same amount of money or food will generate more utility when transferred to a poor or food insecure household than when transferred to an household from, let us say, the middle class. We may also reasonably expect $C_i(I) > C_j(I)$ the (opportunity) cost of the time spent queuing or working for the transfer program is likely to be higher for the less poor households because they usually have more economic opportunities. This means that we may reasonably expect $U_i > U_j$. If $I$ is correctly fine-tuned (the length of the queue, the level of quality of the distributed food, the wage paid for recipients’ work), we may expect that for (almost) all households in need, the utility of receiving the transfer will be positive (they will accept the transfer), whereas for (almost) all households not in need, this utility will be negative (they will not ask for the transfer). What ST is offering us is the promise of an effective targeting. We may even say the promise of an efficient targeting, as the cost of ST seems to be quite low, compared to classical targeting methods.

Now you know what self-targeting is. Are you shocked? Enthusiastic?

2. IS THERE SOMETHING WRONG WITH SELF-TARGETING?

Economists are usually enthusiastic. They like cost-effective tools and self-targeting is a very low cost method that proved to be effective in selecting only households in needs (see for instance Alatas et al., 2016). Some year ago, I had the opportunity to question two of the main international experts of food security and food aid. They said they do not see where the problem is. The first one gave me the example of Ethiopia where cash for work programs were implemented with the result of improving food security both in the short term -thanks to the cash transferred to food insecure households- and in the long term, because recipients’ work contributed to improve the roads and thereby the connection between surplus areas and deficit areas. The second expert gave me the example of Mozambique where imported yellow maize (considered as a low quality compared with the local white maize) succeeded in self-targeting food insecure households, while having no depressing effect on white maize price and production. Both of them said that, compared with the consequences of malnutrition, having to consume low quality food is not really a problem. And they are right of course, from some point of view.
One months later, I had the opportunity to discuss the same question with recipients of food aid, in France. They were complaining about the low quality of the distributed food and about the long queues to get their “basket”. I told them that, in developing countries, the low quality of the distributed food and the long queues are not only related to cost and logistical issues (as is the case in France), but were purposely created to generate self-targeting. You know what? They were horrified.

I replicated the “experiment” with many people. Some of them were experts on food aid, food security, poverty or social transfer programs. Others were not aware of these topics and I had to explain them what was social transfers, targeting methods and self-targeting. In both groups, some people were horrified while others do not see any problem with self-targeting methods.

The coexistence of these two (so contrasted) reactions raises several puzzling questions. First, what explains the feeling that “there is something wrong with self-targeting”? Second, why do some people only share this feeling whereas other do not see any problem with ST? Third, who is right and who is wrong? The general answer to the second question is obvious: people from the two groups apply different criteria. Answering the third question would therefore require using a kind of meta-criterion to assess the criteria used by both groups. But maybe the most puzzling question is the first one, a question that can be expressed like this: “What are the criteria used by people who feel that there is something wrong with self-targeting?”. For people of the other group (those who “do not see where the problem is”), it is quite easy. They are pragmatist people: they are in favor of what works and self-targeting works well (it targets effectively households in needs, at a low cost). Therefore applying self-targeting allows maximizing the impact of transfer programs on poverty or food insecurity. But, for the first group, it is more complicated. Although I am part of this group (I feel that “there is something wrong with ST”), I face difficulties to explain what is wrong. The analysis developed in this article is an attempt to answer this question.

3. WHAT IS WRONG WITH SELF-TARGETING?

Let us first clarify that I did not question the cost-effectiveness of self-targeting. The empirical literature converge toward the idea that self-targeting is very cost-effective, not perfect but much better than classical targeting. Although some divergent works emphasize the limits of ST (see for instance Alderman and Lidert, 1998), I will not enter into this debate. Even assuming that ST is very cost-effective, my feeling is that there is still a problem with it. In this article, to be extremely clear and simple, I will even assume that ST leads to perfect targeting (no inclusion or exclusion errors). And I will try to investigate what is wrong, in spite of this assumed perfectness.

How to go beyond cost-effectiveness? The point of departure is the observation that the cost-effectiveness of ST only refers to the point of view of the transfer program, with its objective (reduce poverty, improve food security) and its limited means. To go beyond cost-effectiveness, we have therefore to go beyond the point of view of the social transfers program. And consider the point of view of the households that are the potential recipients of the transfers. Then, the question we have to consider is the following: can their life be worsened because of the implementation of self-targeted transfers?

Answering this question requires criteria to compare the situation of the considered population with transfers targeted through classical methods (T) versus with self-targeted transfers (ST). Many criteria have been proposed by the numerous theories of justice. The authors of these theories usually consider that the criteria they propose should not be applied to a specific institution but to the complete set of institutions of a given society. Anyway, as we can consider social transfers as an optional institution (it can exist or not), it seems that we can use the clause ceteris paribus and discuss whether households’ situation with the transfers is better or worse than the situation without
the transfers and, similarly to compare the situations resulting from transfers with T versus ST. In other words, we can try to assess the contribution of transfers to the satisfaction of criteria of justice in the considered population, depending on whether they are targeted through T or ST. We will consider successively criteria based on endowments, welfare and freedoms, before considering the effect of transfers on social relations.

Endowments

The simplest and most intuitive way to analyze whether ST is better or worse than T is to considerer their impact on households’ endowments. To do this, we need a criterion allowing us to rank different set of endowments from the better to the worse. An intuitive criterion is based on equality. Under this criterion, ST can be considered as better than T if it contributes to reduce more the inequalities within the considered population. We will consider this criterion in a second step, but we have first to consider criteria more in line with the objectives of transfers. Indeed, transfers explicit objectives are not related to reducing inequalities but to reducing poverty or food insecurity. They are more related to a rationale of maximin (improve as much as possible the situation of the less favored persons). Therefore, they are closer to the “difference principle” proposed by John Rawls in his Theory of Justice (Rawls, 1997). However, for Rawls, the difference principle cannot be considered separately from another principle: the “fair equality of opportunity principle”. Let us consider these two principles.

Rawls’ “fair equality of opportunity principle” means that persons in a similar situation (e.g. the same skills) should have the same opportunities (e.g. job opportunities). Social transfers targeted through classical methods (T) are supposed to meet this criterion: all poor or food-insecure households are supposed to have access to the transfers, contrary to non-poor and non-food insecure households. However as, in practice, the targeting through classical methods (T) is always imperfect, some households in needs do not have access to the transfers (although they are in a quite similar situation as other households in needs who have access to the transfer) and symmetrically part of households who are not in needs have access to the transfers. Under this principle, ST is clearly better: as it offers the same opportunity to all households, a fortiori all households in a similar situation have the same opportunity to access the transfers. Quite the same conclusion can be drawn for Rawls’ “difference principle”. The targeting through classical methods (T) theoretically meets this principle: the difference made between households who do not have access and households who have access clearly advantages the less favored people because those who have access are poor or food insecure households. However, in practice, because of the targeting imperfectness, part of households in needs do not receive the transfers, whereas part of households not in needs receive them: the maximin rationale of the principle of difference (improving as much as possible the endowments of the less favored) is clearly not met. The situation is better with ST as the rate of targeting errors is lower with ST than with T. With the unrealistic assumption made in this article that ST leads to a perfect targeting, we can even say that ST fully meets the difference principle (the difference made between recipients and non-recipients clearly advantages the less favored people).

Although equality is not part of the explicit objectives of social transfers, we can consider the potential contribution of transfers to reducing inequalities. By increasing the endowments of poor households and only poor households, social transfers are supposed to reduce the gap between poor and non-poor households and, by this way, to contribute to reduce inequalities (although they do not affect inequalities within the group of poor households and within the group of non-poor households). Theoretically, this result holds whatever the targeting method used (T or ST). But, again, the imperfectness of targeting changes the picture. As ST is assumed to generate a better targeting than T, it is likely to contribute more to reducing inequalities. In brief, whatever the criteria used to
compare households endowments, ST seems to be better than T. If we want to understand what is wrong with ST, we have to move to other sets of criteria. Let us try criteria based on welfare.

Welfare

Criteria based on welfare take into account more information than criteria based on endowments. What matters is not only the objective consequences of the transfers (the food or cash received) but the way they affect the welfare of the recipients and potentially of the non-recipients.

The first step is clarifying the counterfactual: the reference situation can be no transfers (ST vs nothing) or transfers targeted by classical targeting methods (ST vs T). Let us consider first the case ‘ST vs nothing’. It seems that offering self-targeted transfers i) does not change the situation of the households who reject the transfer and ii) can only improve the situation of the households accept it. As self-targeting allows households to choose whether they want to be recipient or not, it allows them to put in balance all these costs and benefits: if properly informed, they will accept to receive the transfers only if for them the benefits are higher than the costs. Therefore, it seems that, when self-targeted, transfers are always beneficial for the recipients (and neutral for the other households). Therefore it seems that the situation with ST is always better than the situation without transfers (ST > nothing). In other words, implementing ST transfers always generate a better situation than no transfers, according to the Pareto criterion: it improves the situation of at least one person without deterring the situation of even a single person.

The second comparison (ST vs T) is more complex: shifting from T to ST generates both winners and losers. This can be easily understood by referring to the four categories of households described in matrix 1 and assuming that ST generate a perfect targeting. In a first step, we will also assume that the total amount transferred remained unchanged. With these assumptions, the winners and losers are as follows:

- Households from category A were already receiving the transfers with T and are still receiving it with ST. However, with ST they have to incur the cost of the inconvenience intentionally introduced (providing a matching contribution in work, queuing, or eating food products they dislike). Therefore, they are losing when the targeting method shifts from T to ST.
- Households from category B are clearly losing: they were receiving a transfer with T and they do not receive it anymore with ST.
- Households from category C are in the opposite situation: they were not receiving the transfers with T and they receive it with ST. As they choose to take the transfers whereas they were free to leave them, we know that the transfer is welfare-improving for them.
- Households from category D do not receive the transfers (neither with T nor with ST). For them, there is no difference between T and ST.

What can be said about the aggregated effect of shifting from T to ST? As there are winners and losers, we cannot apply the Pareto criterion (as we did for the comparison ‘ST vs nothing’). Anyway, assuming that individual utilities can be compared and aggregated, we can identify two factors playing in opposite direction. First, the total amount transferred (assumed to be unchanged) is allocated differently: the transfers toward households of category B are diverted toward households of category C. For the reasons explained in section 1, we can reasonably assumed that the utility generated by the same amount received is higher when the recipients are households in needs than

1 Setting aside the question of the financing of the transfer program (assuming that it is financed from outside, not by taxes paid by members of the considered population). Note also the way the transfer are funded is not affected by the way the targeting is done (T or ST): there is therefore no reason to think that the funding of the transfers can affect the compared performance of T and NT.
when they are not. This factor therefore plays in favor of ST being superior to T (in terms of aggregated welfare generated). The second factor is related to the cost C, purposely introduced in ST to incentivize the households to self-select themselves. It reduces the utility of all recipients (households of category A and C). Therefore, strictly speaking, the effect on aggregated welfare of shifting from T to ST is undetermined. Although the supporter of ST will argue that the gain in utility induced by better targeting poor or food insecure households is much higher than the cost of the inconvenience purposely introduced by self-targeting methods.

Two other factors support the idea that ST is likely to be better. The first one is related to the compared cost of T and ST. Until now, we assumed that the total amount transferred is the same with T and ST but, as ST is usually less costly, it seems more reasonable to assume that the money saved on the cost of targeting is used by the social transfer program to increase the amount transferred (the amount per transfer, the frequency of the transfers and/or the number of recipients). This is an additional reason for thinking that ST is likely to be better than T. The second factor is more subtle. It is related to psychological costs generated by T and (supposedly) removed by ST. The utilitarian framework is usually linked with a selfishness assumption: agents’ utility is assumed to be independent from the situation of other agents. Anyway, sociologists and psychologists showed that this is often not the case: for instance, people can be jealous or, on the contrary, altruist. The utilitarian framework can take into account this phenomenon: the only thing to do is to assume that the utility function of agent i depends on j’s income or utility. In the case of classical targeting methods (T), two effects have to be considered: recipients may feel stigmatized and non-recipients may feel excluded. An interesting consequence is that non-recipients may be negatively affected by a transfer program (their utility decreases if they feel excluded) but, more surprisingly, this can also be the case for recipients (if the disutility generated by stigmatization is higher than the utility generated by the amount received). With the final consequence that a transfer program implemented through T is not necessarily better than no transfers at all. As, with ST, households themselves choose to be recipient or not, it seems that the psychological costs related to the feelings of exclusion or stigmatization disappear or, at least, are strongly reduced. And this is the reason why, as we saw at the beginning of this section, ST can be considered as being Pareto-superior compared to the situation without transfers.

The situation can therefore be summarized as follows:

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<thead>
<tr>
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<th>(1) Utility with T</th>
<th>(2) Utility with ST</th>
<th>Δ Utility : (2) – (1)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Recipients</strong></td>
<td>U (A) – U(S)</td>
<td>U*(A*) – C(I)</td>
<td>U*(A*) – U (A) + U(S) – C(I)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Non recipients</strong></td>
<td>-U(E)</td>
<td>U*(A*) – C(I)</td>
<td>U*(A*) – U (A) + U(S) + U(E) – C(I)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>U (A) – U(S) -U(E)</td>
<td>U*(A*) – C(I)</td>
<td>U*(A*) – U (A) + U(S) + U(E) – C(I)</td>
</tr>
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The welfare gains generated by shifting from T to ST are therefore the following:

- U*(A*) – U (A) > 0 because i) A* > A : the money saved thanks to ST’s lower cost is used to increase the amount transferred and ii) U*(X) > U (X): the same amount transferred to an household in need generate more utility (and with ST –contrary to T- all recipient households are assumed to be households in needs).
- U(S) : the stigmatization cost is supposed to be nil (or at least lower) when the household itself chose to accept the transfer.
- U(E): the exclusion cost is nil when the household itself chose to reject the transfer.

The only element that plays against ST is the cost C(I) of the inconvenience purposely introduced to incentivize the households to self-select themselves. It is enough to say that the effect on aggregated welfare is theoretically undetermined. But at the same time, it is seems reasonable to assume that
most of the time \( C(I) \) is inferior to the three elements listed above (and therefore that ST is usually better than \( T \)).

To sum up, although there is no certainty that ST is better than \( T \) from the point of view of aggregated welfare, many elements suggest that it is the case, most of the time. In addition, the utilitarian approach did not give us good reasons to be horrified by ST, as it seems that ST does not generate dramatic consequences for households' welfare. Therefore, the two approaches we explored do not help us to identify what is wrong with self-targeting: neither the consequences on households endowments nor the consequences on households welfare seem to be horrific. These two approaches have in common to be purely consequentialist: they are only based on the objective (endowments) or subjective (welfare) consequences of \( T \) and ST. To go further, maybe it is worth exploring approaches that are not purely consequentialist: approaches based on freedoms.

** Freedoms

Different philosophical streams emphasized the importance of freedom to choose. No (as in the utilitarian approach) because more freedom to choose often results in better decisions (following the classical argument that individuals usually know better than anyone else what is good or convenient for them). But because they assume that *freedom to choose has a value in itself*, independently from its consequences on individuals or groups. This non-consequentialist approach based on freedom has deep roots in the history of thought. For instance, during the 18th century, the debate on slavery developed within two different frameworks: the utilitarian framework and a non-consequentialist framework based on human rights (within both frameworks, there was both supporters and opponents to the abolition of slavery).

During the 20th century, the non-consequentialist approach based on freedom has been mainly developed by the libertarian thought. People like Robert Nozick emphasized the role of the law and prohibitions in reducing individual freedoms (Nozick, 1988). They recommended minimizing as much as possible the scope of prohibited behaviors, putting a strong emphasis on the absolute respect of property rights. For instance, the property right one has on his own body should not be constrained by a law prohibited the sale of organs). The main argument of libertarians against social transfers is related to the way they are financed: if they are funded by taxes, these taxes may be viewed as unjustified constraints restricting individual property rights and freedom. I will not consider this argument here as I assume that the financing is external to the considered population (see footnote 1). However, the issue I have to deal with is the mirror image of taxes. Should we consider than receiving a transfer without having applied for it and without being willing to receive it, is an unjustified restriction of individual freedom? I am not referring here to unpleasant feelings associated with receiving an unwilling transfer (such as the feeling of being stigmatized): these feelings are related to welfare (see previous section), not to freedom. I am referring to the following question: “Can receiving an undesired transfer be considered as a restriction of freedom exactly in the same way as an unwilling tax can be considered as a restriction of freedom?”. To my best knowledge, Libertarian never studied this kind of question and I do not know if for them the answer can be “yes”. But for my purpose, it does not matter: either receiving an undesired transfer is not a problem and, in this case, ST is equivalent to \( T \) (they do not generate any problem for individual freedom); or receiving an undesired transfer is a problem and, in this case, ST is better than \( T \) (ST does not generate any problem for individual freedom, but \( T \) does). Note that, in this case, it is not the compared effectiveness of \( T \) ans ST that matters (as was the case with criteria based on endowments or welfare) but the fact that, with ST, receiving a transfer is the result of a choice whereas with \( T \), it is the result of someone else’s decision. In all cases, ST is at least as good as \( T \): the libertarian approach is not very helpful to understand what is wrong with ST.
Other theories propose lists of freedoms that should be guaranteed. Rawls for instance proposed a list of “basic liberties” such as political liberty (i.e., to vote and run for office), freedom of speech and assembly, liberty of conscience and freedom of thought, freedom of property; and freedom from arbitrary arrest (Rawls, 1997). It seems that none of them can be affected by social transfers (whatever the method used for targeting).

Maybe the problem with these theories is that they are only concerned with formal liberties. The approach on capabilities developed by Amartya Sen implies much more than the libertarian view: beyond formal liberties, it stresses the importance to allow people to really have the choice (Sen 1985). What may require specific interventions to increase the capabilities of persons in difficulty. For instance, to be free to choose, some people will need more endowments (case of poor people), others will need more infrastructures (case of people living in a remote area far from a hospital) and others more education. The point is that in Sen's view what matters is not only the fact that people with more capabilities are likely to have different “functionings” (“beings and doings”) and finally a better life (according to their own criteria of what is a good life). The freedom to choose also matters per se: it has a value in itself, independently of its consequences. That is the reason why his approach (called “broad consequentialism”) is a mixed approach of freedom: like the libertarians, he gives an intrinsic value to freedom; like purely consequentialist approaches (based on endowments or welfare), he takes into account the consequences of freedom on people's life. It can therefore be considered as a quite comprehensive approach. Maybe it will give us some keys to understand what is wrong with self-targeting...

The rationale of social transfers is consistent with Sen's capabilities approach. For instance transferring cash to poor households is likely to strengthen their capabilities. The same can be said for food transfers: recipients' capabilities is increased if they are better nourished and have a better health. And receiving food also allows them to save money (the money that would otherwise have been used to buy food). This money can be used for many purposes and increase their freedom of choice. Do we have any reason to think that ST is better or worse than T? Yes indeed. We have two good reasons to think that ST is likely to be better. First, as ST is more effective than T in targeting poor households, ST is likely to have a stronger effect on the capabilities of people with low capabilities. Second, ST offer more freedom of choice than T as the households themselves choose to ask for the transfer or not. Therefore it seems that both the consequentialist and the non-consequentialist components of Sen's criteria converge toward the idea that ST is likely to be better than T. It seems that approaches based on freedom do not help us a lot to understand what is wrong with self-targeting.

Maybe the individualist approaches explored until now are not relevant. Being purely consequentialist (based on endowments or welfare) or partly non-consequentialist (based on freedoms), they are exclusively focused on individuals. Maybe this is there that we missed the point. Because some elements can only be perceived at a broader scale, at the scale of social groups or populations, rather than the scale of individuals.

Social relations and institutions

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2 By the way, note that if freedom of choice has a value in itself for the agents themselves, it seems possible to integrate this value within the utilitarian framework. This gives an additional advantage to ST (compared to T), as having an additional option appears to increase the welfare: even the welfare of the agents who decide to leave the option is increased.
As said by a Niger village mayor (cited in Olivier de Sardan et al., 2014): “Transfers solve problems at the household level and create problems at the village level!”. This citation gives some weight to the idea that looking only at a broader scale may allow capturing effects of the transfers that cannot be perceived at the level of individuals. What does it mean from the point of view of ethics to consider effects on entities that are not human beings or animals? What does it mean to consider effects on social relations or on social institutions? Maybe we can consider that social relations have a value in themselves and that damaging them is a cost event if it does not affect the considered persons. Or maybe it is better to consider that damaged social relations will affect humans beings by reducing their endowments, their welfare or even maybe their freedoms. In this case, the effects on social relations or social institutions are just intermediary effects in a causality chain, the final effect being captured at the level of individual (in terms of endowments, welfare or freedoms). I don’t know but, for my purpose, it does not matter. The point is to investigate if the (potential) negative effects of transfers on social relations or institutions are likely to be higher with T or ST.

At this point, an element should be taken into account. The people who design and implement social transfer programs are usually far (socially speaking) from the households that are potential recipients of the transfers. They usually come from other countries or other regions of the same country and they are members of different social classes. This social distance often means different ways of thinking and results in surrealistic situations where interventions are perceived as absurd or unfair. To analyse this phenomenon, Jean-Pierre Olivier de Sardan developed the “anthropology of development”. It is based on the very attractive idea to study development project and emergency aid from the point of view of the “beneficiaries”, and therefore potentially to view them as strange and exotic entities. Exactly as Franz Boas, Claude Lévy-Strauss or Philippe Descola studied “primitive peoples”. JP Olivier de Sardan is usually highly critical: he emphasized the gap between the visions of the world of the designers and beneficiaries of development projects (or food aid interventions), and the resulting unexpected effects of these projects or interventions.

In particular, he developed a critical analysis of the cash transfers implemented in many villages of Niger during the 2005 food crisis. These transfers were targeted through classical targeting methods (T). According to Jean-Pierre Olivier de Sardan, the targeting rules used by NGOs and other organizations that implemented the transfers were “incomprehensible” for local populations. They often “contradict local norms, keep their distance with municipal authorities, raise suspicions and exacerbate conflicts” (Olivier de Sardan et al., 2014, p. 107). Population reacted by “treating the ‘humanitarian rent’ as a form of the usual ‘development rent’ [provided by the numerous development projects that intervene in Niger], and with the same criteria: everyone should try to ‘get his share’ […] The targeting criteria used by donors (such as acute child malnutrition) were therefore most of the time perceived as unfair, just as imposed conditionalities that should be circumnavigated” (Olivier de Sardan et al., 2007, p. 21). A striking example is provided by the way households reacted to the food transfers implemented by the WFP and the CCA [Niger public body in charge of managing food crises]. As social targeting was too complicated to implement in this situation of emergency, the choice was made to rely only on a geographical targeting and to distribute food to all households of the selected villages. The amount distributed was supposed to be based on the size of the family: the presentation of the family record book was therefore required to receive the transfers. However, the need to present the family record book generated several problems. As, in Niger, some taxes depend on the size of the family, in many families, many family members were not declared (resulting in families receiving food for six persons whereas they were 20). Moreover, the need for the family record book gave rise to the idea that food transfers were a consequence of having paid the taxes (and therefore a right for all tax-payers). Therefore, many people living in villages not covered did not understand why they did not receive the transfers in spite of having paid their taxes (Olivier de
In some localities such as Tirmini, an additional condition was added to presenting the family record book: the presence of women was supposed to guarantee that the food would benefit to the family consumption. Therefore, many men were in trouble because they did not have a wife (they were dead or divorced) or because their wife was not available (ill or travelling), or simply because they were not aware of this condition and living far from the delivery place of food transfers. Therefore, women from Tirmini offered them the possibility of a marriage of convenience, with the agreement of their husband (Olivier de Sardan et al., 2007, p. 30).

Another striking example is provided by the episode of the “babies of luck” that also occurred during the 2005 crisis. Due to the high level of child malnutrition (malnutrition rates have been the trigger of the mobilisation of the international community by Médecins Sans Frontières or MSF), many nutrition recovery centres have been set up. Following MSF, almost all NGOs that provided this kind of aid provided food transfers to the families of undernourished children. Having children considered as undernourished therefore became an entry ticket to get grains and other food products (beans, oil, sugar). As the amount of the food transfer was quite high (with MSF, 50 kg of millet, 25 kg of beans and 10 litres of oil when the child leaves the nutritional recovery centre), it was attractive for rural households. Women who came back in their village with the food from the nutritional recovery centre were congratulated and having a child classified as undernourished was perceived as a chance and the considered children were called the “babies of luck”. The criterion of selection (a strap to measure the mid-arm circumference) was completely incomprehensible for the local populations, all the more that for them being thin is not perceived to be a disease. As a result, the women who went far to reach a nutritional recovery centre and came back with nothing did not understand why they “make selections whereas everybody is hungry”. Of course, many strategies were developed including going to the recovery centre with a child from another family or provoking diarrhoea in children to make them lose weight (Olivier de Sardan et al., 2007, pp. 31-33).

In order to avoid destabilising effects on social structures and institutions, the transfers received are often reallocated, which sometimes results in nullifying the targeting. Transfers are often reallocated within the household: the most frequent situation is that wives have to give the money received to their husbands and they did it most of the time. But transfers are also sometimes reallocated within the community: the cash received is bulked and distributed equally to all the households of the village either directly or in the form of food purchased with the cash gathered. In some occasion, part of the money is used to pay the taxes of the village (Olivier de Sardan et al., 2014, pp. 120-121).

For our purpose, this analysis has two limitations. First, it is not a normative analysis: it aims to analyze the different unintended effect of cash transfers, by presenting households’ behaviors and their motivations. Of course, it is a highly critical analysis, but its final goal is not to formulate judgments such as “X is good and Y is bad” or “X is better than Z”. Second, it only deals with T (not ST): all these examples of transfers’ potential destructuring effects on social relations and institutions are related to transfers implemented through classical targeting methods (T). Nevertheless, it seems possible to build on Olivier de Sardan analysis to investigate the (potential) adverse consequences of ST. Although, strictly speaking, Olivier de Sardan analysis is not normative, it clearly emphasizes the violence that may result from transfers targeted through external norms. And maybe we can reasonably infer from it the following normative criterion: “the more transfers are targeted according to rules understood and accepted by the population, the better”. His analysis showed that, assessed under this criterion, transfers with T have a very poor performance. What about ST? Do we have any reason to think that the situation can be even worse with ST? Although, he did not study in detail any form of ST, Olivier de Sardan is quite indulgent with cash for work programs (one of the modalities of ST). This is because the rationale of cash for work is in line with local practices: when facing a food

crisis, the members of poor households usually accept hard and bad paid jobs (for instance in other farms). It is worth noting that the same argument can also be applied to the other modalities of self-targeting: when facing a food crisis, poor households often queue in the anteroom of friends, familiars or relatives. Or accept to eat bad quality food such as wild leaves (during Niger 2005 food crisis, some families even eat ants’ food). It seems therefore that the deterring effects of social transfers on social relations and institutions are likely to be lower with ST than with T. It seems that the anthropology of development will not help us a lot to understand what is wrong with ST...

Synthesis

None of the approaches reviewed seems able to explain our feeling that there is “something wrong” with self-targeting. This is surprising in a way because these approaches are quite representative of the different possible approaches that can be used to formulate a normative judgment: individualistic versus holistic, consequentialists versus non-consequentialists, objectivists versus subjectivists (see figure 1).

FIGURE 1. Typology of the approaches reviewed

Whatever the approach used, ST appears to be at least as good as T, and often better. This is because:

(a) ST is generally less costly than T : with the same budget, the amount transferred can be higher with ST
(b) ST is generally more effective than T (less errors of targeting) : the amount transferred is channeled through poorer or more food-insecure households
(c) ST allows households to choose if they will be recipients of the transfers or not (contrary to T).

These different factors play a different role depending on the considered approach: the superiority of ST over T stems from (a) and (b) for approaches based on endowments, from factor (c) for the Libertarian approach of freedom and for the anthropology of development and from (a), (b) and (c) for approaches based on welfare and Sen’s approach of freedom based on capabilities.

The only factor that can play against ST is the “inconvenience” intentionally introduced to induce the self-targeting: having to provide a matching contribution in the form of work, having to queue, having
to eat a low quality food. However, the cost of this inconvenience is usually assumed to be quite low compared to the risk of food-insecure households not receiving the transfer they need. The cost of having to queue or to work to receive the food or the cash you need to feed your family seems to be quite low, especially for poor households who have very few alternative opportunities. And the fact that, with ST, recipient households choose to ask for the transfers seems to be a proof that, for them, the benefit of receiving the transfer is higher than the cost incurred to get it.

Maybe now you began to ask yourself if there is really something wrong with self-targeting. Maybe it is time for you to ask to yourself to each part of humanity you belong to. Are you among those who “don’t see where the problem is” or among those who are horrified? If (as me) you belong to the second category, then you have to answer yourself why”. You don’t like an efficient way to provide food aid to people in need? You don’t like them being free to choose whether they want to receive the transfers or not, thereby preventing feelings of exclusion or stigmatization? You don’t like people being responsible of their own food security? You don’t like freedom?

Definitely, you have to ask to yourself “What is wrong with self-targeting food aid?”. The following section presents my hypothesis.

4. A HYPOTHESIS

My hypothesis is based on four observations derived from the previous sections. First, assessing T and ST through the flows of food or cash they allocate is helpless to understand what may be wrong with ST. Second, assessing T and ST through their effect on the freedom of choice of the recipients is helpless as well to capture the “dark side” of ST. Third, the problem with ST is probably linked to the inconvenience intentionally introduced to generate households’ self-targeting. Four, analyzing this inconvenience as a cost does not allow to understand what is wrong with self-targeting (for starving households, the opportunity cost of the time wasted to queue or work is low compared to the benefit resulting from the transfer).

My hypothesis is also based on the additional observation that transfers do not only provide flows of resources (food, cash): they also provide messages. These (implicit) messages are related to all the characteristics of the transfers: nature (food, cash, vouchers), amount, frequency and targeting (who is recipient and who is not). We have many evidences that transfers always convey messages, even when not accompanied by awareness actions (for instance on nutrition). The main example is related to the so-called “citizenship effect” of the transfers. It has been observed that households increase more their food consumption when their income increases because of a (cash or food) transfer than when it increases for other reasons. This fact show that transfers convey an (implicit) message related to the importance that should be given to the food consumption of the family. It is even more than that: impact assessment studies showed that food transfers usually provoke a stronger increase in calorie consumption than cash transfers do and that, conversely, cash transfers usually generate a stronger increase in food expenditures (for a review, see Gentillini, 2005). What can be interpreted as follows: when a household receive a food transfers (mainly made of grains in developing countries) it also receive an implicit message “consume more calories”. And when it receives a cash transfer, the message is “spend more money on food consumption”.

These five observations lead me to formulate the following hypothesis to explain what is wrong with ST:
“When ST is implemented, messages are conveyed by the inconvenience purposely introduced to generate the self-targeting (having to queue, having to provide a matching contribution in work, having to eat low quality food). The deterring effects of self-targeting are related to these messages.”

More precisely, my hypothesis is that the messages conveyed by ST provoke three types of effects:

1. They convey to households (to all households of the considered community) an information about how they are perceived by those who provide them the transfers (the government of their country or the international community when the transfers are provided by international NGOs or UN organizations). The implicit messages conveyed by ST tell them that they are viewed as people suited to do a bad-paid job, to spend time in queueing or to eat low quality food. And these messages can be extremely violent: in some occasions, maize has been distributed to populations that usually use maize exclusively to feed cattle.

2. They convey to households (to all households of the considered community) the message that their destiny is in their hands, that they are responsible of their own food security. This is because the transfers are proposed to them (to all of them) and they can take them or leave them. This kind of messages can be considered positively (building autonomous individuals instead of assisting them) or negatively (changing individuals to make them become entrepreneurs of their own life can be seen as a form of violence, see the numerous criticisms of neoliberalism).

3. There is something more: the messages conveyed by the transfers are not only made of words: they are lived “in their body” by recipient households: the low-quality food is eaten; recipients have to use their body to queue a long time or provide a bad-paid work. For recipients, accepting the transfers therefore means constraining their body to some kind of self-discipline.

In brief, the different types of inconveniences purposely introduced in ST to provoke households’ self-targeting produce messages. For the considered households, these messages may involve different types of violence: a violence linked to the negative image of themselves that is sent to them (and may affect their self-esteem); a violence linked to the injunction to change themselves; a violence lived in their body for the households who accept the transfers.

It seems to me that this hypothesis explains well why ST divide humanity between those who don’t see the problem and those who are horrified. If you consider only the material flows provided by the transfers or required to get them, you will not see any problem: it is obviously better to eat low-quality food than nothing (and suffer from malnutrition) and it is worth queuing or providing a work (even bad-paid) if this allows you to feed your family. But, if you include in your analysis the message conveyed by the targeting method used (and the violence carried through these messages), you may be horrified by self-targeting.

How can this hypothesis be related to the different approaches reviewed in this article? We identified a new dimension of T and ST: the implicit messages they sent and the violence carried by these messages. Can this new dimension be included in these approaches?

For approaches based on endowments, the answer is clearly “no” because the symbolic violence does not affect the flows of cash or food (the only thing that matters for this approach). Let us come back to the example of the (extreme) case where maize has been distributed to populations that usually use maize exclusively to feed cattle. No doubt households not in needs did not ask for the transfers: the self-targeting has probably been extremely effective to exclude those who should be
excluded. Maybe it went too far in that direction and resulted in excluding also part of food insecure households (as they may have preferred to suffer from hunger than to eat food considered as food for animals). Let us assume it has not been the case. Then, in this case, ST proved to be extremely effective (no errors of targeting). As the distributed maize was safe and nutritive, it played its role to support the nutrition of recipient households’ members. Then, approaches based on endowments do not see any problem because they do not take into account the extremely violent message conveyed and its deterring effect of people self-esteem.

By contrast, approaches based on welfare can easily include this new dimension: the violent message is assume to a disutility which has to be balanced with the utility generated by the transfer received. Note that the effects (1) and (2) do not depend on whether the household accept the transfer or not: households who do not ask for the transfers are also hit by the violence conveyed by the message. To keep the same (extreme) example, if someone propose to offer you food which you perceived as food for animal, you will be hurt even if you refuse (and even more if you accept). This remark entails a very important consequence: as part of the damages causes by self-targeting affect all households, they are already affected when they make their decision to ask for the transfer or not. This means not only that self-targeted transfers negatively affect the non-recipients (those who choose to reject the transfers) but also that there is no guaranty that these transfers increase the welfare of the recipients: although it is better for them to accept the transfer than to reject it (otherwise, they will not accept it), they may have been better-off if no transfer had been proposed to them (because in this case they would have been preserved from the symbolic violence conveyed by self-targeting). However, although approaches based on welfare can easily include the symbolic violence, they may find difficulties in putting it in balance with the positive effects resulting from the better cost-effectiveness of ST (compared to T). Could we accept some dose of symbolic violence to improve food security (thereby reducing another type of violence)?

Anthropology of development can also easily include the symbolic violence conveyed by ST. As a matter of fact, the analysis produced by J.-P. Olivier de Sardan and his colleagues on cash transfers in Niger are all about the implicit messages sent by the way these transfers were targeted. Although they did not refer explicitly to messages, they focused their analysis on the fact that the rules used to target the transfers are not understood and are therefore perceived to be absurd or arbitrary. Therefore, they implicitly consider that transfers are not just flows but also messages, messages that are not understandable because of the “noise” generated by the social distance (or the cultural gap) between the designers of the targeting and the population of potential recipients. Messages were therefore already present in their analysis of T (they only analyzed transfers targeted through classical methods). It seems therefore natural to include the implicit messages in the analysis of ST. This is not what I did. When I tried to build a criterion based on Olivier de Sardan’s works, I just take into account the fact that the different types of inconveniences purposely introduced in ST are quite similar to inconveniences that already exist in the coping strategies implemented by poor households when a food crisis occurs: accepting bad-paid jobs, queueing in the anterooms of friends or relatives to ask for aid, eating low quality food (including in some occasions animal food). And I wrongly deduced from these similarities that the inconveniences purposely introduced in ST should be understood and accepted quite easily by the considered households. In fact, this is more complicated because the message sent through ST’s inconvenience changes everything: having to eat animal food to survive is extremely different from receiving animal food from people who could have given you human food. In the second case a symbolic violence is carried out through the message that you are perceived as a human being that note deserve to eat human food, as a human being for whom animal food is adequate. Of course, this is an extreme example. But it does not matter: you can replace “animal” by “low quality food” and you will reach the same conclusions. The point is that
anthropology allows us to think the violence. Both the symbolic violence carried by classical targeting methods \( T \) (as shown in the works of Olivier de Sardan and his colleagues) and the (stronger) symbolic violence generated by \( ST \). It is not just a matter of being jealous, or of feeling excluded or stigmatized. It is a matter of being hurt deep inside: on the representation of you other people have and, by this way, also on the picture you have of yourself. What may be damaged is your self. Your self-esteem and your dignity. This symbolic violence comes from the exterior of the considered population of potential recipients: it comes from the government or the international community (depending on who provide the transfers). It likely affects all households of the considered population. But it likely affects more those who accepted the transfers and may feel ashamed. The symbolic violence may also widespread inside the considered population if some non-recipient households begin to see recipient households through the glasses of the negative picture projected by \( ST \). In brief, anthropology helps us to understand that the symbolic violence conveyed by \( ST \) hit something deep inside people, something related to their self, self-esteem and dignity. This logically leads us to consider the last category of approaches: approaches based on rights and freedoms.

Approaches based on freedoms may lead to the conclusion that the symbolic violence conveyed by self-targeting is not acceptable because it violates one of the fundamental rights of human beings. For instance, we can maybe consider that this symbolic violence should be forbidden because it violates the capability #7.2 of Martha Nussbaum's list of 10 core capabilities (Nussbaum, 2011):

"Having the social bases of self-respect and non-humiliation; being able to be treated as a dignified being whose worth is equal to that of others. This entails provisions of non-discrimination on the basis of race, sex, sexual orientation, ethnicity, caste, religion, national origin and species".

5. CONCLUSION

The research presented in this article aimed to solve three puzzles. Identify what drives the feeling (felt by many people) that there is something wrong with self-targeting. Explain why some people are horrified by self-targeting while others do not see any problem with it. Specify who is wrong and who is right, i.e. clarify if there is really something wrong with self-targeting.

To solve the first puzzle, we compare self-targeting (\( ST \)) with classical targeting methods (\( T \)) by using different criteria proposed by ethics and related to endowments, welfare and freedoms. None of the criteria reviewed helped us to understand what may be wrong with self-targeting: as \( ST \) is generally less costly than \( T \) and more effective to target poor or food-insecure households, it is generally better under consequentialists criteria; as \( ST \) allows households to choose if they will be recipients of the transfers or not (contrary to \( T \), they are generally better under non-consequentialists criteria related to the freedom to choose.

To complement our analysis, we mobilized the empirical results of the anthropology of development that showed (for the case of Niger) the numerous unintended effects of cash transfers targeted through classical methods (\( T \)) and their adverse consequences on social relations and institutions. The anthropology of development does not explicitly propose normative criteria but, as it shows that the deterring effects of transfers were due to the use of targeting methods perceived as absurd or unfair by the population of the considered area, we consider the criterion that the more the targeting rules are understandable and acceptable by the consider population, the better. The fact is that the inconveniences purposely introduced in self-targeting (matching contribution in work, queues and low quality food) seems to be quite similar to local practices: when facing a food crisis the members of poor households usually i) accept hard and bad paid jobs, ii) queue in the anteroom of friends, familiars or relatives or iii) eat bad quality food such as wild leaves (or even animal food). Therefore,
ST seems to be more understandable than T for the considered population, and therefore to produce less deterring effects on social relations and institutions.

A solution to the first puzzle was finally found. We made the hypothesis that when ST is implemented, messages are conveyed by the inconvenience purposely introduced to generate the self-targeting (having to queue, having to provide a matching contribution in work, having to eat low quality food) and that the “dark side” of self-targeting is related to these messages because they involve different types of violence: a violence linked to the negative image of themselves sent to potential recipients (being persons suited to do a bad-paid job, to queue or to eat low quality food); a violence linked to the injunction to change themselves to become entrepreneur of their own food security; and finally, for the households who accept the transfers, a violence lived in their own body (constrained to a kind of self-discipline: eating low quality food, working, queueing).

This hypothesis also provides a solution to the second and third puzzles. If some people are horrified by self-targeting whereas others don’t see any problem with it, it is because the first group take into account the messages conveyed by the inconvenience purposely introduced in self-targeting and the violence generated by this messages. By contrast, the second group only consider the material flows provided by the transfers or required to get them, and these flows do not raise any ethical problems: when you suffer from malnutrition, it is obviously better to eat low-quality safe food than nothing, and it is worth queuing or working, even for a low wage.

The third puzzle is the more complicated one. Who is wrong and who is right? Those who support self-targeting because of its amazing cost-effectiveness? Or those who are horrified by its violence? My feeling is that the second group of persons has a more comprehensive approach because it includes effects that are ignored by the first group. I am referring of course to all the effects conveyed by the implicit messages sent when self-targeting is used (especially the symbolic violence they generate). Of course, one may argue that that the advantages of ST (compared to T) have to be put in balance with their drawbacks and that it can be justified to introduce some dose of symbolic violence to improve food security or reduce poverty (and, by this way, reduce other forms of -economic-violence). My personal feeling is that the best approaches are the ones that mix fundamental rights and freedoms that should be guaranteed (whatever their consequences) with criteria based on the -objectives or subjective- consequences (like John Rawls’ approach or the approaches based on capabilities). My feeling is that because of the symbolic violence it generates, self-targeting should be abandoned...

Finally, it appears that the analysis developed here for self-targeting could be (should be?) applied to other tools used to increase food security, reduce poverty or enhance development. These tools are classically assessed exclusively with criteria related to their cost-effectiveness or their impact of people’s income or welfare. But what we found for self-targeting may also be valid for them. Maybe these tools (or the way they are implemented or governed) in some occasions generate “collateral damages”, in the form of an invisible symbolic violence that hit the “beneficiaries” of these interventions, not only in their mind but also sometimes in their body (Foucault 1975; Foucault 2004).

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