ASSESSING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF BENEFICIARY REGISTRATION IN FOOD DISTRIBUTION DURING THE 2024/2025 EL NIÑO-INDUCED DROUGHT RESPONSE. A CASE STUDY OF T/A TSABANGO LILONGWE DISTRICT

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ABSTRACT

This study assessed the effectiveness of beneficiary registration in food distribution during the 2024/2025 El Niño-induced drought response in Traditional Authority (T/A) Tsabango, Lilongwe District, Malawi. The study examined how registration processes influenced transparency, accountability, and fairness in humanitarian food distribution programs. A mixed-methods approach was employed, combining quantitative and qualitative research designs. Data were collected through household questionnaires, key informant interviews, focus group discussions, and document reviews involving beneficiary households, local leaders, and humanitarian actors. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics, while qualitative data were analyzed thematically.

The findings revealed that the beneficiary registration process was moderately effective but faced significant challenges in transparency, accountability, and operational efficiency. Although community-based approaches enhanced local participation, the registration process was largely dominated by village leaders with limited technical oversight. Many respondents reported that beneficiary lists were not openly shared and that selection criteria were unclear, contributing to perceptions of favoritism and targeting errors. The study further found that accountability mechanisms, including complaint-handling systems, were weak, as many grievances were not adequately addressed. Operational challenges such as long distances to registration centers, inadequate staffing, congestion, and limited information dissemination also constrained equitable access to registration services.

The study concludes that weaknesses in transparency, accountability, and operational systems undermined the fairness and credibility of beneficiary registration and food distribution during the drought response. The study recommends strengthening oversight mechanisms, improving communication and information sharing, decentralizing registration centers, increasing staffing levels, and enhancing grievance redress systems to promote more transparent, inclusive, and accountable humanitarian food distribution programs in Malawi.

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ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

DoDMA – Department of Disaster Management Affairs

DRR – Disaster Risk Reduction

FAO – Food and Agriculture Organization

FGDs – Focus Group Discussions

IFAD – International Fund for Agricultural Development

IFRC – International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies

IRC – International Rescue Committee

KIIs – Key Informant Interviews

MVAC – Malawi Vulnerability Assessment Committee

NGOs – Non-Governmental Organizations

NSO – National Statistical Office

ODI – Overseas Development Institute

SDG – Sustainable Development Goal

Sphere Association – Sphere Standards / Sphere Project (Humanitarian Standards)

SPSS – Statistical Package for the Social Sciences

T/A – Traditional Authority UNDP – United Nations Development Programme

UNHCR – United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

VCPC – Village Civil Protection Committee

WB – World Bank

WFP – World Food Programme

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

Humanitarian food assistance has become one of the most important interventions used to address food insecurity among populations affected by disasters, climatic shocks, and livelihood disruptions across the world. In recent years, the increasing frequency and intensity of droughts associated with climate change have significantly increased humanitarian needs, particularly in developing countries where rural livelihoods depend heavily on rain-fed agriculture. According to the World Food Programme, drought-related food insecurity continues to affect millions of vulnerable households globally, thereby increasing dependence on humanitarian food assistance programs. As humanitarian crises continue to intensify, concerns regarding the effectiveness, fairness, and accountability of humanitarian response systems have also become increasingly important within disaster risk management and humanitarian governance discourse.

Within humanitarian food assistance programs, beneficiary registration plays a critical role in determining which households receive support during emergencies. Beneficiary registration is not merely an administrative exercise, but rather a governance process that directly influences transparency, accountability, targeting accuracy, and public trust in humanitarian interventions. Effective beneficiary registration systems are expected to ensure that humanitarian assistance reaches the most vulnerable households while minimizing exclusion and inclusion errors. According to the Food and Agriculture Organization, transparent and accountable targeting systems are essential for improving the effectiveness and legitimacy of humanitarian programs, especially in resource constrained emergency contexts.

Despite the increasing implementation of humanitarian food distribution programs across disaster-prone regions, studies continue to report weaknesses in beneficiary registration systems. Research conducted in countries such as Ethiopia, Kenya, and Zimbabwe

demonstrates that humanitarian registration processes are often affected by favoritisms, weak verification systems, political interference, corruption, poor transparency mechanisms, and limited community participation. In many humanitarian contexts, vulnerable households are excluded from assistance while less deserving households benefit due to local power relations and institutional weaknesses. Such governance challenges negatively affect the fairness and effectiveness of humanitarian interventions and undermine community trust in humanitarian response systems.

In Sub-Saharan Africa, humanitarian organizations and governments continue to face challenges in implementing effective targeting and registration systems during emergency food distribution programs. Although community-based targeting approaches are commonly used to improve local participation and identification of vulnerable households, studies suggest that local leadership structures and social influence may sometimes compromise fairness and accountability during beneficiary selection processes. Furthermore, while technological innovations such as digital registration systems have improved efficiency in some countries, many rural communities continue to face operational and institutional challenges that affect the implementation of transparent and accountable registration systems.

In Malawi, droughts and erratic rainfall patterns remain major threats to agricultural production, food security, and rural livelihoods. The majority of rural households depend heavily on subsistence farming, making them highly vulnerable to climatic shocks and crop failure. The 2024/2025 El Niño-induced drought significantly affected agricultural productivity and household food security in many districts across the country. In response to the crisis, the Government of Malawi through the Department of Disaster Management Affairs, together with humanitarian partners such as the World Food Programme and the Malawi Red Cross Society, implemented emergency food distribution programs targeting drought-affected households.

However, despite these humanitarian interventions, concerns regarding the effectiveness of beneficiary registration systems continue to emerge in many affected communities. Previous humanitarian responses in Malawi have been associated with complaints related

to exclusion of deserving households, favoritism during beneficiary selection, weak accountability mechanisms, inadequate communication of selection criteria, and limited transparency in beneficiary identification processes. Such challenges negatively affect community perceptions of fairness and reduce public confidence in humanitarian assistance programs.

Traditional Authority (T/A) Tsabango in Lilongwe District was among the areas significantly affected by the 2024/2025 El Niño-induced drought. Many households experienced severe food shortages and increasingly depended on humanitarian food assistance for survival. During the implementation of food distribution programs, concerns were raised regarding transparency, accountability, targeting effectiveness, and fairness in beneficiary registration processes. Some community members complained about exclusion from beneficiary lists despite being severely affected by food insecurity, while others perceived favoritisms and inconsistencies during beneficiary selection.

Although previous studies in Malawi have examined food insecurity, humanitarian assistance, and disaster response interventions, limited empirical attention has been given to the effectiveness of beneficiary registration systems during emergency drought responses at community level. Existing studies largely focus on food distribution outcomes, policy implementation, and disaster impacts while giving limited attention to governance-related dimensions such as transparency, accountability, targeting effectiveness, operational challenges, and community perceptions during humanitarian beneficiary registration processes. Consequently, limited empirical evidence exists regarding how weaknesses in beneficiary registration systems influence perceptions of fairness, inclusion and exclusion outcomes, and trust in humanitarian interventions during severe drought emergencies in Malawi.

It is against this background that this study examined the effectiveness of beneficiary registration in food distribution during the 2024/2025 El Niño-induced drought response in Traditional Authority Tsabango, Lilongwe District. The study specifically focused on beneficiary registration procedures, transparency and accountability mechanisms, targeting

effectiveness, and operational challenges affecting humanitarian food distribution programs.

1.2 Problem Statement

The 2024/2025 El Niño-induced drought significantly affected household food security in many parts of Malawi, including Traditional Authority (T/A) Tsabango in Lilongwe District. In response to the increasing humanitarian needs, government institutions and humanitarian organizations implemented emergency food distribution programs targeting vulnerable households affected by the drought. Beneficiary registration was a critical component of the intervention because it determined which households qualified to receive humanitarian food assistance.

Despite the importance of beneficiary registration in ensuring fair and effective humanitarian assistance, concerns regarding transparency, accountability, targeting effectiveness, and fairness in the registration process continued to emerge within affected communities. Some households reportedly experienced exclusion from beneficiary lists despite severe food insecurity, while others perceived favoritisms, political influence, and inconsistencies during beneficiary selection. Additional concerns included weak complaint handling mechanisms, inadequate communication of selection criteria, overcrowding at registration centers, and delays during the registration process. These challenges negatively affected community trust and perceptions regarding the credibility and fairness of humanitarian interventions.

Although previous studies in Malawi and other African countries have examined humanitarian assistance, food insecurity, and disaster response programs, much of the existing literature focuses broadly on food distribution outcomes, policy implementation, and food security conditions. Limited empirical attention has specifically been given to the effectiveness of beneficiary registration systems during emergency drought response programs, particularly regarding transparency, accountability, targeting effectiveness, operational challenges, and community perceptions at local level. Furthermore, existing

studies rarely examine how weaknesses in beneficiary registration systems influence perceptions of fairness, inclusion and exclusion outcomes, and trust in humanitarian interventions among affected communities during emergency response operations.

Consequently, limited empirical evidence exists regarding the effectiveness of beneficiary registration systems during humanitarian food distribution programs in drought-affected communities in Malawi. This study therefore addressed this empirical and contextual gap by examining the effectiveness of beneficiary registration in food distribution during the 2024/2025 El Niño-induced drought response in T/A Tsabango, Lilongwe District, with specific focus on transparency, accountability, targeting effectiveness, and operational challenges affecting the registration process.

1.3 Research Objectives

1.4 Main Objective

To assess the effectiveness of beneficiary registration processes in food distribution during the 2024/2025 El Niño-induced drought response in Traditional Authority Tsabango, Lilongwe District.

1.5 Specific Objectives

1. To examine the registration procedures used during beneficiary identification and food distribution in T/A Tsabango during the 2024/2025 El Niño drought response.
2. To assess the effectiveness of transparency, accountability, and community participation mechanisms used in the beneficiary registration process.
3. To evaluate the operational and governance challenges affecting fairness, inclusiveness, accessibility, and targeting effectiveness during beneficiary registration.
4. To propose measures for improving the effectiveness, transparency, and inclusiveness of beneficiary registration systems during humanitarian food distribution programs.

1.6 Research Questions

1. What registration procedures were used during beneficiary identification and food distribution in T/A Tsabango during the 2024/2025 El Niño drought response?

2. How effective were the transparency, accountability, and community participation mechanisms used in the beneficiary registration process?

3. What operational and governance challenges affected fairness, inclusiveness, accessibility, and targeting effectiveness during beneficiary registration?

4. What measures can be adopted to improve the effectiveness, transparency, and inclusiveness of beneficiary registration systems during humanitarian food distribution programs?

1.6 Significance of the Study

The study contributes to improved understanding of beneficiary registration systems within humanitarian food distribution programs during disaster emergencies. The findings provide empirical evidence regarding transparency, accountability, targeting effectiveness, and operational challenges affecting humanitarian interventions in drought-affected communities.

The findings may assist the Department of Disaster Management Affairs, district councils, and humanitarian organizations in strengthening beneficiary registration procedures, improving accountability mechanisms, and enhancing transparency during future food distribution programs. The study may also contribute to improved targeting systems aimed at reducing exclusion and inclusion errors during humanitarian interventions.

Humanitarian organizations such as the World Food Programme and the Malawi Red Cross Society may benefit from the findings by identifying governance and operational weaknesses affecting beneficiary registration processes in rural communities. This may contribute to improved program implementation, increased community trust, and more equitable access to humanitarian assistance.

The study is also important to policymakers and disaster risk management practitioners because it contributes to existing knowledge on humanitarian governance, transparency, accountability, and targeting systems within emergency response programs. Academically, the study contributes to literature on disaster risk management and humanitarian assistance by addressing an important empirical gap regarding beneficiary registration effectiveness during drought response interventions in Malawi.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

This chapter reviews literature related to beneficiary registration systems in humanitarian food distribution programs, with a focus on transparency, accountability, community participation, targeting effectiveness, technological innovations, and operational challenges. The review critically examines existing scholarly work, identifies agreements and contradictions, and highlights key gaps in knowledge.

Rather than merely describing previous studies, this chapter analyses how beneficiary registration is influenced by both technical systems and governance dynamics. It further situates the study within the context of the 2024/2025 El Niño-induced drought response in Malawi.

2.2 Beneficiary Registration in Humanitarian Food Distribution

Beneficiary registration is a fundamental component of humanitarian food assistance because it determines who receives support during emergencies. The World Food Programme (WFP, 2021) argues that registration systems enhance targeting efficiency by enabling humanitarian agencies to identify vulnerable households. Similarly, McGee (2016) emphasizes that structured registration systems reduce duplication and improve resource allocation in humanitarian programs.

However, this technical perspective is limited because it assumes that registration is a neutral administrative process. In reality, beneficiary registration is influenced by social relations, institutional capacity, and local power dynamics. Tadesse (2020) argues that community-level targeting processes are often shaped by political influence and social hierarchies, particularly in rural settings where traditional leaders exercise significant authority.

In the same vein, Banda (2022) found that in Malawi, beneficiary selection processes were sometimes influenced by local leadership structures, leading to both inclusion of no

deserving households and exclusion of vulnerable ones. These findings challenge the assumption that technical systems alone can guarantee fairness.

Therefore, beneficiary registration should be understood not only as a technical procedure but also as a governance process shaped by accountability structures, transparency, and socio-political relations.

Despite this growing body of literature, limited research has examined how beneficiary registration systems operate during delayed humanitarian food distribution in acute climate shocks such as El Niño-induced droughts. This creates a significant gap in understanding how registration systems function under extreme vulnerability conditions.

2.3 Transparency in Beneficiary Registration

Transparency is widely recognized as a core principle in humanitarian programming because it promotes fairness, accountability, and trust. WFP (2021) argues that transparency reduces corruption risks by ensuring that communities understand selection criteria and procedures. Similarly, Kibret (2022) notes that public sharing of beneficiary lists enhances trust by allowing communities to verify selected households.

However, the assumption that transparency automatically ensures fairness is overly simplistic. In practice, transparency mechanisms are often inconsistently applied and poorly enforced. Banda (2022) found that even where beneficiary lists were publicly displayed, communities still reported perceptions of bias and manipulation, indicating that transparency alone is insufficient without strong oversight mechanisms.

Chinsinga (2021) further argues that transparency in rural humanitarian contexts is frequently weakened by limited literacy levels, poor communication systems, and political interference. As a result, households may lack the capacity to interpret or challenge beneficiary selection decisions.

These findings suggest that transparency is not merely about information disclosure but also about access, comprehension, and institutional accountability. However, existing literature

largely focuses on policy frameworks rather than lived experiences of affected communities during emergency responses.

This study addresses this gap by examining how transparency influences perceptions of fairness and trust during the 2024/2025 drought response in Malawi.

2.4 Accountability Mechanisms in Humanitarian Registration Systems

Accountability mechanisms such as grievance redress systems, monitoring structures, and feedback channels are essential for ensuring fairness in humanitarian programming. The Sphere Handbook (2018) emphasizes that accountability systems strengthen legitimacy by enabling affected populations to raise concerns and challenge decisions.

FAO (2023) similarly argues that effective complaint mechanisms improve trust and reduce targeting errors in humanitarian programs.

However, empirical evidence shows that accountability systems are often weak in practice. Tadesse (2020) found that grievance mechanisms in several African contexts were poorly understood by communities, limiting their effectiveness. Nyirenda (2022) further observed that in Malawi, beneficiaries often avoided reporting complaints due to fear of retaliation from local leaders.

These findings demonstrate that accountability is not only institutional but also social, shaped by power relations and fear dynamics. Consequently, even where systems exist, they may not be used effectively.

A major gap in the literature is the limited focus on beneficiary perceptions of accountability during emergency food distribution under severe drought conditions. This study contributes by examining how accountability mechanisms functioned during the El Niño response in T/A Tsabango.

2.5 Community Participation in Beneficiary Selection

Community participation is widely promoted in humanitarian programming because it enhances ownership, legitimacy, and targeting accuracy. Chambers (2017) argues that

involving communities improves identification of vulnerable households due to local knowledge of socio-economic conditions. WFP (2021) also supports participatory approaches, noting that they reduce exclusion errors.

However, participation does not always produce equitable outcomes. Tadesse (2020) found that community-based targeting systems may be captured by local elites who prioritize relatives and allies. Similarly, Chinsinga (2021) argues that traditional authority structures in Malawi can influence participation processes, leading to unequal representation of vulnerable groups such as widows and female-headed households.

This indicates that participation can both enhance and undermine fairness depending on governance conditions. It is therefore insufficient to assume that participation automatically leads to equitable outcomes.

Existing literature has not adequately examined how participation influences perceptions of transparency and fairness during delayed humanitarian assistance programs. This study addresses this gap.

2.6 Targeting Effectiveness and Registration Errors

Targeting effectiveness refers to the ability of humanitarian programs to correctly identify eligible households while minimizing inclusion and exclusion errors. Barrett and Maxwell (2005) argue that effective targeting is essential for efficient resource allocation. The World Bank (2022) also emphasizes that accurate targeting strengthens public trust in humanitarian systems.

Despite these expectations, targeting errors remain common. Exclusion errors occur when vulnerable households are left out, while inclusion errors occur when non-eligible households receive assistance. Tadesse (2020) found that exclusion errors are particularly prevalent in rural programs due to weak verification systems.

However, explanations for targeting failures differ. Technical perspectives attribute errors to data inaccuracies and weak registration procedures, while governance perspectives highlight corruption, political interference, and favoritism as key drivers (Banda, 2022).

This debate suggests that targeting effectiveness cannot be fully understood through technical explanations alone. However, limited research has examined how targeting errors influence household coping strategies and trust during delayed food distribution.
This study addresses this gap.

2.7 Technological Innovations in Beneficiary Registration

Technological innovations such as biometric systems, digital databases, and mobile registration tools are increasingly used to improve humanitarian registration systems. UNHCR (2020) argues that biometric systems reduce duplication and improve verification accuracy. WFP (2022) adds that digital systems enhance efficiency and monitoring.

However, the effectiveness of such technologies is context-dependent. In low-income settings like Malawi, infrastructural challenges such as poor connectivity, limited electricity, and low digital literacy constrain implementation.

Chinsinga (2021) further argues that technology cannot resolve governance problems such as corruption and political interference. This indicates that technology should complement, not replace, institutional reforms.

Moreover, technological systems may unintentionally exclude vulnerable groups such as elderly persons and low-literacy households. Therefore, digital solutions must be designed with inclusivity considerations.

2.8 Operational Challenges Affecting Beneficiary Registration

Beneficiary registration systems often face operational constraints such as staffing shortages, inadequate funding, long distances, and congestion at registration centers (FAO, 2023).

WFP (2021) further notes that poor communication systems reduce access to registration services, particularly in rural areas.

However, many studies treat operational challenges as logistical issues without fully examining their social consequences. In reality, these challenges disproportionately affect vulnerable groups, thereby contributing to exclusion.

During large-scale emergencies such as droughts, these constraints are intensified due to increased demand and limited capacity.

This study therefore examines how operational challenges affected fairness, accessibility, and efficiency during the 2024/2025 El Niño drought response.

2.9 Theoretical Framework

This study is guided by Governance Theory and Participatory Development Theory.

Governance Theory emphasizes transparency, accountability, and fairness in institutional processes. Hyden (2013) argues that good governance reduces corruption and improves service delivery. In humanitarian programming, governance theory explains how transparency and accountability mechanisms influence fairness in beneficiary registration. However, weak governance structures may lead to exclusion, favoritism, and mistrust.

Participatory Development Theory, as explained by Chambers (2017), emphasizes community involvement in decision-making to improve legitimacy and targeting accuracy. However, participation may be distorted by local power relations, leading to elite capture and unequal representation.

These theories are relevant because they explain how institutional systems and community dynamics interact to influence beneficiary registration effectiveness.

2.10 CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

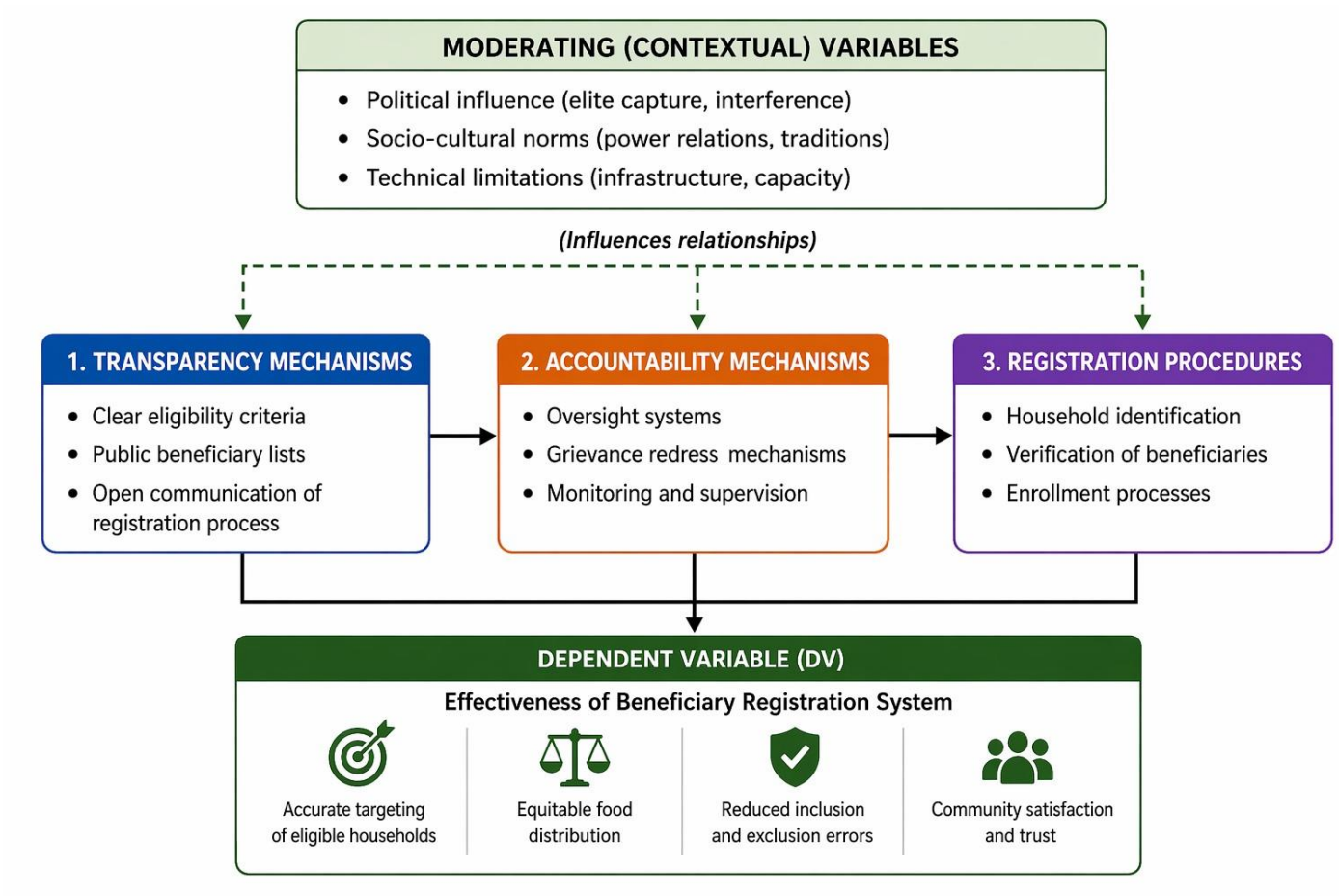


Figure 1:Showing the conceptual framework

The conceptual framework shows the relationship between transparency mechanisms, accountability mechanisms, and registration procedures in influencing the effectiveness of beneficiary registration systems.

The dependent variable is effectiveness of beneficiary registration, measured by accuracy, fairness, reduced targeting errors, and community satisfaction.

Independent variables include:

- Transparency mechanisms (beneficiary lists, communication, eligibility criteria)

- Accountability mechanisms (complaints systems, monitoring, feedback channels)
- Registration procedures (identification, verification, enrolment)

Contextual factors such as political influence, socio-cultural norms, and technical limitations may affect these relationships.

The framework assumes that effective registration occurs when transparency, accountability, and proper procedures function within supportive governance environments.

2.11 Synthesis

The literature shows that beneficiary registration is influenced by both technical and governance factors, including transparency, accountability, participation, and institutional capacity. Although these principles are widely promoted in humanitarian programs, implementation challenges such as weak oversight, elite influence, and targeting errors still affect effectiveness.

Most existing studies focus on stable humanitarian settings, with limited attention to emergency contexts involving severe drought and delayed food distribution. Therefore, a research gap exists in understanding how beneficiary registration systems function during the 2024/2025 El Niño-induced drought in Malawi.

This study addresses this gap by examining the effectiveness of beneficiary registration processes in T/A Tsabango, Lilongwe District.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

3.1 Study Area

The study was conducted in Traditional Authority (T/A) Tsabango in Lilongwe District, central Malawi. The area is mainly rural with some semi-urban settlements, and most households depend on subsistence farming. Livelihoods are largely based on rain-fed agriculture, making the area highly vulnerable to droughts and erratic rainfall. The main crops grown include maize, groundnuts, and legumes, and poor rainfall during the 2024/2025 El Niño drought led to reduced yields, food shortages, and increased food insecurity.

During the drought response, humanitarian food assistance was coordinated by DoDMA in collaboration with the Lilongwe District Council and partners such as WFP and the Malawi Red Cross Society. Beneficiary registration played a key role in determining which households received assistance.

T/A Tsabango was selected as the study area due to its high vulnerability to drought and reports of challenges in beneficiary registration, including exclusion of eligible households, favoritism, and limited transparency, making it suitable for assessing the effectiveness of the registration system.

3.2 STUDY AREA MAP OF T/A TSABANGO, LILONGWE DISTRICT

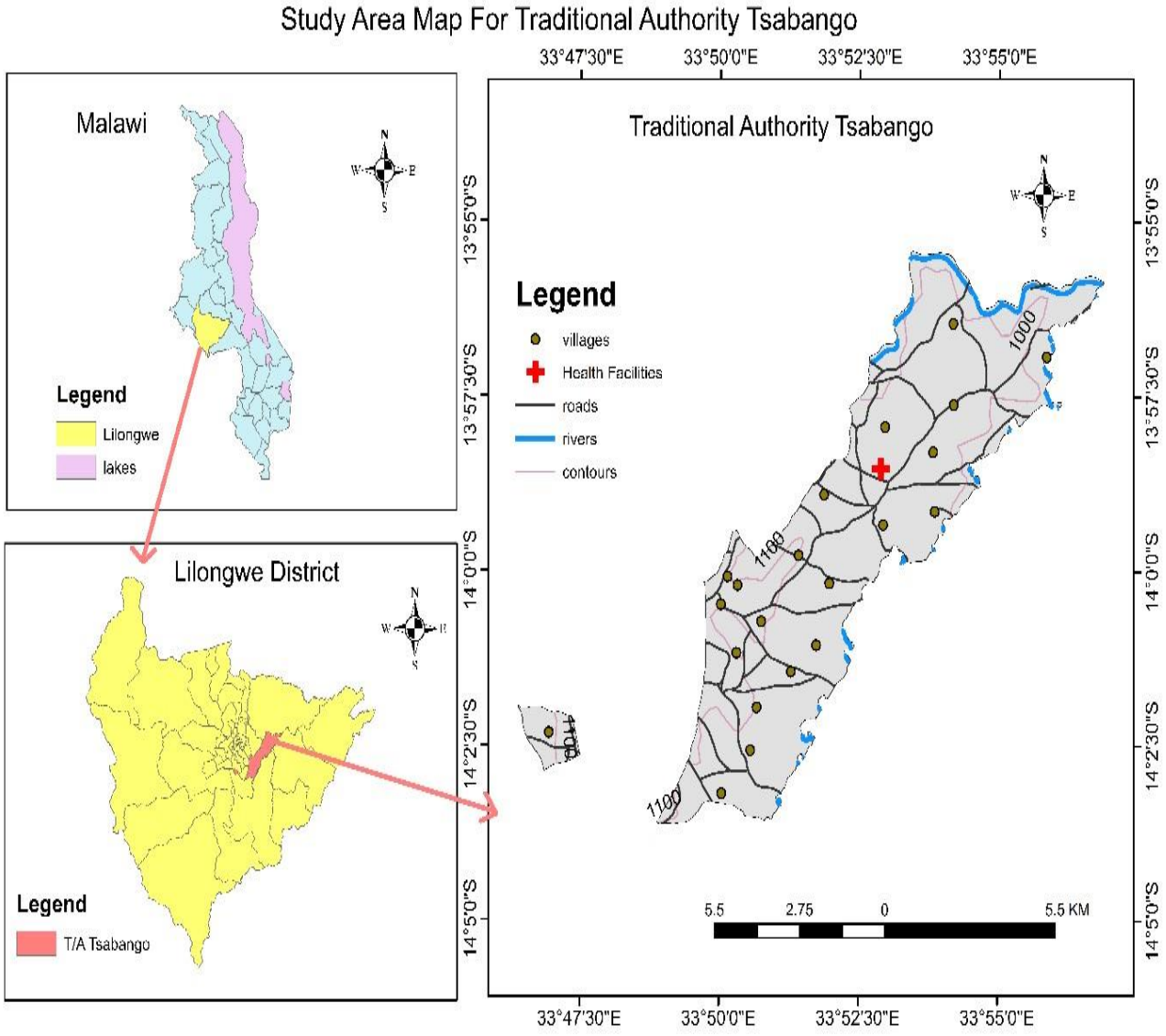


Figure 2:Map of T/A Tsabango

3.3 Research Design

The study adopted a mixed-methods case study design, combining quantitative and qualitative approaches to assess beneficiary registration in food distribution. The design was suitable because it allowed both measurement of outcomes such as transparency,

inclusion, accountability, and targeting effectiveness, and exploration of the social and institutional factors influencing them.

A case study approach was used to provide an in-depth analysis of T/A Tsabango during the 2024/2025 El Niño-induced drought response, where local leadership and institutional dynamics shaped registration outcomes.

The quantitative component used a descriptive cross-sectional survey to measure key variables at a single point in time using structured questionnaires. The qualitative component used KIIs and FGDs to explore stakeholder perceptions and explain the quantitative findings.

Triangulation of both methods strengthened the study by combining statistical results with contextual explanations, making the design appropriate for a comprehensive understanding of beneficiary registration effectiveness.

3.3 Research Design

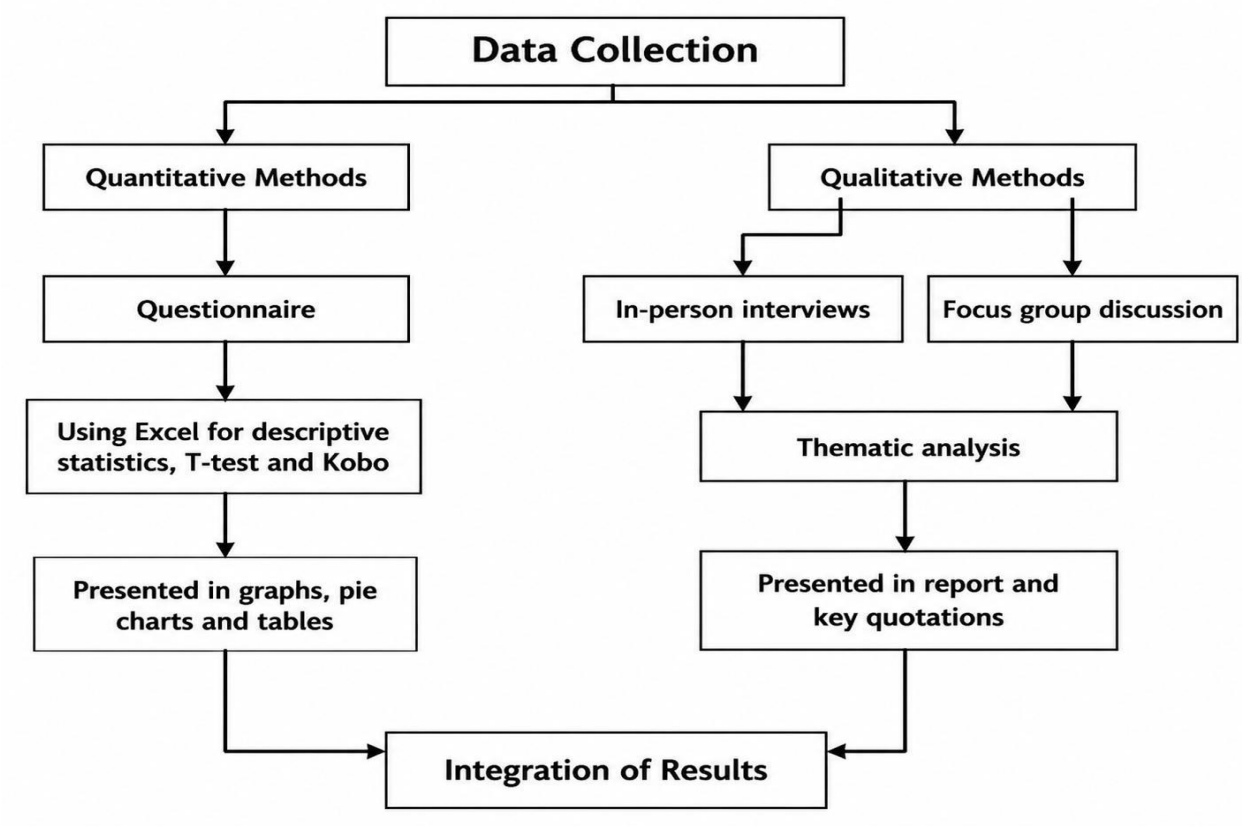


Figure 3:Research design

3.4 Target Population

The target population for this study included registered beneficiaries and community members affected by the 2024/2025 El Niño-induced drought response in T/A Tsabango, Lilongwe District, including households that perceived themselves as excluded from food assistance. This enabled the study to assess issues of inclusion, exclusion, transparency, and fairness within the beneficiary registration process.

The study mainly focused on households that were registered for and received food assistance because they had direct experience with the registration and distribution processes. In addition, Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) were conducted with VCPC members, community leaders, humanitarian personnel, and local government officials,

while Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were conducted with community members to capture broader institutional and community perspectives on the registration process.

The inclusion of both beneficiaries and key stakeholders strengthened the comprehensiveness and credibility of the study findings.

3.5 Sample Size and Sampling Techniques

The study employed both probability and non-probability sampling techniques to obtain quantitative and qualitative data from different categories of participants. The target population for the quantitative component consisted of households that were registered for humanitarian food assistance during the 2024/2025 El Niño-induced drought response in Traditional Authority (T/A) Tsabango, Lilongwe District. Beneficiary registration lists obtained from the Department of Disaster Management Affairs (DoDMA) and humanitarian partners served as the sampling frame for the study.

The sample size for household respondents was determined using Yamane's (1967) formula for sample size determination:

$$n = \frac{N}{1 + N(e)^2}$$

Where:

- n= required sample size
- N= target population
- e= margin of error (0.05)

A 5% margin of error was adopted because it is widely accepted in social science research for producing reliable findings. Based on beneficiary registration records obtained from

DoDMA and humanitarian partners, a sample size of 44 household respondents was selected for the study.

Simple random sampling was used to select household respondents from the beneficiary lists, ensuring that each household had an equal chance of being included. This helped reduce selection bias and improve representativeness.

For the qualitative component, purposive sampling was used to select 10 key informants, including DoDMA officials, NGO representatives, VCPC members, traditional leaders, and religious leaders, based on their knowledge and involvement in the registration process.

In addition, two gender-segregated focus group discussions comprising 8–10 participants each were conducted to capture community experiences and encourage free participation. The combination of probability and non-probability sampling strengthened both the reliability and depth of the study findings.

3.6 Data Collection Methods and Instruments

Multiple data collection methods were used to enhance the validity and reliability of the study. Quantitative and qualitative data were collected through household questionnaires, key informant interviews (KIIs), focus group discussions (FGDs), and document review to allow triangulation of findings.

Household questionnaires collected quantitative data on registration procedures, transparency, accountability, targeting effectiveness, and operational challenges. Key informant interviews provided qualitative insights into stakeholder roles, complaint handling systems, verification processes, and implementation challenges. Focus group discussions captured community experiences and perceptions regarding fairness, participation, inclusion, and access barriers in the registration process. Document review generated secondary data from beneficiary lists, program records, and operational reports to verify information obtained from primary sources.

The use of multiple instruments ensured comprehensive coverage of the study objectives and strengthened the credibility of the findings.

3.7 Household Questionnaire Survey

Structured questionnaires were administered to the sampled beneficiaries in order to collect quantitative data. The instrument included both closed and open-ended questions designed to capture measurable indicators such as household inclusion, levels of satisfaction, awareness of eligibility criteria, accessibility of registration information, and the timeliness of aid delivery. These variables operationalized the first and second research objectives, which focused on assessing inclusivity and transparency within the registration process. Quantitative data obtained from the questionnaires were subsequently analyzed using both descriptive and inferential statistical techniques, including frequencies, chi-square tests, and t-tests, in order to identify patterns, examine relationships, and determine the overall effectiveness of the beneficiary registration outcomes.

3.8 Key Informant Interviews (KIIs)

Semi-structured interview guides were used to collect qualitative data from key stakeholders such as Department of Disaster Management Affairs (DoDMA) officers, NGO staff, and local leaders. The key informant interviews (KIIs) explored operational procedures, verification mechanisms, monitoring systems, and accountability structures applied during the beneficiary registration process. This method directly supported the third research objective, which examined institutional mechanisms that promoted or hindered accountability in the registration process. The qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis in order to identify key governance gaps, coordination challenges, and procedural strengths that influenced registration outcomes.

3.9 Focus Group Discussions (FGDs)

Focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted to obtain community-level perceptions and collective experiences related to the beneficiary registration process. Each discussion group comprised 8–10 participants representing various demographic categories, including men, women, youth, and vulnerable groups, in order to ensure diverse perspectives. The discussions covered key issues such as inclusivity, fairness, grievance handling mechanisms, and gender differences in registration experiences. Data generated from the FGDs were

coded and analyzed thematically to complement the quantitative findings, thereby providing deeper social context and enabling the validation of community perceptions against the survey data.

3.10 Document Review

A systematic review of secondary sources such as Department of Disaster Management Affairs (DoDMA) operational guidelines, NGO reports, beneficiary lists, and monitoring records was conducted. This method provided factual and procedural evidence used to cross-verify primary data and assess adherence to established beneficiary registration protocols. Findings from the document review were triangulated with results from questionnaires, key informant interviews (KIIs), and focus group discussions (FGDs) in order to strengthen the robustness, validity, and credibility of conclusions drawn regarding the effectiveness of the registration process.

3 11 Data Analysis

The study employed both quantitative and qualitative data analysis Quantitative data collected through household questionnaires were entered into SPSS version 28, checked for completeness, and cleaned before analysis. Descriptive statistics such as frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations were used to summarize the data. Inferential statistics, including chi-square tests, t-tests, and ANOVA, were also applied where appropriate, with statistical significance set at $p < 0.05$.

Qualitative data obtained from key informant interviews and focus group discussions were transcribed and analyzed thematically using NVivo 12. Key themes related to transparency, accountability, inclusivity, and community participation were identified and coded during analysis.

The study further used triangulation to integrate quantitative and qualitative findings, which helped improve the credibility and depth of the results by combining statistical findings with participants' experiences and perceptions regarding beneficiary registration effectiveness.

3.12 Validity and Reliability

Validity refers to the extent to which research instruments measure what they are intended to measure, while reliability refers to the consistency of the instruments and findings. Several measures were used to ensure validity and reliability in this study.

To ensure validity, questionnaires, interview guides, and focus group discussion guides were developed in line with the study objectives and research questions. The instruments were reviewed by the research supervisor and academic experts to assess clarity, relevance, and appropriateness. A pilot study was also conducted outside the study area to identify unclear questions and improve the quality of the instruments.

Reliability was enhanced through the use of standardized questionnaires, consistent data collection procedures, and training of research assistants before fieldwork. Cronbach's Alpha coefficient was used to assess internal consistency, with a coefficient of 0.70 or higher considered acceptable.

For qualitative data, reliability and credibility were strengthened through triangulation of multiple data sources, including questionnaires, interviews, focus group discussions, and document review. Qualitative data were transcribed and coded systematically using thematic analysis, while member checking was conducted to confirm the accuracy of participants' responses.

Overall, pilot testing, expert review, triangulation, and standardized procedures helped strengthen the validity and reliability of the study findings.

3.14 Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the Malawi University of Science and Technology Research Ethics Committee. Permission to conduct the study was also obtained from the Lilongwe District Council, Traditional Authority Tsabango, and relevant local leaders before data collection.

Participation in the study was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all participants before questionnaires, interviews, and focus group discussions were conducted. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study and their right to withdraw at any stage without any consequences. For participants with limited literacy, the consent form was explained verbally in the local language.

Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout the study. Names and personal identifiers were not recorded, and collected data were securely stored and used strictly for academic purposes only.

Special consideration was given to vulnerable participants to ensure that participation did not expose them to harm or discomfort. The researcher also ensured honesty and objectivity in presenting findings, while adhering to ethical principles such as voluntary participation, confidentiality, anonymity, and respect for participants throughout the study.

3.15 Limitations of the Study

Despite providing important insights into the effectiveness of beneficiary registration during the 2024/2025 El Niño-induced drought response in T/A Tsabango, the study had several limitations. The study focused on one geographical area and used a relatively small sample size, which limits generalization of the findings to other contexts. In addition, the study relied on self-reported information, which may have introduced response bias and differences in individual perceptions.

The cross-sectional design collected data at one point in time and could not assess changes throughout the intervention period. Limited access to some official records, together with time and financial constraints, also affected wider geographical coverage and verification of certain findings.

Despite these limitations, the use of mixed methods and triangulation strengthened the validity, reliability, and credibility of the study findings.

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the findings of the study on the effectiveness of beneficiary registration in food distribution during the 2024/2025 El Niño-induced drought response in Traditional Authority (T/A) Tsabango, Lilongwe District. The results are presented in line with the study objectives and are based on data collected through household questionnaires, key informant interviews, focus group discussions, and document review. Both quantitative and qualitative data are analyzed and interpreted to provide a comprehensive understanding of the transparency, accountability, inclusivity, and overall effectiveness of the beneficiary registration process. The chapter also discusses the findings in relation to existing literature on disaster risk management and humanitarian aid distribution.

4.2 RESULTS

4.3 Procedures Used in Beneficiary Registration

This section presents the procedures used in the beneficiary registration process during the 2024/2025 drought response program in T/A Tsabango

4.4 Sources of Information

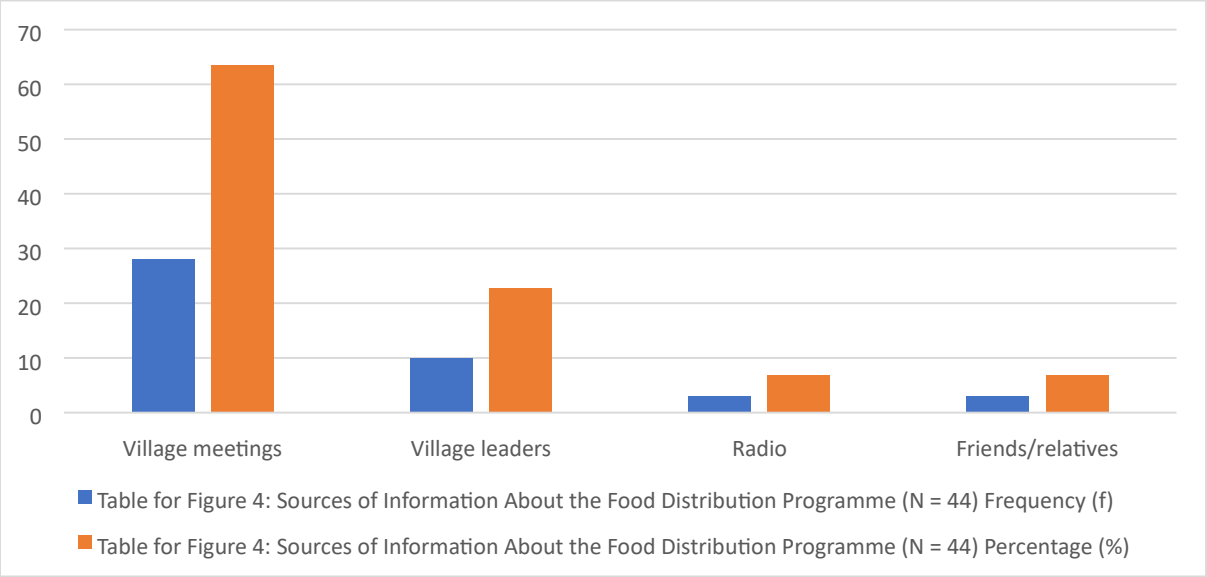


Figure 4: Sources of Information About the Food Distribution Programme

Figure 4 presents the sources through which respondents received information regarding the food distribution program. The findings show that the majority of respondents (63.6%) received information through village meetings, while 22.7% received information from village leaders. Radio and friends or relatives each accounted for 6.8%.

The findings suggest that village meetings were the major communication channel used during the drought response program. This indicates that community-based communication structures played an important role in disseminating information to affected households.

Qualitative findings from focus group discussions revealed that village meetings were considered useful because they allowed community members to directly interact with local leaders and program implementers. One participant explained:

"Village meetings helped people understand registration dates and procedures clearly."
However, some respondents argued that individuals who failed to attend meetings due to illness, distance, or other commitments sometimes missed important information regarding registration.

"Some households missed information because they were absent during community meetings."

These findings demonstrate that although village meetings improved community awareness, dependence on physical meetings may have limited access to information for some vulnerable households.

4.5 Registration Locations and Implementers

Table 1:Registration Venues (N = 44)

Location	Frequency(f)	Percentage (%)
School	23	52.3
Village ground/committees	13	29.5
Churches/trading center's	8	18.2
TOTAL	44	100

Table 1 presents the locations where beneficiary registration was conducted. The findings show that more than half of the respondents (52.3%) indicated that registration took place at schools, while 29.5% reported village grounds and committees as registration venues. Churches and trading centers accounted for 18.2%.

The findings suggest that schools were the most commonly used registration venues because they were centrally located and capable of accommodating large numbers of people.

However, qualitative findings revealed that some respondents experienced difficulties accessing registration centers due to long distances and overcrowding.

One participant explained:

"Some elderly people struggled to walk long distances to the registration centers." Another participant stated:

"The registration points were overcrowded and people spent many hours waiting."

These findings indicate that although schools and public spaces were convenient for program implementation, accessibility challenges affected some vulnerable households.

Table 2:Who Conducted Registration

Actor	Frequency(f)	Percentage (%)
Village leaders/headmen	31	70.5
Village committees	7	15.9
NGOs/extension officers	6	13.6
TOTAL	44	100

Table 2 presents the actors involved in conducting beneficiary registration. The findings show that village leaders conducted most of the registration activities (70.5%), followed by village committees (15.9%) and NGOs or extension officers (13.6%).

The findings indicate that local leadership structures played a dominant role in the registration process. Respondents argued that village leaders possessed better knowledge regarding vulnerable households within their communities. However, some participants expressed concerns regarding fairness and possible manipulation during beneficiary selection.

One focus group discussion participant explained:

"Village leaders knew the vulnerable households, but some people believed that relatives were sometimes prioritized."

These findings suggest that although local leadership involvement improved local coordination, it also created concerns regarding accountability and favoritism.

4.6 Community Participation in Beneficiary Selection

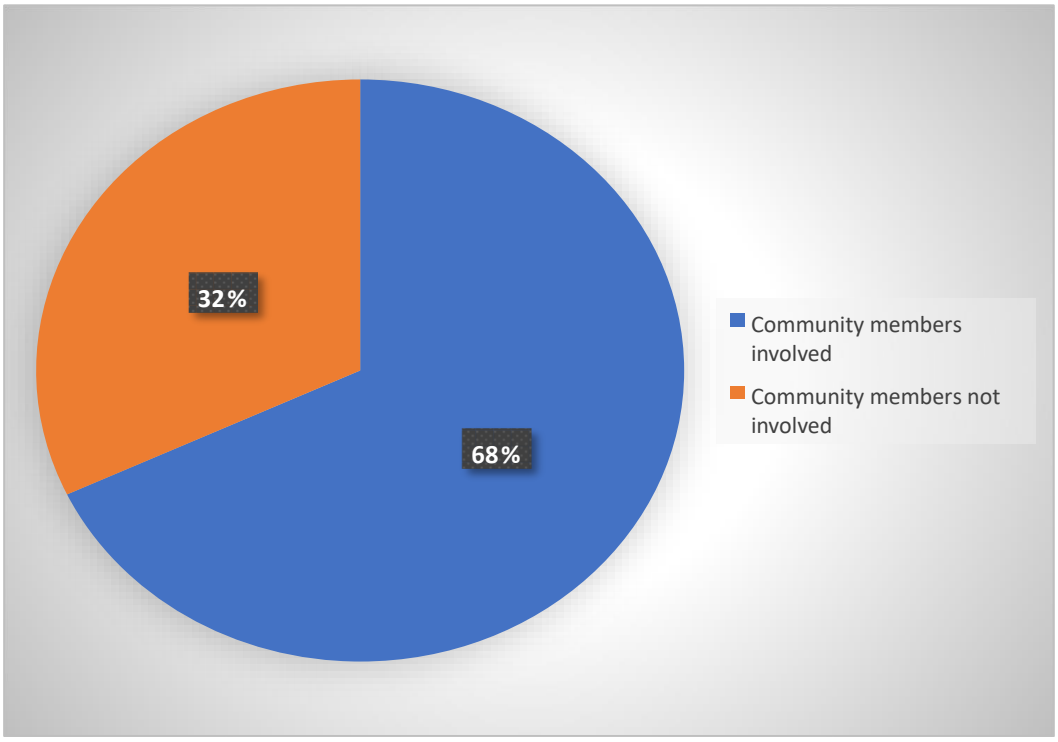


Figure 5:Pie chart Showing Community Participation in Beneficiary Selection

Figure 5 presents the level of community participation in beneficiary selection. The findings show that 68% of respondents indicated that community members participated in the selection process, while 32% reported no community participation.

The findings suggest that community participation was relatively high during the beneficiary registration process. Respondents indicated that community involvement improved local understanding of household vulnerability conditions.

Qualitative findings further revealed that participation improved trust and community ownership of the program. One participant explained:

"People trusted the process more when communities were involved in selecting beneficiaries."

However, some respondents argued that influential individuals dominated decision making processes.

"Ordinary community members participated, but final decisions were mostly controlled by local leaders."

These findings suggest that while participation improved inclusiveness, local power relations still influenced beneficiary selection processes.

Table 3:Understanding of Selection Criteria (N = 44)

Response	Frequency(f)	Percentage (%)
Understood	32	72.7
Not clear/uncertain	12	27.3
TOTAL	44	100

Table 3 presents respondents' understanding of beneficiary selection criteria. The findings show that 72.7% of respondents understood the selection criteria, while 27.3% reported that the criteria were unclear.

The findings suggest that most respondents were aware of the conditions used in selecting beneficiaries. However, the relatively high proportion of respondents who lacked understanding indicates weaknesses in communication and sensitization processes.

Qualitative findings revealed that some households were uncertain about why certain beneficiaries were selected while others were excluded.

One participant explained:

"People were confused because the selection criteria were not explained properly in some villages."

These findings demonstrate that inadequate communication regarding eligibility criteria may contribute to mistrust and perceptions of unfairness.

4.7 Time Taken for Registration

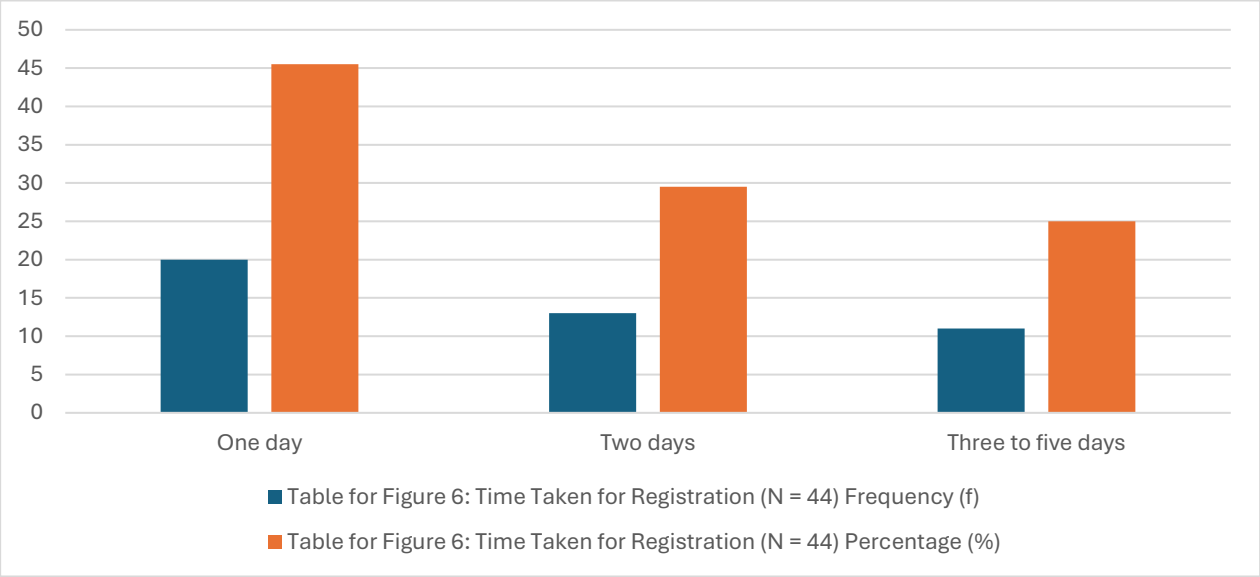


Figure 6: Time Taken for Registration

Figure 6 presents the time taken by respondents during the registration process. The findings show that 45.5% of respondents completed registration within one day, while 29.5% required two days and 25% completed registration within three to five days.

The findings suggest that although many respondents completed registration within a relatively short period, delays were experienced in some areas. Qualitative findings revealed that congestion, shortage of staff, and long queues contributed to delays during registration.

One participant explained:

"People arrived very early but still waited the whole day before being attended to."

These findings demonstrate that operational limitations affected the efficiency of the registration process in some communities.

4.8 Targeting Effectiveness

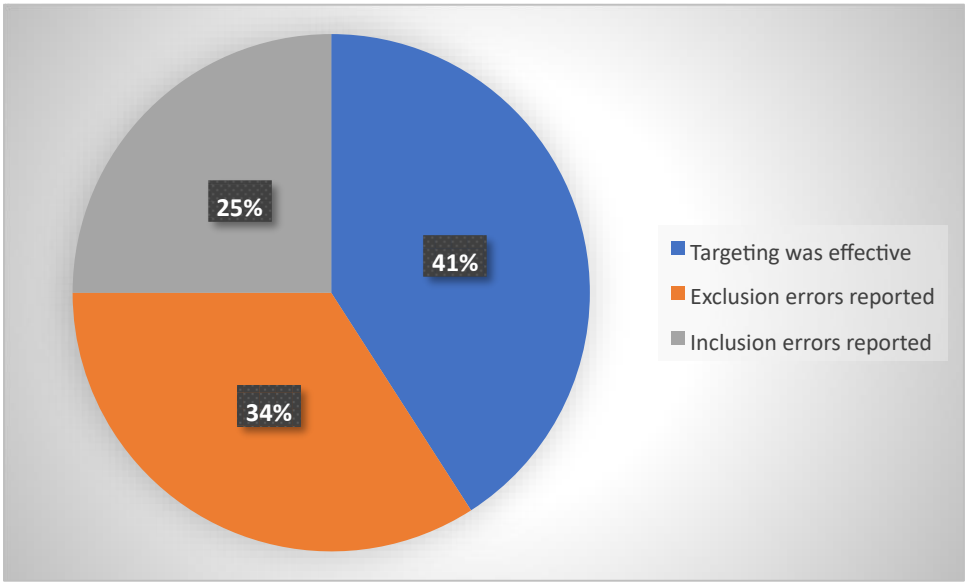


Figure 7: Perceptions of Targeting Effectiveness targeting

Figure 7 presents respondents' perceptions regarding targeting effectiveness during the beneficiary registration process. The findings show that 41% of respondents considered the targeting process effective, while 35% reported exclusion errors and 25% reported inclusion errors.

The findings suggest that although some households viewed the targeting system positively, significant concerns remained regarding fairness and accuracy in beneficiary identification. Exclusion errors appeared to be more common than inclusion errors, indicating that some vulnerable households may have been left out of the program despite experiencing severe food insecurity.

Qualitative findings from focus group discussions further supported these concerns. One participant explained:

"Some households facing serious hunger were not selected even though they were highly vulnerable."

Another respondent stated:

"There were cases where less deserving households benefited while others in greater need were excluded."

These findings demonstrate weaknesses in household verification and beneficiary selection procedures during the drought response program.

4.9 Beneficiary List Sharing

Table 4:Transparency of Beneficiary Lists

Indicator	Frequency(f)	Percentage (%)
Lists shared	24	54.5
Lists not shared/unclear	20	45.5
TOTAL	44	100

Table 4 presents findings regarding the sharing of beneficiary lists within communities. The findings show that 54.5% of respondents indicated that beneficiary lists were publicly shared, while 45.5% reported that lists were either not shared or were unclear.

The findings suggest that transparency mechanisms existed within some communities during the registration process. Public sharing of beneficiary lists allowed community members to verify selected households and increased awareness regarding program beneficiaries.

However, qualitative findings revealed inconsistencies in the implementation of transparency measures. One participant explained:

"We only saw the lists after names had already been finalized."

Another respondent stated:

"Some villages displayed the lists publicly while others did not."

These findings indicate that transparency mechanisms were not implemented consistently across all communities.

4.10 Favoritism

Table 5:Perception of Favoritism

Response	Frequency(f)	Percentage (%)
Yes	25	56.8
No	14	31.8
Not sure	5	11.4
TOTAL	44	100

Table 5 presents respondents' perceptions regarding favoritism during the beneficiary registration process. The findings show that 56.8% of respondents believed favoritism occurred during registration, while 31.8% did not perceive favoritism and 11.4% were uncertain.

The high proportion of respondents who perceived favoritism suggests that community confidence in the fairness of the registration process was relatively low. Respondents believed that personal relationships and local influence affected beneficiary selection.

Qualitative findings further revealed concerns regarding preferential treatment during registration. One focus group discussion participant explained:

"Some village leaders prioritized relatives and close associates during registration."

Another participant stated:

"Not everyone was treated equally because some households were favored over others."

These findings reveal that perceptions of favoritism were widespread within some communities and negatively affected trust in the program.

4.11 Relationship between Beneficiary List Sharing and Favoritism

A Chi-square test was conducted to examine the relationship between beneficiary list sharing and perceptions of favoritism. The findings revealed a statistically significant relationship between the two variables ($p < 0.05$).

The findings suggest that respondents who lacked access to beneficiary lists were more likely to perceive favoritism during the registration process. This indicates that transparency mechanisms significantly influenced community trust and perceptions regarding fairness.

Qualitative findings further supported these results. One participant explained:

"When lists were hidden, people suspected that leaders were favoring their relatives."

These findings demonstrate the importance of transparent information-sharing mechanisms in reducing mistrust and perceptions of manipulation.

4.12 Accountability Mechanisms

Table 6:Complaint Handling and Reporting System

Indicators	Frequency(f)	Percentage (%)
Complaints addressed	21	45.5
Reporting system existed	23	52.5
TOTAL	44	100

Table 6 presents findings regarding complaint handling and reporting systems during the registration process. The findings show that 52.5% of respondents indicated that reporting

systems existed, while 45.5% reported that complaints raised by community members were addressed.

The findings suggest that accountability mechanisms were present within some communities during program implementation. However, the relatively low proportion of respondents who reported successful complaint resolution indicates weaknesses in responsiveness and complaint management systems.

Qualitative findings revealed that some community members feared reporting complaints against local leaders.

One key informant explained:

"Some people feared reporting complaints because they worried about conflict with village leaders."

Another participant stated:

"Even when complaints were reported, responses were often delayed."

These findings demonstrate that accountability systems faced implementation challenges despite their formal existence.

4.13 Satisfaction with Transparency

Table 7:Satisfaction Levels

Level	Frequency(f)	Percentage (%)
Satisfied/Strongly satisfied	22	50
Neutral	9	20.5
Dissatisfied	13	29.5
TOTAL	44	100

Table 7 presents respondents' levels of satisfaction regarding transparency during the registration process. The findings show that 50% of respondents were satisfied or strongly satisfied, while 20.5% were neutral and 29.5% were dissatisfied.

The findings suggest mixed perceptions regarding transparency during the drought response program. Although some respondents appreciated the communication and participation mechanisms used during registration, others remained dissatisfied due to concerns regarding favoritism and exclusion.

One participant explained:

"Transparency improved in some villages, but other communities still experienced unfair practices."

These findings demonstrate variations in the implementation of transparency mechanisms across different communities.

4.14 Challenges During Registration

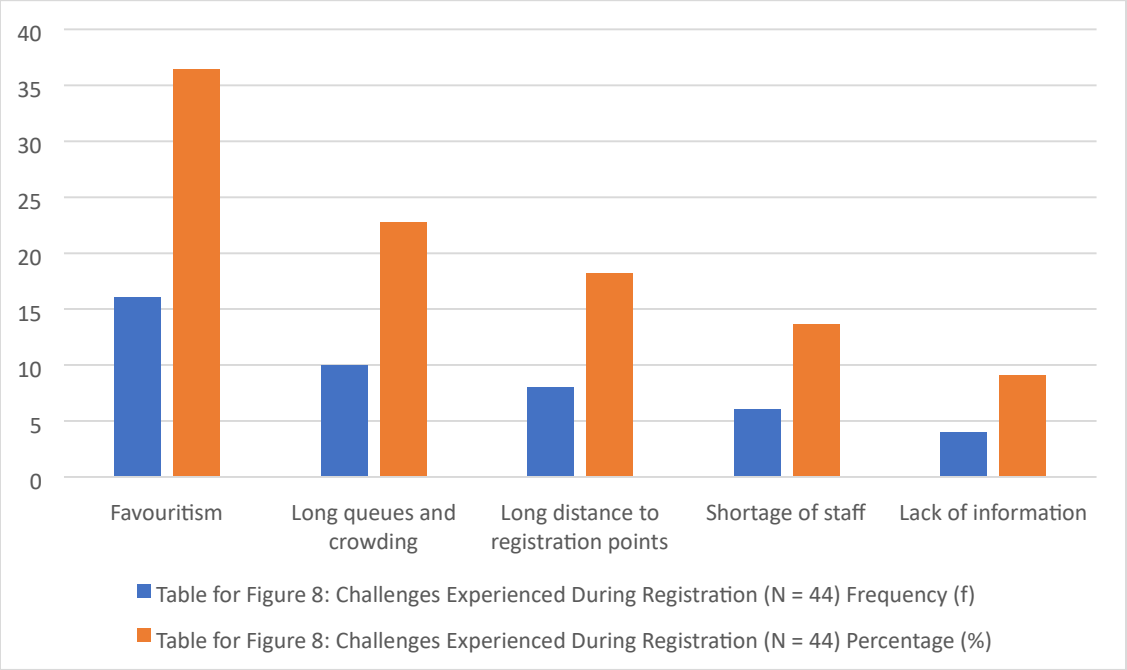


Figure 8: Challenges Experienced During Registration

Figure 8 presents the challenges experienced during the registration process. The findings show that favoritism was the most commonly reported challenge. Other challenges included long queues and crowding, long distances to registration centers, shortage of staff, and lack of information.

The findings suggest that operational and governance-related challenges significantly affected the effectiveness of the registration process.

Qualitative findings revealed that overcrowding and limited staffing contributed to delays and frustration during registration.

One participant explained:

"People spent many hours waiting because there were too few staff members."

Another respondent stated:

"Some elderly people returned home without assistance because the queues were too long."

These findings indicate that operational limitations negatively affected accessibility and efficiency during program implementation.

4.15 Inferential Statistical Analysis

Inferential statistical analysis was conducted using Chi-square tests and one-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) to examine relationships among key variables associated with transparency, accountability, participation, and satisfaction within the beneficiary registration process.

The Chi-square tests examined relationships between:

- access to beneficiary lists and perceived fairness;

- access to information and satisfaction levels; and
- community participation and perceived transparency.

In addition, a one-way ANOVA was conducted to assess differences in satisfaction levels across different information access groups.

4.16 Relationship between Access to Beneficiary Lists and Perceived Fairness

Table 8: Chi-Square Test Between Community Participation and Perceived Transparency

Variable Relationship	χ^2 Value	df	p-value	Interpretation
Access to beneficiary lists × Perceived fairness	8.214	`2	0.016	Significant relationship

A Chi-square test of independence was conducted to examine the relationship between access to beneficiary lists and perceived fairness in the maize distribution process. The findings revealed a statistically significant relationship between the two variables (χ^2 = 8.214, df = 2, p = 0.016). Since the p-value was less than 0.05, the null hypothesis was rejected.

4.17 Relationship between Access to Information and Satisfaction with the Distribution Process

Table 9: Chi-Square Test Between Access to Information and Satisfaction Levels

Variable Relationship	χ^2 Value	Df	p-value	Interpretation

Access to information × Satisfaction levels	10.532	3	0.014	Significant relationship

A Chi-square test was conducted to determine the relationship between access to information and respondents' satisfaction levels with the distribution process. The results showed a statistically significant association between the variables ($\chi^2 = 10.532$, df = 3, $p = 0.014$). Since the p-value was below the significance level of 0.05, the null hypothesis was rejected.

4.18 Relationship between Community Participation and Perceived Transparency

Table 10: Chi-Square Test Between Community Participation and Perceived Transparency

Variable Relationship	χ^2 Value	df	p-value	Interpretation
Community participation × Perceived transparency	7.689	2	0.021	Significant relationship

A Chi-square test was conducted to assess the relationship between community participation and perceived transparency during the beneficiary registration process. The findings indicated a statistically significant relationship between the variables ($\chi^2 = 7.689$, df = 2, $p = 0.021$). Since the p-value was less than 0.05, the null hypothesis was rejected.

4.19 Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) on Satisfaction Levels Across Information Access Groups

Table 11: ANOVA Results for Satisfaction Levels Across Information Access Groups

Source of Variation	F-value	p-value	Interpretation
Information access groups and satisfaction levels	4.276	0.018	Significant difference

A one-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was conducted to examine differences in respondents' satisfaction levels across different information access groups. Respondents were grouped according to their primary source of information, including village meetings, community leaders, and other communication channels. The ANOVA results revealed a statistically significant difference in satisfaction levels across the information access groups ($F = 4.276$, $p = 0.018$). Since the p-value was below 0.05, the null hypothesis was rejected.

4.20 Access Barriers

Table 12:Access Barriers

Issue	Frequency(f)	Percentage (%)
Lack of information	23	52.3
Distance affected access	26	59.1

Table 12 presents the major access barriers experienced by respondents during the beneficiary registration process. The findings show that 59.1% of respondents reported that long distances affected access to registration centers, while 52.3% identified lack of information as a significant barrier.

The findings suggest that physical accessibility and communication challenges significantly affected participation in the registration process. Long distances to registration centers particularly affected elderly persons, female-headed households, and vulnerable community members who lacked adequate transport and financial resources.

Qualitative findings from focus group discussions further revealed that some households failed to complete registration because registration centers were located far from their communities. One participant explained:

"Some elderly people could not manage to walk long distances to the registration centers."

Another respondent stated:

"Some households missed registration because they received information too late."

These findings demonstrate that both operational and communication-related barriers negatively affected inclusiveness and accessibility during the drought response program.

The results further suggest that improving proximity of registration centers and strengthening community information systems may enhance participation and reduce exclusion of vulnerable households during future humanitarian interventions.

4.21 Suggested Improvements

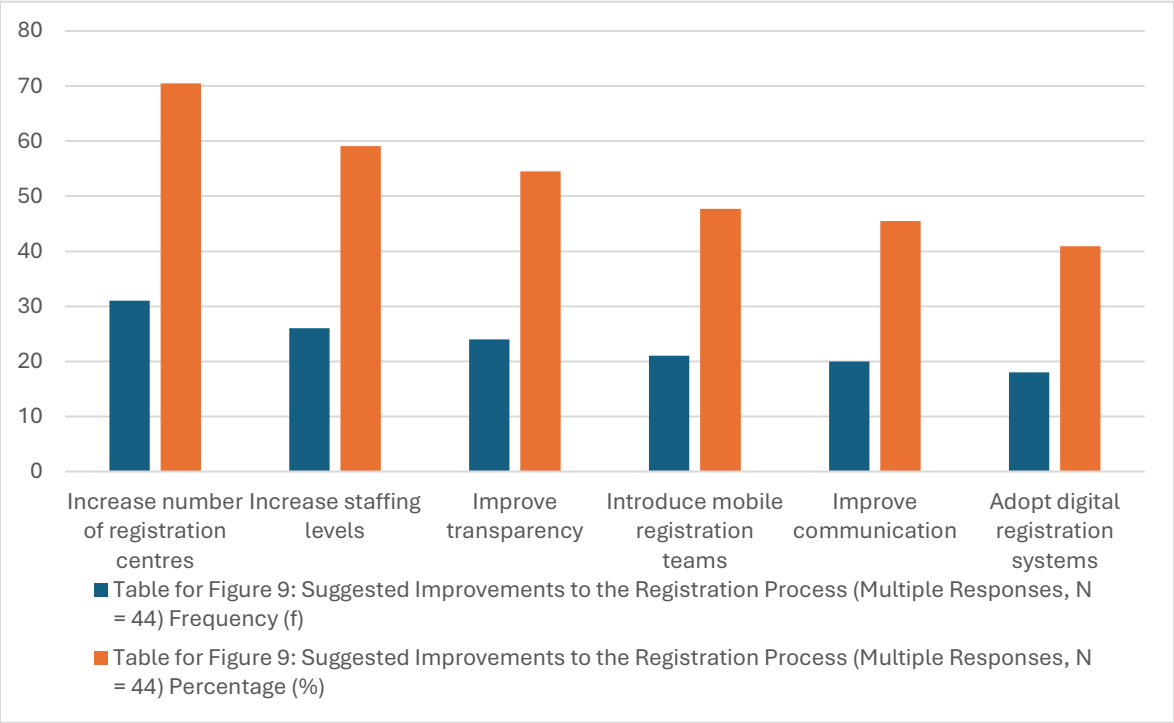


Figure 9: suggested improvements

Figure 9 presents respondents' suggested improvements to the beneficiary registration process during the 2024/2025 drought response program. The findings show that the most frequently suggested improvement was increasing the number of registration centers (70.5%). Other suggestions included increasing staffing levels (59.1%), improving transparency (54.5%), introducing mobile registration teams, improving communication systems, and adopting digital registration systems.

The findings suggest that respondents believed both operational and governance-related reforms were necessary to improve the effectiveness, accessibility, and fairness of the registration process. The recommendation to increase registration centers indicates that distance and congestion were major barriers affecting community participation during registration.

Qualitative findings from focus group discussions further revealed that many respondents preferred decentralized registration systems that would reduce travel distances and overcrowding at registration points. One participant explained:

"More registration centers would reduce congestion and make the process easier for vulnerable households."

Another respondent stated:

"Mobile registration teams would help elderly and disabled people who struggle to travel long distances."

The findings further suggest that respondents considered transparency and communication as important factors for improving community trust in the program. Some participants argued that clearer communication and public sharing of beneficiary lists would reduce misunderstandings and perceptions of favoritism.

One participant explained:

"If information is shared openly and lists are displayed early, people will trust the process more."

The recommendation to adopt digital registration systems also demonstrates growing community awareness regarding the potential benefits of technology in improving efficiency, reducing duplication, and strengthening accountability during humanitarian response programs.

Overall, the findings indicate that respondents viewed improved accessibility, stronger transparency mechanisms, increased staffing capacity, and enhanced communication systems as critical for strengthening future beneficiary registration processes during humanitarian interventions.

4.22 Findings from FGDs and KIIs

Table 13:Findings from FGDs and KIIs

Theme	Findings from FGDs	Findings from KIIs	Implication
Transparency	Limited sharing of beneficiary lists and unclear criteria.	Inconsistent information sharing was reported.	Reduced trust in the process.
Favoritism	Perceived bias in beneficiary selection.	Risk of bias due to weak oversight was acknowledged.	Affected fairness in targeting.
Accountability	Complaints were not effectively addressed.	Complaint systems existed but were weak.	Reduced accountability.
Community Participation	Participation varied across communities.	Participation was not consistently applied.	Affected inclusiveness.
Operational Challenges	Distance, delays and congestion were reported.	Staff and logistical constraints were noted.	Reduced accessibility and efficiency.

As shown in Table 9, qualitative data from focus group discussions (FGDs) and key informant interviews (KIIs) revealed five major themes, namely transparency, favoritism, accountability, community participation, and operational challenges. The findings indicate that weaknesses in information sharing, complaint handling mechanisms, inconsistent participation, and logistical constraints affected the effectiveness, fairness, and accessibility

of the beneficiary registration process. The qualitative findings also complement the quantitative results by providing deeper insights into the experiences and perceptions of participants regarding the registration process. Further interpretation of these findings is presented in the discussion section.

One participant summarized these concerns by stating:

"Some people who needed food were left out, while others were included unfairly, which made people question the process." (FGD Participant)

4.23 Discussion of Findings

4. 24Sources of Information and Communication Effectiveness

The findings indicate that village meetings were the primary channel through which beneficiaries accessed information about the food distribution program. This reflects a deliberate reliance on existing local governance and traditional leadership structures as a cost-effective and contextually embedded communication strategy within rural humanitarian settings.

From a Participatory Development Theory perspective (Chambers, 2017), this approach enhances local ownership by situating communication within familiar and trusted community institutions. In this context, village meetings likely improved initial program visibility and allowed direct interaction between implementers and community members, thereby strengthening legitimacy and reducing misinformation at early stages of implementation.

However, the findings also reveal structural limitations in this communication model. Reliance on physical meetings inherently privileges individuals who are physically able to attend and geographically close to meeting venues. As a result, vulnerable groups such as elderly persons, chronically ill individuals, and remote households were systematically disadvantaged in accessing timely information. This creates an information asymmetry that undermines the inclusiveness of the communication system.

This limitation highlights a key weakness in Participatory Development Theory when applied in resource-constrained rural contexts: participation does not automatically guarantee equitable access. In practice, participation becomes conditional on mobility, health status, and geographic location. Similar concerns raised by WFP (2021) suggest that single-channel communication strategies in humanitarian settings often reproduce exclusion rather than reduce it.

Therefore, the findings demonstrate that effective humanitarian communication requires a hybrid model combining community meetings with supplementary channels such as radio messaging, mobile outreach, and targeted household sensitization to ensure equitable information access across vulnerable groups.

4.25 Registration Venues and Accessibility Constraints

The use of schools and public spaces as registration centers reflects an operational strategy aimed at maximizing space availability, administrative efficiency, and the ability to process large numbers of beneficiaries within limited timeframes. From an implementation perspective, this approach is rational in emergency humanitarian contexts where speed and scale are prioritized.

However, the findings reveal a significant tension between operational efficiency and social inclusion. While centralized registration sites improve coordination, they simultaneously introduce spatial barriers that disproportionately affect vulnerable populations. Elderly individuals and households located in remote areas faced increased travel burdens, financial costs, and physical strain, which limited their ability to participate fully in the registration process.

This indicates that program design did not adequately incorporate differentiated vulnerability considerations, particularly mobility constraints. FAO (2023) similarly observes that humanitarian service delivery in rural contexts often reproduces spatial inequality when accessibility is not explicitly integrated into operational planning.

From a governance perspective, this reflects a partial failure in equity-sensitive service delivery. Efficiency-oriented systems, while operationally effective, risk undermining

inclusiveness when they do not account for heterogeneity in beneficiary capacities. The implication is that decentralized or mobile registration models may be more appropriate in geographically dispersed rural settings.

4.26 Role of Local Leaders and Governance Implications

The prominent role of village leaders in registration processes reflects the decentralized governance structure underpinning humanitarian implementation in Malawi. Local leaders contribute valuable contextual knowledge, particularly in identifying vulnerable households, which can improve targeting efficiency and reduce administrative costs.

However, the findings also reveal governance risks associated with reliance on local authority structures. Perceptions of favoritism suggest that informal social relations and power dynamics may have influenced beneficiary selection. This introduces subjectivity into what is intended to be an objective targeting process.

This dual role of local leadership aligns with Chinsinga (2021), who argues that traditional authorities in Malawi simultaneously facilitate program implementation while also creating opportunities for bias and elite influence. From a Governance Theory perspective (Hyden, 2013), this indicates weak accountability mechanisms at the local level, where authority is not sufficiently balanced by oversight or transparency systems.

The implication is that decentralization without robust accountability frameworks can lead to legitimacy challenges. Strengthening independent verification systems and introducing multi-level oversight structures would help reduce the risk of elite capture while preserving the benefits of local knowledge.

4.27 Community Participation and Power Relations

The study found that community participation was widely incorporated into beneficiary selection processes, reflecting adherence to participatory development principles. This suggests an intention to democratize decision-making and improve local ownership of the program.

However, qualitative evidence reveals that participation did not necessarily translate into equal influence over decisions. Instead, decision-making power remained concentrated among influential individuals and local elites. This indicates that participation was often procedural rather than substantive.

This finding supports Tadesse (2020), who argues that community-based targeting systems in rural governance contexts are frequently constrained by pre-existing social hierarchies. In such settings, participation may reinforce rather than reduce inequality when power asymmetries are not explicitly addressed.

The implication is that participatory mechanisms must be accompanied by structured safeguards such as clear selection criteria, transparent decision-making procedures, and independent monitoring. Without these, participation risks becoming symbolic, masking underlying power imbalances rather than addressing them.

4.28 Targeting Effectiveness and Social Exclusion

The findings reveal persistent targeting inaccuracies, characterized by both exclusion of eligible households and inclusion of non-eligible households. This indicates weaknesses in the beneficiary identification and verification process, undermining the fairness and accuracy of resource allocation.

From a governance perspective, exclusion errors represent a critical failure in distributive justice, as they deny assistance to households most in need. Conversely, inclusion errors reduce program efficiency and weaken public trust by allowing less vulnerable households to benefit.

The persistence of these errors suggests that targeting challenges are not purely technical but also institutional. Weak verification systems, limited data accuracy, and potential social bias in decision-making collectively contribute to inefficiencies in beneficiary selection. Banda (2022) similarly argues that targeting inefficiencies in Malawi reflect both governance deficits and operational constraints.

The broader implication is that inaccurate targeting not only reduces programme effectiveness but also has long-term welfare consequences, including increased food insecurity and the adoption of negative coping strategies such as asset depletion and reduced consumption. This underscores the need for stronger verification mechanisms and independent monitoring systems.

4.29 Transparency, Accountability and Trust

The findings demonstrate that transparency, particularly through beneficiary list sharing, plays a critical role in shaping perceptions of fairness and institutional trust. Where beneficiary lists were publicly displayed, communities reported higher levels of confidence in the selection process and reduced suspicion of manipulation.

In contrast, the absence or inconsistency of list sharing increased perceptions of favoritism and unfairness. This demonstrates that transparency is not merely an administrative requirement but a central determinant of perceived legitimacy in humanitarian programming.

From a Governance Theory perspective, transparency strengthens accountability by enabling community oversight and reducing information asymmetry between implementers and beneficiaries. However, inconsistent implementation across communities undermines this effect and creates uneven trust outcomes.

Weaknesses in complaint handling systems further exacerbate accountability deficits. Fear of retaliation and lack of responsiveness reduce the effectiveness of grievance mechanisms, indicating a gap between formal institutional design and practical functionality. This weakens the overall accountability ecosystem and limits community empowerment.

4.30 Operational Constraints and Programme Efficiency

Operational constraints such as long travel distances, congestion at registration points, and staffing shortages significantly affected the efficiency of the registration process. These challenges were particularly pronounced in rural areas, where infrastructure limitations intensified logistical difficulties.

These findings suggest that while humanitarian programs may be well-designed at policy level, their effectiveness is significantly shaped by implementation capacity at the operational level. This reflects a common challenge in emergency response systems, where high demand often exceeds institutional capacity.

FAO (2023) similarly notes that humanitarian operations frequently experience operational overload during peak emergency periods. However, this study extends that argument by demonstrating that operational inefficiencies also have governance implications, as delays and congestion influence perceptions of fairness and institutional credibility.

Thus, operational constraints should not be viewed solely as logistical challenges but as factors that directly shape beneficiary trust and program legitimacy.

4.31 Integrated Interpretation of Findings

The integration of quantitative and qualitative findings demonstrates that the effectiveness of beneficiary registration is shaped by the interaction of three interrelated dimensions: governance structures, operational capacity, and community power dynamics.

Governance structures influence transparency, accountability, and leadership involvement; operational capacity determines efficiency, accessibility, and speed of implementation; while community dynamics shape participation, trust, and informal decision-making processes.

The statistical findings confirm that transparency, participation, and communication access significantly influence perceptions of fairness. However, qualitative evidence reveals that these relationships are mediated by structural inequalities and institutional constraints at the local level.

This triangulation highlights that beneficiary registration is not merely a technical administrative process but a complex socio-governance system in which institutional design, power relations, and operational realities interact. Consequently, improving

humanitarian effectiveness requires integrated reforms that address governance accountability, operational capacity, and inclusive communication systems simultaneously.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Conclusion

This study assessed the effectiveness of beneficiary registration in food distribution during the 2024/2025 El Niño-induced drought response in Traditional Authority (T/A) Tsabango, Lilongwe District. The findings revealed that the registration process achieved moderate effectiveness but was affected by challenges related to transparency, accountability, targeting, communication, and operational efficiency.

The study found that the registration process largely depended on village leaders and local structures, which promoted community participation and use of local knowledge in identifying vulnerable households. However, limited oversight created opportunities for favoritism, bias, and inconsistencies in beneficiary selection. Transparency and accountability mechanisms existed but were not implemented consistently, leading to confusion, mistrust, and dissatisfaction among some respondents.

The findings further showed that long distances to registration centers, inadequate information, congestion, staff shortages, and delays negatively affected accessibility and participation, particularly among vulnerable households. In addition, the study identified inclusion and exclusion errors, where some deserving households were left out while some less deserving households benefited from the program.

Overall, the study concludes that although the beneficiary registration process supported food distribution during the drought response, weaknesses in governance, inclusiveness, transparency, and operational systems reduced its overall effectiveness. Strengthening these areas is essential for improving the fairness, credibility, and efficiency of future humanitarian interventions.

5.2 Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, several recommendations are proposed to improve beneficiary registration processes in future humanitarian food distribution programs.

First, transparency should be strengthened by ensuring that beneficiary lists are publicly displayed in all communities and that selection criteria are clearly communicated using simple and understandable language. Multiple communication channels such as community meetings, radio programs, and mobile messaging should be used to improve access to information.

Second, accountability mechanisms should be improved by strengthening complaint handling systems and ensuring that grievances are addressed promptly and fairly. Independent monitoring involving government officials, NGOs, and other stakeholders should also be enhanced to reduce favoritism and improve oversight during registration.

Third, inclusiveness and accessibility should be enhanced by increasing the number of registration centers and introducing mobile registration teams to reach remote communities. Special support measures should also be provided for vulnerable groups such as elderly persons, people living with disabilities, and pregnant women.

Fourth, operational efficiency should be improved through increased staffing levels, proper scheduling systems, and adequate logistical support to reduce congestion and delays during registration activities.

The study further recommends strengthening stakeholder coordination by increasing the involvement of NGOs, extension workers, and government officials in beneficiary identification and verification processes. This would help improve consistency, fairness, and standardization during implementation.

Finally, the adoption of digital registration systems is recommended to reduce duplication, improve data accuracy, and strengthen program efficiency and accountability.

However, successful implementation of digital systems will require adequate training for staff and proper community sensitization to ensure effective utilization and acceptance.

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APPENDIX

HOUSEHOLD QUESTIONNAIRE

Study Title: Assessing the Effectiveness of Beneficiary Registration in Food Distribution During the 2024/2025 El Niño-Induced Drought Response in T/A Tsabango, Lilongwe District

Researcher: John Gondwe

Institution: Malawi University of Science and Technology

SECTION A: DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

1. Gender: ☐ Male ☐ Female
2. Age group: ☐ 18–25 ☐ 26–35 ☐ 36–45 ☐ 46–55 ☐ Above 55
3. Marital status: ☐ Single ☐ Married ☐ Widowed ☐ Divorced
4. Highest level of education: ☐ No formal education ☐ Primary ☐ Secondary ☐ Tertiary
5. Village name: _____
6. Household size: _____
7. Main source of livelihood: ☐ Farming ☐ Small business ☐ Casual labour ☐ Employment ☐ Other: ___

SECTION B: AWARENESS OF FOOD DISTRIBUTION PROGRAM

8. Are you aware of the food distribution program? ☐ Yes ☐ No
9. How did you hear about the program? _____

10. Who informed the community? _____

11. Did community leaders inform people? ☐ Yes ☐ No 12. Were you registered? ☐ Yes ☐ No

SECTION C: BENEFICIARY REGISTRATION PROCESS

13. Where did registration take place? _____

14. Who conducted registration? _____

15. Were community members involved? ☐ Yes ☐ No

16. What criteria were used? _____

17. Did you understand the criteria? ☐ Yes ☐ No

18. Was the process fair? _____

19. How long did it take? _____

20. Were vulnerable groups considered? ☐ Yes ☐ No

21. Were deserving people left out? _____

22. We're undeserving people included? _____

SECTION D: TRANSPARENCY AND ACCOUNTABILITY

23. Were beneficiary lists shared? ☐ Yes ☐ No

24. Could community verify the list? ☐ Yes ☐ No

25. Was there favoritism? ☐ Yes ☐ No

26. Were complaints addressed? ☐ Yes ☐ No

27. Was there a reporting system? ☐ Yes ☐ No

28. Satisfaction with transparency: _____

SECTION E: CHALLENGES

29. Challenges observed: _____

30. Did lack of information affect registration? ☐ Yes ☐ No

31. Did distance affect participation? ☐ Yes ☐ No

32. What should be improved? _____ 33. Recommendations: _____

SECTION F: STRUCTURED QUESTIONS

34. Registration process was transparent: ☐ Strongly Agree ☐ Agree ☐ Neutral ☐ Disagree ☐ Strongly Disagree

35. Criteria were clear: ☐ Strongly Agree ☐ Agree ☐ Neutral ☐ Disagree ☐ Strongly Disagree

36. Vulnerable households identified: ☐ Strongly Agree ☐ Agree ☐ Neutral ☐ Disagree ☐ Strongly Disagree

37. Leaders ensured fairness: ☐ Strongly Agree ☐ Agree ☐ Neutral ☐ Disagree ☐ Strongly Disagree

38. Registration improved distribution: ☐ Strongly Agree ☐ Agree ☐ Neutral ☐ Disagree ☐ Strongly Disagree



The figure above shows one of pictures during data collection