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Cash transfers and psychosocial well-being: evidence from four African countries

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There is reasonable consensus that development ultimately aims to improve people's well-being. Well-being is a final goal in a way that other traditional developmental outcomes—income, expenditure, education, health etc.—are not. Yet the large majority of cash transfer impact evaluations focus narrowly on these simpler and relatively easy-to-measure indicators.

This One Pager addresses this research gap by developing a framework to conceptualise 'psychosocial well-being' and presenting evidence from an application of the framework to cash transfer programmes evaluated by Oxford Policy Management in Kenya (drawing on a large-scale impact evaluation), Ghana, Lesotho and Zimbabwe (drawing on systematic cross-country qualitative research undertaken with the From Protection to Production team of the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations) (Attah et al. 2016).

A conceptual framework for analysing psychosocial well-being

The proposed framework is an extension of the Well-being in Development approach developed by researchers at the University of Bath, who define well-being as a multi-dimensional concept consisting of an interlay of three dimensions: material (what people have or do not have), relational (what people can or cannot do with what they have) and subjective (how people think or feel about what they can do and can be). Psychosocial well-being as we define it lies at the intersection between the two latter dimensions, relating to the dynamic interaction between *social/relational* processes and *subjective/ psychological* perspectives.

We draw on Ryff and Singer's (1996) conceptualisation, focusing on: self-acceptance; positive relations with others; autonomy; environmental mastery; purpose in life; and personal growth. These six dimensions affect and are affected by an individual's material well-being and social/cultural/ political contexts. Psychosocial well-being is thus both an effect (it is good to have increasing values in any of those six dimensions) and cause for further positive effects (increasing values in those six dimensions is likely to lead to improvements in other areas of well-being).

Cash transfers and psychosocial well-being: the evidence

Children and education - Findings from Kenya's Hunger Safety Net programme show an increase in educational performance. Qualitative research showed how improved cleanliness, clothing and ability to pay for fees and other school materials affected children's overall self-acceptance (appearing at ease and more confident), improved relations with their teachers and classmates (no longer being 'chased away' from school and stigmatised), increased their sense of autonomy and mastery over their environment (their performance now depended only on their hard work and discipline, rather than being constrained by a lack of food and school materials) and gave them more purpose in life. These findings were confirmed in a qualitative research for Lesotho's Child Grant Programme (CGP)[1] and Zimbabwe's Harmonised Social Cash Transfer Programme (HSCT)

Other psychosocial effects - In all the aforementioned programmes and in Ghana's Livelihood Empowerment Against Poverty (LEAP), cash transfers similarly enabled adult beneficiaries and caregivers to be better clothed, clean and able to feel presentable in public, leading to an increased sense of self-worth and sociability with community members. In Ghana, due to delays in payments, there was an expression of certainty that the cash would eventually arrive, which helped create a sense of hopefulness, and a longer-term perspective compared to non-beneficiaries who described life to be 'tipping down'.

This newly found self-esteem, acceptance and sense of hope enabled beneficiaries to assert agency and autonomy by reducing reliance on their families. Beneficiaries could now be seen as financially independent, rather than being a drain on scarce resources. For example, beneficiaries in Zimbabwe noted now being able to 'stand on their own two feet', while in Lesotho they derived increased self-reliance in their ability to now return things they had borrowed. We note the relational and economic significance of this, with beneficiaries now being able to rebuild and participate in risk-sharing networks, evidenced by increased participation in savings and religious groups as a result of greater autonomy over financial resources.

Policy implications

The findings show that while cash transfer interventions may not have explicit psychosocial objectives, they influence these dimensions of well-being. This calls for a more explicit incorporation of psychological and relational dimensions in programme theories of change and evaluations. These findings imply that psychosocial well-being is potentially a powerful driver for the achievement of larger and more sustainable impacts on 'traditional' programme outcomes.

The research also stressed the mediating role played by programme design: the ways in which beneficiaries are informed about its objectives and rules, told about their duties and rights, addressed and treated during payments or monitoring visits, and provided opportunities to express their complaints all represent opportunities of social interaction that can help build psychosocial well-being.

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Note:

1. Importantly, the CGP contributed to a highly significant 25.5 percentage point increase in the proportion of pupils who had both uniform and shoes to go to school with (Oxford Policy Management 2014).

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