

Replicating a Conditional Cash Transfers Programme: Reflections Based on the Experience of the *Oportunidades* Programme

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Over the course of the first decade of the 21st century, with the support of a number of international organizations, Conditional Cash Transfers (CCTs) programmes became one of the social policy instruments most widely used to combat poverty in Latin America, Africa and Asia. Because of its widely recognized success, Mexico's *Oportunidades* Programme (formerly known as PROGRESA) was commonly employed as a model for creating programmes in other countries. The fundamental components of the 'copy models' are basically the same, but there are variances in terms of objectives, selection of target population and specific lines of intervention.

Yaschine (2012) looks at the *Oportunidades* with an aim toward identifying factors instrumental in the achievement of its set objectives, especially with regard to the improvement of human capital as a means toward breaking the intergenerational vicious cycle of inequality and poverty. These factors present themselves as potentially critical lessons for the design and implementation of CCTs in other parts of the world.

For Yaschine, key features that have contributed to the *Oportunidades*' capacity to increase coverage, generate positive impacts and stay in operation for more than 15 years include:

- Strong national ownership during all stages of the programme, including both human and financial capacity.
- Political and financial support from the highest level of Mexico's federal government.
- The progressive construction of consensus about the programme between the main political and social actors.
- Technical, operational, and policy capacity at the national level.
- Expansion (both prior to and subsequent to the programme) of the coverage of education and health services.
- Rigorous multidisciplinary diagnostic and piloting of the programme as a way to improve its design.
- A design that is informed by a long-term vision focused on the breaking of the intergenerational cycle of inequality and poverty.
- The aligning of educational, health and dietary components.
- The ability to "translate" the theoretic-conceptual design into an institutional and operational design that is both viable and efficient.
- The creation of coordinating tools that facilitate systematic communication between the social development, education and operational health sectors.
- The establishment of a monitoring and evaluation system since the design phase of the programme and its use as a learning tool for the continuous improvement of the programme.
- The existence of a basic communications infrastructure.

Perhaps the most considerable replication challenge, says Yaschine, is successfully adapting the CCT model to local circumstances. Several of the 'new' programmes have arisen in response to a sense of political urgency that calls for immediate results, and this tends to minimize the importance of an in-depth diagnostic assessment. Overly hasty approaches can engender the creation of programmes characterized by negligible conceptual and technical clarity and that encourage only a short-term response to combating poverty.

In many cases there is no alignment between the components of the development of human capital. In other cases one observes only a tenuous local political support for the programme while, simultaneously, more and more ground in terms of decision-making and sources of technical and financial resources is yielded to international participants. Such a phenomenon favours designs that are to a considerable extent outwardly-directed, and this could create impediments to creating domestic agreements and ensuring national ownership of a given programme.

Weak technical and managerial capacity, the lack of statistical information for diagnosis, design and planning, and constraints in the supply of services and basic infrastructure limit the potential impact of many new programmes and their long-term sustainability.

Given the characteristics outlined, 'copy' programmes will perhaps be successful in providing short-term positive results in view of the fact that transfers will increase the income and consumption of families as well as school attendance (in those programmes with an educational component) and attendance at health clinics (in cases in which a health component is present). However, such results will possibly be less broad than what could be achieved if better conditions for design and implementation of the programme were initially in place. Either way, it is quite unlikely that there will be observed impacts on the intergenerational transmission of poverty and inequality. Better results in these dimensions would require a long-term vision and the inclusion of a comprehensive social policy and development strategy.

It is worth asking where, when and how to implement an *Oportunidades*-style programme and how to ensure that it has objectives more in keeping with a longer-term conceptual framework. Or perhaps it is the case that this obsession with a long-term vision stems from an outlook that is too firmly rooted in the Mexican experience. That is, in some countries the national priorities may actually shift the centre of gravity of the CCTs towards programmes with a short-term perspective. However, we should recognize that there are root causes and features of poverty that do not respond to the CCTs and that, indeed, call for the use of other policy instruments.

Reference:

Yaschine, I. (2012). Replicar un programa de transferencias condicionadas: reflexiones a partir de la experiencia de *Oportunidades*. In González de la Rocha, Mercedes y Agustín Escobar Latapí (Coords.), 2012, *Pobreza, transferencias condicionadas y Sociedad*, México, D.F.: Publicaciones de la Casa Chata, CIESAS.