



Conflict-sensitive cash transfers: social cohesion

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Question

Are there documented positive social cohesion benefits from cash transfers over vouchers? What lessons are there from humanitarian contexts, as well as the wider debate on universal basic incomes that use cash approaches in more stable settings?¹

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¹ This report on cash transfers and social cohesion is the second report of a two-part query. The first report looked at unintended negative consequences of cash transfers in fragile/conflict-affected settings.

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1. Overview

The literature suggests that the effects of social protection initiatives such as cash transfers and vouchers on social cohesion are positive, but there is very little empirical evidence to back this. This review found no research comparing cash transfers and vouchers from the perspective of social cohesion. However, experience of cash transfers in developing countries, including post-conflict contexts, indicates that these can help promote social cohesion but can also undermine it by creating divisions between beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries. Targeting is a critical factor in determining impact. Universal basic income (UBI) schemes (universal, unconditional transfers) are being tried in a number of largely developed countries. Evidence from those and pilot schemes in developing countries suggests that UBI could promote social cohesion.

- **Cash transfers can potentially improve social cohesion by reducing inequalities and promoting inclusion of vulnerable, marginalised groups, and by strengthening the citizen-state compact.** Indeed, there are several examples of countries using social protection specifically as a tool to strengthen citizen-state relations and promote unity. Conditional cash transfers (CCTs) in Latin America have been shown to increase social engagement among beneficiaries. In fragile countries, cash transfers can support conflict prevention and peace building processes.
- **However, cash transfers can also create social divisions.** When targeting in fragile states is carried out on the basis of ethnic or other group identity, or when targeting is weak because of corruption and/or mismanagement, this can fuel resentment and exacerbate tensions between different groups. This is also a major risk in programmes that target the very poorest households, but exclude those who are only marginally less poor. Targeting of specific groups (e.g. minorities, ex-combatants) in fragile/post-conflict contexts so as to reduce social tensions could mean that other poor households are excluded - fuelling divisions. CCTs in Latin America were found to lead to envy and resentment on the part of non-beneficiaries, and stigmatisation of beneficiaries.
- **The literature clearly shows that empirical evidence on the impact of social protection on social cohesion is very limited; this review found no research comparing the effects of cash transfers and vouchers.** Reasons for this include lack of baseline data; lack of indicators on social cohesion; lack of comparison (control) groups; and the obvious challenges faced when carrying out research in fragile/post-conflict contexts. Some work has been done on the effects of labour programmes and health insurance, but very little specifically on cash transfers and vouchers.
- **Experience from a number of developing countries – including post-conflict countries – suggests that cash transfers could have positive effects on social cohesion, but also negative effects.** The Oportunidades CCT programme in Mexico, for example, targets the poorest 25 percent of households, and has increased access to basic services and opportunities for excluded groups. However, by focusing on households rather than communities, it has been accused of creating divisions between members and non-members.
- **Universal basic income (UBI) could address the targeting issues faced in cash transfer/CCT schemes, by providing cash to all citizens.** Focusing on the impact of UBI schemes on social cohesion, the limited evidence available from both developed and developing countries suggests that this could be positive. Alaska has had UBI for many years, and in 2014 citizens there were reported to have the highest rate of well-being of

any state in the United States (Santens, 2016). A study of universal cash transfers in a district of Nepal found that, while the amounts involved were too low to improve access to education and healthcare, the universal transfers led to perceptions of equality among the beneficiaries, thereby promoting social inclusion.

2. Effects of social protection on social cohesion

Social cohesion is 'the capacity of a society to ensure the well-being of all its members – minimising disparities and avoiding marginalisation – to manage differences and divisions and ensure the means of achieving welfare for all members' (European Union definition, cited in Idris, 2016: 1).

Potential for social protection to strengthen social cohesion

Social protection is something that can potentially make a positive contribution to strengthening social cohesion (Babajanian, 2012; Slater & Holmes, 2012). Social cohesion entails accepting differences in society, but ensuring equity so that differences and disparities do not undermine stability and cause conflict. Social protection is thought to address the distributional aspect of social cohesion: it can reduce poverty, enhance income security of vulnerable people, improve their access to basic services and establish legal entitlements for previously excluded groups (Babajanian, 2012). Assumptions about the role social protection can play in creating social cohesion are 'largely based on arguments about its state-controlled redistributive role and the levels of social unrest in the absence of social protection' (Slater & Holmes, 2012: 9).

A DFID evidence paper on cash transfers (DFID, 2011) identifies a number of ways in which cash transfer programmes can, in theory, contribute to building social cohesion and strengthening the legitimacy and effectiveness of states: they can strengthen the state-citizen 'contract' and promote social inclusion, integration and accountability; and can assist states to fulfil their human rights obligations as cash transfers can impact positively on a number of economic, social, cultural, civil and political rights. Noting that public actions for direct support to the poor have been an important element in the consolidation of functioning nation-states in OECD countries, it explains that they have the potential to play a similar role in redressing long-standing tensions and inequalities that contribute to state fragility in developing countries.

The DFID paper lists examples of countries using social protection as a tool to strengthen citizen-state relations and promote unity (DFID, 2011: 43-44):

- In Indonesia and India, social protection has been a key element in building and strengthening the social compact.
- *Progresa* was introduced in Mexico in part to address the disaffection with the state that had fuelled the Chiapas uprising.
- The rapid expansion of China's Minimum Living Standards Scheme and Argentina's *Jefes y Jefas* were prompted by rapidly rising unemployment and the threat of unrest.
- In Kenya, the state is extending cash transfer provision, and making significant fiscal allocations, even in the context of the financial crisis, in an attempt to promote stability following the civil disturbances of 2008.
- Public works programmes in Sierra Leone have targeted young ex-combatants, and in Nepal cash transfers and public works programmes have been directed to excluded ethnic groups.

The role of social protection in building social cohesion is echoed by the European Union, which believes that ‘social protection programmes are not only a way to address the needs of the most vulnerable groups of the population but are also a tool to foster social inclusion and social cohesion, within countries and between countries’ (UNICEF, 2012: 2).

An analysis of conditional cash transfers (CCTs) in South America highlights a number of ways in which these have positive effects on social engagement (Camacho, 2014: 3-4):

- CCTs often provide opportunities for beneficiaries to develop or strengthen ties among themselves. In the case of Mexico’s *Progresa*, for example, bonds between participants have been strengthened by participation in monthly meetings, health education talks, and community work activities. In the case of *Juntos*, a CCT in Peru, one study indicates that mothers of beneficiary households tend to form organisations that provide opportunities for interaction as well as support for members in the event of unexpected shocks such as illness;
- Conditions imposed on beneficiaries can open additional opportunities for engagement, such as joining and participating in parent associations in schools;
- Increases in income (and social status) associated with transfers may result in higher engagement, given the positive association that has been documented between the two;
- Beyond defraying the costs associated with membership or active participation in organisations, CCTs may have a positive effect by encouraging recipients to interact with others with whom they have had little or no prior contact or by increasing the demand for leisure activities.

In the context of post-conflict/fragile states, the DFID paper notes that social protection is increasingly recognised as an important element of state- and peace-building strategies. ‘In fragile states, cash transfer programmes have the potential to play an important role in supporting the conflict prevention and peace process necessary for creating a stable environment for renewed growth and investment’ (DFID, 2011: 44). In particular, cash transfers can address the immediate needs of poor households.

Risks and challenges

The literature stresses that, if not carried out properly, social protection initiatives can actually undermine social cohesion (Idris, 2016). Key factors in determining effectiveness of social protection transfers are targeting, benefit value, and coverage (Babajanian, 2012). In low-income and fragile countries, delivery of any kind of social protection will face challenges related to capacity and corruption (Idris, 2016). The DFID paper acknowledges that introducing cash transfer schemes in the aftermath of conflict and state collapse is particularly challenging. While such schemes can reduce inequalities in developing countries, ‘the extent to which they will do this will depend on the interaction of programme design and the local context’ (DFID, 2011: 43).

When targeting in fragile states is carried out on the basis of ethnic or other group identity, or when targeting is weak because of corruption and/or mismanagement, this can fuel resentment and exacerbate tensions between different groups. For example, in the context of Brazil’s Conditional Cash Transfer Programme it was argued: ‘there is the risk that benefitting Indigenous populations with cash transfers as opposed to poor non-Indigenous populations could create conflict and social tensions’ (Slater & Holmes, 2012, cited in Idris, 2016).

While targeting can create social tensions even in peaceful countries, it is particularly critical in post-conflict contexts, especially where the conflict has its roots in social divisions (Holmes, 2009). Some analysts describe this as a major risk when attempts to target the very poorest households result in the exclusion of those who are only marginally less poor (ibid).

In fragile/post-conflict contexts there can be a focus on helping specific groups in order to diffuse social tensions. In Sierra Leone, for example, public works programmes targeted specific groups (e.g. mainly young men, ex-combatants), and in Nepal, the government has focused on extending the cash transfer programme to excluded minority groups. Holmes (2009) notes that such approaches can fuel divisions as other poor households are excluded. 'In post conflict contexts the implications of such divisions could be detrimental to the peace process, creating tension between the objective of social protection for poverty reduction, and the underlying objectives of supporting the peace process' (Holmes, 2009: 3).

Camacho's analysis of CCTs in South America identifies a number of potential negative effects of these on social cohesion, with targeting again being especially significant (Camacho, 2014: 3-4):

- Fostering divisions: The available evidence suggests that targeting can have adverse effects on social engagement, especially in close-knit communities in which poverty is prevalent. Studies of *Progresa* in Mexico and Nicaragua's *Red de Protección Social* have documented sentiments of envy, resentment, and sadness among those not receiving subsidies, mostly because they consider themselves poor and deserving of government assistance. These studies also report specific instances in which existing social ties have weakened, because beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries see themselves as having less in common, and non-beneficiaries refuse to take part in community activities.
- Stigmatisation: Means testing often leads to the stigmatisation of programme participants by the general population as well by the non-beneficiaries in their communities. For example, beneficiaries of social assistance programmes are often viewed as lacking the will to get ahead without public assistance, or are thought to engage in legally or morally questionable strategies to qualify for programmes. Stigmatised individuals may not only be rejected or excluded from social interactions but also refrain from engaging others due to low self-esteem. In sum, stigmatisation can contribute to severing existing social ties and, perhaps more importantly, to hindering the development of new ones.

An example of the latter was found in a study of Peru's *Juntos* programme, which documented the stigmatisation of beneficiaries in their own communities, identifying three 'myths' that were prevalent among those not receiving transfers: beneficiaries 'do not want to work anymore' and 'become lazy'; women get pregnant to qualify for the programme or to remain enrolled; and beneficiaries do not use the transfers appropriately, spending them on alcohol (ibid: 4).

But Camacho (2014) also notes that in CCT programmes negative sentiments were not always directed toward transfer recipients, with non-beneficiaries often attributing their exclusion to bad luck and hoping to receive assistance in the future. In several of these cases, solidarity across groups was often also reported, with communities getting together to help those perceived of as needy but who had failed to qualify for the programme. 'This suggests that targeting and the subsequent response to it could also bring communities together and thus create opportunities for strengthening intra-community relations' (Camacho, 2014: 4).

One review notes that the provision of income support alone will not uproot social exclusion: 'policies must address structural factors that generate deprivation and vulnerability' (Babajanian, 2012: 5). This, and the risks posed to social cohesion in relation to targeting of cash transfers and CCTs, highlights the need to pay attention to design and implementation of social protection programmes. 'Context-appropriate institutional design and implementation of programmes can help to promote transformative change and maximise the impact of interventions on social exclusion' (Babajanian et al, 2014: 4).

3. Case studies

Limited evidence

The literature highlights the difficulties of measuring the impact of aid interventions on social cohesion. These commonly include lack of baseline data, the absence of a control or comparison group (i.e. randomised control trials), the difficulty of measuring intangible social outcomes, and few relevant indicators (Idris, 2016). A widely used World Bank instrument measures social capital across six dimensions: groups and networks; trust and solidarity; collective action and cooperation; social cohesion and inclusion; information and communication; and empowerment and political action (ibid) – and thus has obvious limitations in terms of assessing social cohesion. In fragile/post-conflict contexts it will be even more difficult to gauge impact of interventions on social cohesion.

Given the challenges, it is not surprising that there is little empirical evidence on the impacts or mechanisms by which social protection achieves better social cohesion outcomes (Drucza, 2015). Moreover, there is limited evidence of the ways in which *different* social protection modalities (e.g. cash transfers, social insurance, conditional transfers, microfinance) impact social cohesion. This review was unable to find any comparisons of effects of cash and vouchers on social cohesion. There is also little evidence about how social protection measures such as cash transfers impact post-conflict countries (DFID, 2011). Many experts argue more empirical evidence is needed on the effects of social protection on social cohesion (Idris, 2016).

The limited evidence that is available in the literature indicates that the use of cash transfers in developing countries has generally had positive effects. Even in fragile/post-conflict contexts where, until recently, cash transfers have not been a common choice in programming, and in-kind transfers, such as food-aid, agricultural inputs and basic necessities have dominated, positive experiences (for example in Somalia) suggest these constraints can be overcome through design choices and good supervision (Holmes, 2009). In Nepal, cash transfers have been provided to the elderly, disabled and widowed since the mid-1990s, and delivered even during the conflict (Holmes, 2009).

The examples given below show the impact (positive and negative) cash transfer programmes can have on social cohesion.

Mexico: *Oportunidades*

Mexico's *Oportunidades* programme, a conditional cash transfer scheme, targets the poorest 25 percent of the population. It has led to greater equality in access to public services, notably health and education, and by disproportionately benefiting the indigenous population, 'has been instrumental in reducing the schooling attainment gap between indigenous and non-indigenous

children' (Holmes & Slater, 2007: 7). It has achieved a higher level of equal opportunities for excluded groups. By transferring money to the female head of the household, the programme is promoting greater participation by women at both household and community level; there is also some reported increase in the participation of beneficiaries in community activities (ibid: 9).

However, the programme has come in for criticism in relation to social cohesion, with critics arguing that its focus on the household level rather than on the community as a whole means it cannot really ever address issues of social cohesion. Specifically, the programme is accused of creating divisions in the community by targeting some members and not others. One study found that 'whilst social capital and solidarity increased *between* beneficiaries in the community, social divisions were created between beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries' (cited in ibid). The study reported non-beneficiaries' resentment over their exclusion from the programme as well as their lack of understanding of the basis for the differentiation.

Peru: *Juntos*

Peru's National Programme of Direct Support to the Poorest (*JUNTOS*) is a conditional cash transfer programme that was set up in 2005 in 70 districts, but by December 2012 had expanded to over 1,000 districts (Camacho, 2014: 6). It targets poor households that have one or more children up to 14 years old or a pregnant woman, and imposes conditions related to identity registration, health, and education. An analysis of the programme's effects on social engagement and trust in public institutions, focusing on 133 districts, found that it seemed to have no effects on social engagement among either beneficiary or non-beneficiary households (Camacho, 2014). 'These findings suggest that fears of CCTs having negative consequences on intra-community relations as well as optimism regarding their potential to enhance social engagement may have been premature' (ibid: 2).

The programme did have effects on trust, but these differed for eligible and non-eligible households. Among the former, it increased trust in government institutions directly related to programme conditions (e.g. health). Among the latter, it led to decreased trust in the ombudsman's office, which channelled grievances arising from perceptions of unfairness in the selection of beneficiaries, but was not able to influence ultimate programme enrolment. This has policy implications: 'While increases in trust provide additional reasons to justify and promote these programmes, decreases in trust should be a source of concern, especially in contexts like those in which CCTs are implemented, where trust is already low and links between the state and society are weak' (Camacho, 2014: 15).

4. Universal basic income

Approach

Given the issues faced with targeting of cash transfers and CCTs, provision of universal basic income (UBI) might be the answer. UBI is a type of welfare paid by the state to all citizens, rich or poor, working or not. There are no conditions attached to it. The unemployed are paid it even if they are not seeking work, and even if they find work. There is growing interest in the idea, and it is being implemented in a number of largely developed countries (in some cases only in parts of the country):

- Canada - each province is responsible for implementing their programme; in Québec it is known as *Bien être social* or social welfare

- Denmark - *Social Bistand*
- Finland - *Toimeentulotuki*
- Germany - *Grundeinkommen*
- Iceland - *Félagsleg aðstoð*
- Brazil - *Bolsa Familia*

Under the Finnish pilot scheme, for example, participants are paid around 560 euros (£512) a month,² which they are free to spend on whatever they like. They do not have to do anything in return to receive the money. There are pros and cons of universal basic income relating to costs, incentives for people to seek work/to work hard and so on. This review focuses on the effects of UBI schemes on social cohesion. Proponents claim UBI can generate benefits such as reduced stigmatisation of those on low incomes, and empowerment of women (PSC, 2017).

Santens (2016), an advocate for UBI, argues that attaching conditions to cash transfers actually undermines social cohesion: 'By targeting assistance to households instead of individuals, we create an incentive for the formation of single parent households. By removing assistance as incomes increase, we create an incentive to stay out of the labor market. By giving only to those determined to be deserving, we attach a stigma to the assistance and to its recipient. These are not problems with the provisioning of cash assistance itself. These are problems with the way we go about designing our assistance programs. They are the result of non-universality and the inclusion of conditions that are actually and provably counterproductive'.

As with the effects of targeted cash transfers, empirical evidence is limited. Nonetheless, some lessons can be drawn from the experience of UBI schemes in both developed and developing countries (largely pilot initiatives):

Alaska

Alaska has one of the oldest, continuous universal basic income programmes, the Permanent Fund Dividend (PFD). Annual dividends have been paid to Alaskan citizens since 1982 and average USD 1,000 over that period; in 2016 each individual received USD 2,072 (Santens, 2016). Fears that the payments could erode social cohesion and fuel social decay have proven unfounded. Alaska's rates of poverty and inequality were the lowest in the country according to the *2014 State of American Well-Being*³ report (cited in Santens, 2016) and individuals there reported having the highest rate of well-being of any state in the US across an index of five indicators including social and community well-being.

India

India has conducted a number of experiments with universal basic income. In 2011, two basic income pilots were undertaken in Madhya Pradesh, funded by UNICEF, under the coordination of SEWA (Self-Employed Women's Association). The pilots took place for between one year and 17 months, with over 6,000 individuals receiving a small unconditional basic income (PSC, 2017). The results of the pilots identified improved basic living conditions, nutrition, health and school attendance. The scheme also reported positive equity effects, in particular for

² <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/business/2017/09/05/will-scots-get-free-money-nicola-sturgeon-universal-basic-income/>

³ http://cdn2.hubspot.net/hub/162029/file-2513997715-pdf/Well-Being_Index/2014_Data/Gallup-Healthways_State_of_American_Well-Being_2014_State_Rankings.pdf?t=1437575309454

disadvantaged groups within the community - women, those with a disability and lower caste families (ibid). Moreover, both pilots identified a growth in productive work in the villages concerned.

According to Weir (2014) the unconditional nature of the cash transfer was the key to its success. He cites a SEWA research coordinator: 'Conditionality means intermediaries and intermediaries mean corruption. Officials take their cut - out of food, bricks, everything..... Unconditional cash benefits cut through the system, they free people and give them control and dignity; and the savings from the heavy bureaucratic regime could be ploughed back into a more generous cash payment scheme' (ibid).

Nepal

A study of universal cash transfers in the district of Sarlahi, Nepal found amounts to be too low to improve health and education opportunities or productive pursuits and thus to break the inter-generational cycle of poverty (Drucza, 2015). However, the transfers allowed beneficiaries to participate more in community activities, increased their access to information and social networks, and enhanced the social contract and people's relationship with the state. 'This breaks down some of the invisible barriers that perpetuate exclusion. Paying cash transfers in Nepal kick-starts other processes of inclusion and well-being that are hard to overcome by other means because they are invisible, denied and relational' (ibid).

The findings reveal that universal transfers generate perceptions of equality for beneficiaries who value receiving the same thing from the state as the rich, *but* being treated the same as the well-off does not necessarily lead to equal opportunities, poverty reduction or improved local governance. Drucza concludes that universal cash transfers can facilitate social inclusion but are not enough alone to achieve substantive inclusion.

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Key website

- Overseas Development Institute: <https://www.odi.org/our-work/social-protection>

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