

How evidence helped address ultra poverty in Malawi

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Highlights

Evidence impact

- Baseline findings informed the government's decision to increase the cash transfer size.
- Prompted by the positive findings, the World Bank decided to increase funding, resulting in the programme being scaled up to all districts.
- Negative findings on child labour outcomes prompted key stakeholders to commission a mixed-methods evaluation to understand these impacts.
- The evaluation informed discussions on improving linkages and referrals to other social services.

Factors that contributed to impact

- Amongst advocates and sceptics alike in Malawi, there was a growing demand for evidence and different types of evaluation.
- Evidence champions in the government and UNICEF played important roles in brokering relationships and increasing the relevance and usefulness of the findings.
- The research team was experienced in the region and had trust relationships with influential government actors.
- The researchers were effective knowledge translators.

Evidence use brief

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This 3ie brief highlights the importance of fully considering the political economy context in evaluation design. It also examines a range of contributory factors for evidence use.

Impact evaluation details

Title: [Evaluating the effectiveness of an unconditional social cash transfer programme...](#)

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Status : Completed December 2016



Context

Evaluations of cash transfer programmes have [shown](#) that they have a positive impact on reducing poverty, improving human capital and promoting recipients' dignity and autonomy. Yet, policymakers across several low- and middle-income countries, including in Sub-Saharan Africa, continue to be sceptical of these transfers as a poverty reduction strategy. They are concerned that the cash may be wasted on alcohol and tobacco, increase dependency on the state and disrupt local economies.

The Malawi Social Cash Transfer Programme aims to address the needs of the most vulnerable populations, which are constrained from participating in the labour force because of age (too old or young), chronic illnesses or disabilities. However, like many unconditional cash transfer programmes, this one faced its own share of scepticism. An impact evaluation of the Social Cash Transfer Programme's pilot in 2006 showed the value of the approach to the Ministry of Gender,

Children, Disability and Social Welfare, but the programme remained underfunded.

In 2012, as funders were considering expansion of the programme, 3ie funded a second impact evaluation, led by researchers at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, the University of Malawi and UNICEF's Office of Research–Innocenti. Using mixed methods, the study assessed the impact of the unconditional transfers on the welfare of children and their caregivers, behaviour change within the household, access to and links with other social services and impact on the familial environment for children in two districts. For proponents of the Social Cash Transfer Programme, the hope was that this larger evaluation might provide further evidence that could allay scepticism and help win needed government and public support.

Evidence

Findings from the 3ie-funded impact evaluation showed that the Social Cash Transfer Programme achieved its primary objective of ensuring food security and improving consumption amongst ultra poor, labour-constrained households. It had significant impacts on the ownership of both agricultural and non-agricultural assets.

For every Malawian kwacha transferred, participating households generated an additional 0.69 kwacha through productive activity. These results countered arguments that such programmes foster dependency, that poor people do not use cash transfers wisely or that they must be provided with conditions to guard against alleged risk of misuse.

The cash transfers improved adult health and increased the use of health services, but the impacts on young children's health and nutrition were less pronounced. The programme had strong effects on children's school enrolment and regular attendance across all age ranges; however, it also increased child labour within the house. The transfers significantly improved caregivers' outlook on their future well-being, and generated strong positive impacts on the material well-being of children. However, The SCTP was found to have a negative impact on access to other care and referral services for children.

“In Malawi, we really understand the value of impact evaluation. Because we've been also working on different pilots and on the point of scaling up, we want to know whether what we want to scale up is worth spending the money. – Esmie Kainja principal secretary, Ministry of Gender, Children, Disability and Social Welfare”

Evidence impacts

Increased the cash transfer size

The baseline findings of the evaluation in 2014 showed that the transfer sizes accounted for only 17 per cent of beneficiary households' consumption. It was lower than the standard 20 per cent of consumption share, the level at which substantive impacts of the programme would be observed. The government set up a task force to look at feasible transfer size scenarios. UNICEF,

too, worked with the government to carry out an independent assessment. To aid discussions, the study team produced additional transfer simulations and their expected impact on key indicators. The findings informed the decision to increase the transfer sizes in May 2015 from 1,000-2,400 Malawian kwacha to 1,700-3,700 Malawian kwacha depending on the household size and number of children in school.

Informing efforts to improve outcomes for children

Findings prompted the implementing partners to improve social workers' outreach and management of children enrolled in the programme. After negative impacts on child labour outcomes were reported at a workshop, key stakeholders agreed to commission a complementary mixed-methods evaluation on child labour, using the same households included in the impact evaluation.

Informing plans to link essential services with cash transfers

Key implementing partners are using the findings to advance the dialogue around improving links and referrals to social services that they had been piloting in two districts. Although the programme has shown positive impacts on food security and household resilience, impacts on nutrition and morbidity remain limited. The impact evaluation findings have reinforced the need to improve access to essential services such as health, education and livelihood opportunities for able household members.

Supported scaling up the Social Cash Transfer Programme

In November 2016, the World Bank, which was funding the programme in two districts, provided additional funding to scale it up to nine more districts. The World Bank cited findings from the 3ie-funded impact evaluation in its proposal for additional funding to improve social safety net programming in Malawi. This expansion would take the programme from the existing 19 to all 28 districts of the country.

Suggested citation

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