**Social transfers and child protection: evidence from impact evaluation studies in low and middle-income countries**

**Introductory remarks to the discussion**

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***The evidence of positive child protection effects***

The main interest of this paper is its presentation of consolidated evidence on the effects of social transfers on child protection outcomes, drawn from a large number of impact evaluation studies. Although, as the paper acknowledges, there is some unevenness in terms of geographical coverage and the types of programmes included, this is an extremely valuable exercise, clarifying what is known and what is not known about a class of impacts that has been studied much less than those on monetary poverty, human development and productivity.

The most compelling evidence presented is that social transfers generally have positive effects on the reduction of child labour, although these effects may vary according to programme design and the size of transfers. The paper provides more limited evidence, from a much smaller number of programmes and countries, that social transfers can have other positive child protection effects, for example on child marriage, birth registration and family separation.

The findings tend to confirm what we would expect. The positive impact on child labour comes from the income effect of transfers on the trade-off between household demand for child work and children’s time in school, supplemented possibly by the substitution effect of school attendance requirements in conditional cash transfers. However, the paper also provides a salutary warning, with evidence from Ethiopia, that in the case of public works programmes (PWPs) there may be a perverse negative effect of substitution of child for adult labour, which needs to be addressed in programme design.

The positive impact on birth registration seems to reflect mainly the fact that social transfer programmes require proof of identity (and often age as well), leading some programmes to include components to facilitate access to civil registration. However, this is an implementation by-product of transfer programmes rather than an effect of the transfers themselves – a distinction that should perhaps be clearer in the paper. It would be useful to explore this further by mapping to what extent social transfer programmes actually do this. Despite the positive example cited from Kenya, my sense is that in many low-income countries, particularly in Africa, the facilitation of access to birth certificates and identity documents by social transfer programmes is quite limited. In fact, the deep systemic problems of civil registration systems in most African countries present one of the most serious practical challenges to the successful implementation of social transfer programmes in this region.

The evidence on the effects of transfers on age of marriage, mainly for girls, is particularly interesting. This is a dimension in which sociocultural traditions and other adverse factors such as early pregnancy might be thought to be dominant, but the increased household resources from transfers and their effects on school retention for girls seem to play a role in delaying marriage, as the data from Malawi suggests.

On the effects of transfers on family separation there is a mixed message, with transfers providing the means both to reduce and to increase adult migration (often leaving children behind), depending on the socioeconomic context and the type of transfer. Something that it would be good to explore further, especially in Africa, is the possible incentive effect of poverty-targeted transfers on the fostering of non-orphan children, given the strong tradition of informal fostering in African societies, although it is likely that this is contained by the low value of transfers and caps on the number of beneficiaries in most programmes.

***The data limitations***

The paper does a good job in compiling the evidence that exists on the positive effects of transfers on child protection outcomes. However, it is striking how lopsided the evidence is. It is overwhelmingly about the effects on child labour. Of the 79 reports used in this meta-analysis, 39 provide data on child labour effects, but only 5 on child marriage, 3 on family separation and 2 on birth registration. And there is nothing at all on whether social transfers have effects on such child protection problems as trafficking, sexual exploitation, rape, female genital mutilation (FGM) and other forms of violence and abuse.

One might hypothesize that at least some of these problems (trafficking and sexual exploitation for example) might be susceptible to the income effects of transfers. Often, however, the data simply doesn’t exist and would be difficult to collect, including through household surveys for impact evaluations. The problems are sometimes ‘hidden’, or they are difficult to formulate as measurable indicators, or they would likely have very few observations in surveys because, while having serious consequences, they may affect only small numbers of children.

But this is not true for all of these problems. It is particularly surprising that so few impact evaluations provide data on the effects of transfers on birth registration, considering that this information is easy to collect and that birth certificates are required for enrolment in many of the programmes. Data for some other indicators, e.g. for the age of marriage, are collected in the larger household surveys (particularly in the DHS), and so could also be included more widely in surveys for social transfer impact evaluations. Their absence from most such evaluations does therefore appear to reflect a lower degree of interest in child protection outcomes than other dimensions of child wellbeing.

***The classification of types of effects***

Finally I will comment briefly on the paper’s classification of effects into three types: the direct effects of social transfers on child protection outcomes, the indirect effects via poverty, and effects resulting from ‘implementation synergies’. The evidence in the paper is more or less entirely on the direct effects. By contrast, the discussion of indirect effects is almost entirely limited to the first stage of the chain, the impact of social transfers on poverty, which is generally well known, and then retreats to generalities about the relationship between poverty and child protection outcomes.

More importantly, the conceptualization of ‘indirect’ effects is vague and confusing. As with the effects on human development outcomes, the so-called ‘direct’ effects of transfers on child protection outcomes (in the short term) are either income effects and/or behaviour change effects from conditionality (in the case of CCTs), although there is scant international evidence about the added effects of conditionality – which the paper would do well to acknowledge. The income effects automatically have short-term poverty effects in so far as the increase in income from transfers reduces the poverty gap (and sometimes poverty incidence, depending on the distance of beneficiaries from the poverty line). In that sense, the direct effects on child protection outcomes operate via poverty effects. So it is unclear what really distinguishes the indirect effects.

Possibly the paper means indirect in a temporal sense. This is suggested by references to the need for longitudinal studies. If that is what the paper is hinting at, it implies that social transfers’ impact on *long-term* poverty (via the development of beneficiaries’ human and productive capital) would have further knock-on effects on child protection outcomes. This might be true in the sense that long-term poverty reduction could have impacts on sociocultural attitudes and practices such as age of marriage, FGM and other forms of violence and abuse, as well as the relative importance given to education and child labour by parents. But exploring these linkages would require panel studies with beneficiary and control groups over extremely long (generational) periods, which are unlikely to be realistic in practical terms.

Regarding implementation synergies, the paper has done well to highlight how strengthening social transfer systems could have positive side effects on child protection services. It highlights several different mechanisms for developing such synergies, including training sessions for transfer beneficiaries, common data systems and referral between programmes. However, the treatment of this question remains hypothetical. Although one or two examples are given, it is not clear how widely these mechanisms exist in fact in the different programmes, especially in low-income contexts where capacity for developing such linkages is weak. Furthermore, no evidence is provided on their actual effects on child protection outcomes; they are simply said to be potentially positive. The paper is candid about the lack of hard data, identifying this question as one that merits further attention from researchers.

It would be more balanced to explore also the risk that the drive to set up and expand social transfers might have some negative effects on social care services and therefore child protection outcomes, particularly in low-income African countries. Transfer programmes could have a ‘crowding out’ effect on the capacity to provide social care services in these countries, especially in the short run, given the extreme weakness of the ministries responsible for both and the small numbers of social workers.

On the other hand, the paper is probably right to emphasize the potential for large investments in social transfer programmes to build stronger operational systems (MIS, referral systems, training of social workers, etc.) that will eventually benefit social care services as well. Nonetheless, it is important for those investing in transfer programmes to be conscious of the need to strengthen rather than undermine the weak delivery capacity for social care services and to ensure that they mutually support each other. This is necessary for the success of the transfer programmes themselves, particularly to ensure access to transfers by the most vulnerable as well as to provide complementary services to transfer beneficiaries.