

Achieving food and nutrition security in West Africa: understanding the role of social transfer programs

Proposed applied research to evaluate and strengthen social transfer programs

Rationale

Social transfer programs are considered among the most promising policy strategy to reduce poverty and food and nutrition insecurity in low and middle-income countries. Conditional cash transfer programs, which have been implemented and carefully evaluated in several countries of Latin America for more than 15 years, have shown a range of benefits including poverty reduction and positive impacts on household food security, dietary diversity, use of health services, school enrolment rates, and to a lesser extent maternal and child nutritional outcomes. Social transfer programs are becoming increasingly popular in West African countries and are being implemented mostly as ‘pilot projects’ at relatively small scale and for a limited time, and are mostly supported by external donors with little involvement of governments. Moreover, despite the large potential of social transfers to reduce children undernutrition, few programs specifically articulate clear nutrition goals and even fewer include well designed and targeted nutrition interventions. The lack of rigorous evaluations of impact, impact pathways and cost-effectiveness of these pilot tests means that learning opportunities are lost and new programs lack evidence-based models and guidance.

Research priorities on social transfer programs in West Africa

We provide a non-exhaustive list of research areas that we feel should be prioritized and addressed through rigorous applied research in the short and mid-term:

- *Eligibility and targeting*: what is the most effective selection and targeting mechanism that minimizes inclusion and exclusion errors without being excessively complex and expensive? Is targeting mothers during pregnancy and lactation and children up to 24 months of age the most effective approach? If so, how should it be done?
- *Type and amount of transfer*: Should the transfer be in the form of cash, vouchers, in-kind, or a combination of those? What is the ideal amount of the transfer? What is the ideal frequency of distribution for the different modalities?
- *To condition or not*: Is conditionality feasible given the capacity and quality of nutrition and health services in the areas where the programs operate? What would be the benefits (and cost-effectiveness) considering the extra administrative and logistical burden it implies?
- *Which nutrition components*: Which of the existing nutritional problems could be addressed by transfer programs? Is this feasible? What is the impact and cost-effectiveness of different nutrition packages delivered through social transfer programs? How do they compare with other delivery mechanisms for targeted nutrition interventions (e.g. health, agriculture, etc.)?
- *Mechanisms and impact pathways*: what are the pathways by which transfer programs and their different components improve nutrition? Which pathways are most critical to achieving nutritional impact?

Objective of the research

Our overall objective is to investigate what are the design, modalities, features and characteristics of social transfer programs that lead to the greatest impacts on nutrition in West Africa, and to assess the potential role of social transfer programs in delivering nutrition interventions to vulnerable populations.

More specifically, we aim at:

1. Assessing which packages of nutrition interventions, and how they are integrated in social transfer programs, work best to improve nutrition in different contexts; and at what cost.
2. Understanding the pathways of impact of social transfer programs on nutrition in order to improve the effectiveness of current and future programs and identify general principles that can be applied elsewhere and used for scaling-up;
3. Understanding how projects should fit together as components of an integrated, consolidated, national social protection program.

Ultimately, this project is expected to provide the evidence needed, through rigorous evaluations of different programs, to help the international community make rational choices about social transfer program design(s) appropriate for specific contexts, and to motivate governments to integrate such interventions into a comprehensive national social protection policy.

Project implementation and feasibility

We plan to work on the evaluation of a diverse set of social transfer programs having a strong food and nutrition security focus and implemented in different contexts in West Africa. We will seek to engage with program implementers at a very early stage in program planning to ensure that a rigorous evaluation design can be used. As much as possible, we will use experimental or semi-experimental methods, including randomized design and valid comparison groups where appropriate. We will collect data at baseline, before the program starts and at endline, and will design a program theory framework to guide our data collection on program impact pathways. We will use a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods to document not only whether or not programs have an impact on the outcomes of interest, but also why and how the impact is achieved. Both IFPRI and IRD have a strong experience in evaluating social transfer programs in different parts of the world, mainly in Latin America and Africa. Dr Savy from IRD and Dr Agnès Le Port from IFPRI are both based in Dakar to manage the present project in Senegal and in the West African region. The success of the project will be ensured by strong networking at the regional level. Our two partner institutions have long-term relationships with United Nations Organizations (FAO, UNICEF, WFP, World Bank) and several non governmental agencies (e.g. HKI, Save The Children, Action against Hunger), which have expertise or a strong interest in implementing social transfer programs. We also plan to collaborate with local universities and research institutions. In fact, we propose to create a consortium of a few key research institutes and agencies that have a research division willing to contribute some time for this purpose. Acting as a consortium may have several advantages: i) increasing opportunities of conducting research and evaluation work on social transfer programs; ii) increasing the scientific thinking around impact evaluations and their technical aspects; iii) ensuring the harmonization of the evaluation procedures, and iv) guarantying a complete transparency of the evaluations.

We therefore invite international and local institutions interested in implementing and evaluating social transfer programs with a strong food and nutrition security focus in West Africa to contact us, in order to share research ideas and establish collaborations.

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The full concept note is available at: <http://www.nutripass.ird.fr/equipes-programmes/equipe-1-nutrition-publique/activites-de-recherche-a-venir>