

A PROTECTION PERSPECTIVE ON CASH AND NUTRITION

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This article presents reflections on lessons learned and the way forward to design contextually appropriate Cash Transfer Programming.

INTRODUCTION

Cash based programming has become part of Action Against Hunger's strategic approach to achieving our nutrition security mandate. Increasingly development and humanitarian actors are examining the impact of cash transfers on health and nutrition objectives. Several nuanced but generally positive results have been observed in this area, especially from conditional cash transfers.

While cash transfers have demonstrated benefits as a flexible form of social assistance, certain risks are frequently associated with these programmes. As humanitarians we are obliged to learn how to prevent, monitor, and address negative and unintended consequences within cash transfer programmes (CTPs).

Action Against Hunger has gained critical insight on this topic from current and previous CTPs. With a view towards greater programme quality and accountability, this

article proposes that a protection perspective must be rigorously applied in the design, targeting, delivery, and monitoring and evaluation of Action Against Hunger's cash based programming.

This article presents two examples of learning on protection risks in CTPs documented from our programmes, before concluding with several ways forward.

1 CHILD WELFARE REPERCUSSIONS OF CASH TARGETED THROUGH CONTINUOUS REGISTRATION OF SAM HOUSEHOLDS

Context: In 2017, Action Against Hunger implemented integrated cash and nutrition programme, providing financial support to households with children under treatment for severe acute malnutrition (SAM). The selection of households was designed to address underlying financial causes of child malnutrition and mitigate the risk of relapse. It mirrored a similar programme implemented by UNICEF in the Democratic Republic

of Congo, where an impact evaluation identified positive results from a targeting approach based on nutrition status. In the Action Against Hunger programme, households were registered for cash transfers on a continuous basis (i.e. newly malnourished children were eligible) over the course of one year. The cash transfer was valued at approximately US\$62 per month, which amounted to around 65-70 per cent of the local food basket and was notably higher than the salary of government health workers.

Protection Challenges: Negative incentives quickly arose based on this targeting criteria, creating a serious child health and protection challenge for staff. Reportedly both health workers and programme staff accepted bribes to enrol children who did not meet criteria. Several shocking unconfirmed rumors arose claiming that services were sometimes denied to children whose caregivers could not pay. We are aware of several cases of households requesting community health workers to incorrectly apply



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MUAC tape to facilitate enrollment in the CTP. Other rumors relayed to the team mentioned cases of households borrowing some SAM children as they are desperate to be enrolled in the cash transfer programme... Some even approach community volunteers (CVs) with incentives to register them as SAM.”

Lessons learned: The situation described is clearly a direct contravention of Action Against Hunger’s nutrition mandate. It also underscores the necessity for responsible design, targeting and monitoring of cash interventions to mitigate risk in communities. Some of the most important lessons gained from this experience were: 1) to avoid using nutrition status as targeting criteria; 2) to systematically ensure independent verification of household eligibility; 3) to determine a contextually appropriate transfer amount; and 4) to ensure sufficient internal controls including monitoring and accountability systems are available for communities to share anonymous feedback.

2 GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE AND OTHER SECURITY RISKS ASSOCIATED WITH CASH TRANSFER PROGRAMMES

Context: Action Against Hunger has taken important steps to

improve the gender-sensitivity of our programmes, including through the Gender Initiative and the launch of a global gender-based violence (GBV) and nutrition project. Increased gender awareness in our organisation carries over to understanding better the effects of our cash-based programming on women, men, boys, and girls.

Protection Challenges: The body of evidence relating CTPs to gender-related outcomes is mixed. Research generated by the Cash Learning Partnership (CaLP) and International Rescue Committee have found positive impacts of cash on women’s empowerment. A 2012 evaluation of a GBV prevention and livelihoods programme implemented by Action Against Hunger found more tenuous linkages between cash transfers and reduction in GBV. What is clear is that, for certain households, inequitable power structures, physical violence and psychosocial harm affecting both genders can be exacerbated by CTPs if they are not carefully designed and monitored. The same evaluation found that targeting cash towards women’s village savings and loan groups (VSLA) in a post-conflict setting contributed to negative psychological effects among some men. Male household members were reported to suffer

from greater depression and feelings of diminished masculinity, leading to negative coping mechanisms such as alcoholism and domestic violence. A woman from this programme sought help from Action Against Hunger through our internal hotline to address a situation of domestic violence linked to a household cash transfer. Less extreme but still serious is the consideration of household decision-making around expenditures linked to nutrition security. From monitoring data in multiple contexts, we have found that it is normal for women to relinquish control of cash assistance to the male head of household, who then makes decisions on household purchases. A Link NCA completed in 2017 found that in more than 75 per cent of households, decision-making power rests with men alone.

Lessons learned: Action Against Hunger does not systematically monitor cash programmes with a view towards uncovering potential harms related to gender, and the information available is based largely on anecdotal reports from monitoring and accountability systems. Indeed, the 2012 evaluation referenced above notes that “GBV incidence, and GBV-related mortality and morbidity are difficult to establish without a systematic design for their measurement. Incidence is particularly difficult to measure because of the inherent risks of under-reporting by GBV survivors for reasons of safety and the risk of stigma.”

We already know that it is important to

mainstream gender protection and empowerment considerations into cash-based programmes if we intend to make gains in nutrition security.¹ While Action Against Hunger still has much to learn, the key lessons around mitigating GBV / protection risks linked to cash are: 1) to conduct a thorough gender and conflict analysis prior to implementing a cash programme and before targeting cash towards a single gender; 2) to carefully monitor GBV and protection risks in the programme through multiple channels; and 3) to consult and include both genders in our efforts to mitigate GBV risks linked to cash transfers.

PROPOSED WAY FORWARD

These experiences underscore the need to carefully reflect on the use of cash-based approaches to achieve nutrition security objectives. Implementing cash assistance through a protection lens will help ensure we ‘Do No Harm’ with respect to nutrition security, and further align our cash strategy with humanitarian standards and principles.

We propose several actions that cover both near-term and longer-term steps.

1 Gender-Related Barriers to Service Access and uptake in nutrition programmes identified during coverage assessments. World Nutrition, 2018. <https://worldnutritionjournal.org/index.php/wn/article/view/148>

NEAR TERM:

1 On design:

Evidence indicates that no single CTP approach or targeting strategy will meet all objectives in all contexts. Moreover, certain modalities and targeting strategies can lead to unintended, harmful effects. To optimise the use of cash for nutrition security objectives, Action Against Hunger should carry out or utilise existing assessments that examine barriers to services.² The assessments should first inform the decision on whether cash transfer programming is appropriate to achieve the stated objective and, if yes, what type of modality and targeting is best suited. When a cash-based programme is under consideration, relevant questions to inform the design should be systematically integrated into these assessments.

2 On monitoring:

In the cases documented above, monitoring and accountability systems have been indispensable in revealing protection concerns arising within cash programmes. As an organisation, we need to ensure dedicated resources for the MEAL function in order to support programme quality and risk management. Monitoring tools should be adapted

2 This might include SQUEAC/SLEAC, gender analyses, barrier analyses, socio-cultural assessments and other context analyses, needs assessments, and Link NCAs.



SPHERE PROTECTION PRINCIPLE 1:

AVOID EXPOSING PEOPLE TO FURTHER HARM AS A RESULT OF YOUR ACTIONS.

to enable analysis of programme performance through a protection lens. For cash programming, monitoring should also support rigorous registration processes including through biometric verifications. The MEAL function should ensure feedback mechanisms and channels for community participation are built into the programme. Furthermore, as an organisation we must strive for more efficient integration and harmonisation of relevant policies and how they are operationalised, e.g. the prevention of sexual exploitation and abuse, risk policy, fraud policies, and M&E guidelines.

3 On learning and knowledge transfer:

To date the evidence on CTPs has been dominated by scientific research like randomised controlled trials (RCTs). While RCTs often provide the most robust evidence of causal impact of cash interventions, this article underlines the valuable contributions of operational research

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and learning. Action Against Hunger should rigorously document and share its operational learning on the effect of CTPs (positive and negative) on nutrition security and protection by: developing case studies of situations such as those described in this article; participating in relevant international working groups; and transferring knowledge on successful approaches to using cash for nutrition objectives within communities of practice.

LONGER-TERM:

1 On research:

More evidence is required to design CTPs that maximise impact on nutrition security and gender equity. Action Against Hunger should develop a framework for internal research which addresses core questions like: What modalities of cash transfers work best to improve nutrition outcomes? What are effective and appropriate conditional cash transfers in different contexts? What are

effective, appropriate, and gender-sensitive targeting strategies? The time is also ripe in Action Against Hunger, as we move forward with both the gender initiative and our organisational cash strategy.

2 On strategy and guidelines:

Based on evidence from both research and operational studies, Action Against Hunger should develop a strategy for using cash to achieve nutrition security objectives. This should come with a clear Theory of Change and associated practical guidelines for field teams. Based on lessons learned, we can already recommend the strategy include: context-specific design of cash modalities sensitive to key health behaviours and risks, clear communication of targeting and selection criteria to stakeholders, sensitisation of households on the importance of nutrition, and systematic monitoring against nutrition security objectives.