

Social cash transfers, generational relations and youth poverty trajectories in rural Lesotho and Malawi

Policy brief 4: Supporting young people through cash transfers and poverty reduction strategies

Findings from an ESRC-DFID-funded research project

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Key points

Cash transfers as a poverty reduction strategy more often benefit young people indirectly than directly. This research investigated young people's own views about how policy might best help to improve their lives. This brief highlights that:

- Young people prefer that cash transfers are not given as “free money” because of the shameful association that they are unable or unwilling to work
- Young people aspire to having good jobs, and state that they want to work for money, but work is often unavailable or involves exploitative conditions
- Young people desire to contribute to development needs in their own communities, and suggest they are paid to do so rather than receiving cash transfers as “free money”

This policy brief, number four in a series of eight, focuses on the findings related to the impact of cash transfers on young people and on wider poverty reduction policies for young people.

The research

Social cash transfer schemes, which disburse cash to poor people, are known to address symptoms of poverty among their target populations, particularly children and the elderly. However, poverty cannot be fully understood by focusing on symptoms alone. Poverty is produced through structural power relations including social relations of gender, age, generation and class. To fully understand the impacts of cash transfers, this research examines how cash transfers intervene in, and are negotiated through, these social relations. It focuses on Lesotho's Old Age Pension and Child Grants Programme and Malawi's Social Cash Transfer Programme. Based on in depth qualitative research in one rural community in each country, the research contributes to a more nuanced understanding of whether, and to what extent, cash transfer schemes are transforming poverty in rural African communities.


For details, see www.cashtransfers-youth.net

Cash transfers that are viewed as “free money” for young and able-bodied people are shameful

Young people expressed distress associated with receiving cash transfers as “free money”, even if the money was a real source of help and sorely needed. Although the cash transfers paid to young adults (particularly Lesotho's child grants) are intended to benefit children, they are viewed less as grants for children than income for healthy young adults who should rightfully work. Whereas pensions are understood as enabling the elderly to live the autonomous lives they deserve, child grants entrench a view that parents are responsible for their own children. Young parents may become less able to call on family or friends for support, in part due to the stigmatising effects of the transfers.

In both countries, receiving money without working is viewed as shameful and is often stigmatized. This is implied by the local names given to such cash transfers. In Lesotho, the child grant is referred to as *seoa holimo*, which means “money falling from the sky”. Similarly, in Malawi, the proverb





mahala wipha, meaning “free things kill!”, is attached to cash transfers, also suggesting that free money will turn out not to be free in the end.

“They always say that if you are receiving the cash transfers, one day they [those who were behind the transfers] will come to suck your blood” (12-year-old-grandson of a recipient in Malawi where people being exposed to blood sucking at night is a common belief)

For young people receiving cash transfers, stigma was experienced through being mocked and harassed by others in the community. In Lesotho, a male recipient of the child grant described his experience of people asking to borrow money from him as a form of mockery. He insisted that he would have been treated differently if the money was earned through productive means.

“you will find that when a person comes and borrows money, he/she says: ‘lend me money, I saw that yesterday you went to collect the money’”

Normally, by contrast, people would borrow money only when they had a specific need.


“If I need to borrow money from you, I should come anytime, not aligning myself to the time when this person has a certain thing”

Being able-bodied plays a key role in the notion of having to work for your money. When young people’s bodies are fully developed, there is an expectation that they should also fully engage in productive work. The child grant in Lesotho, being given to the children’s parents, is viewed as misdirected. One father receiving a child grant said neighbours complained:

“...that cash is said to be for children, yet they [the recipients] are young men who can work for themselves”

Confusion around selection criteria for recipients of the child grant in Lesotho and the cash transfer programmes in Malawi created a situation where it was not clear to the communities why some people had been selected and others not. Many expressed a view that if other persons in similarly poor situations were also receiving the grants, their own grant would have seemed much less problematic.

“We were praying that others be helped also [...] this was said to be social development, so others need to be helped also so that we all move forward” (male child grant recipient, Lesotho)



Young people want to work

Young people repeatedly stated that their aspiration is to have work in order to support their families. A lack of job opportunities, proper education and inadequate markets for goods and services were highlighted as the main problem. Young men were especially concerned about limited work opportunities, because of the expectation that they should be the main breadwinners.

In a situation with limited work opportunities, cash transfer recipients may find themselves excluded due to community notions of fairness. Communities perceive that young people receiving cash transfers already benefit and therefore should not be the first people who get jobs. A female recipient in Lesotho talked of how people insist that those receiving child grants should go to the back of the queue when lining up for casual work. She did not agree: *“these grants are for the children and we were advised not to sit around waiting for them. We should go and work for ourselves”*.



In Malawi, the only local employment available for most young people is work on the tea estates



In Lesotho, the main employment for young men is herding, which exposes them to harsh conditions and a high risk of pay being withheld

stated: *“No, I don’t think of getting another job, I don’t want to leave home [...] We made a choice to concentrate on farming only. We want to be independent.”* This shows that young people from poor rural communities often face poor work opportunities and are vulnerable to exploitation, a problem that it is not addressed by the current focus on cash transfer programmes. Further, these programmes are designed to meet basic needs and do not provide enough to develop lucrative agricultural livelihoods in the villages.

A common aspiration among young people is to find work outside of the village. However, many of those who had managed to find such work had had bad experiences with maltreatment, problematic work conditions, exploitation, sexual harassment, lack of payment or of being fired without pay. In Malawi, several young people described how going to town looking for work was a particularly bad period in their lives. Life had improved once they were back in the village, and especially if they could manage to rent fields that could be irrigated and start growing cash crops. One young man narrated how he had found a job in town as gardener, but was badly treated to the point that he quit after a week and was only paid enough for the transport to return to the village. He



Intensive agriculture in fields that can be irrigated with watering cans and cultivated using small amounts of hand-applied fertilizer creates opportunities for earning money through cash crops in Malawi

Pseudonyms are used and photographs are illustrative only: they do not portray the individuals profiled

Development needs in the community

In both villages, there were many different development needs. Young men in Lesotho said that instead of receiving “free money”, it would be meaningful if they could be paid to work on projects such as bridge building, road repairs or land rehabilitation in their local area, thus also helping to uplift their communities. Another group said that *“because it is not so easy to be given money just freely as the youth”,* they would like to *“come together as working males, then join hands, and bring electricity, install taps and build toilets.”* A female recipient cited examples of previous public works programmes in the area: *“I think it would be better if we were to work for [the money...] any kind of work, that we can be able to do... [like] road construction and maintenance as well as planting trees.”* Similarly, in Malawi young men recommended: *“stop giving the little money, just do development instead!”* They thought improving housing would benefit everyone across the village. Others were keen to be helped to set up businesses, perhaps supplying eggs or pig meat to urban supermarkets. Whereas they thought that cash transfers could only ever be spent on consumption, business generation and community development could help them to generate a regular income and to invest in ways that would enable them to escape poverty.



A key aspect of the young people’s thinking was that funds that came to the village should assist the entire community to better itself. It is therefore important that any public work schemes contribute meaningfully to community development.

“we would advise that he should ensure that there are some means for us to create our own jobs with that money. It shouldn’t be given to certain people, instead it should be used to come up with something that will enable the community to create its own jobs” (advice to the Prime Minister from young men in Lesotho)

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