

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

## Policy brief 6: Engaging government officials with local communities for policy impact

Findings from an ESRC-DFID-funded research project

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### Key points

Cash transfers are viewed by recipients as invaluable for poverty reduction, yet there remains a mismatch between government strategy and community realities which can undermine the effectiveness of social protection programmes. We highlight how bringing government officials into rural communities can enable knowledge and narratives about cash transfers to be co-created in a mutual relationship. The key policy messages are:

- **Creating a forum for engagement exposes government officials to diverse community perceptions, misconceptions and social dynamics around cash transfers**
- **Bringing government officials into communities enables myths to be dispelled and constraints clarified**
- **In the village setting, young adults feel confident to articulate policy proposals grounded in their own realities to improve the design and implementation of cash transfers**

This policy brief, number six in a series of eight, describes an innovative process through which the research team sought to achieve impact. It explains the benefits of connecting local communities, government officials and policy makers as co-creators of knowledge in both village and policy settings.

### 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](http://www.cashtransfers-youth.net)

### Connecting the community to local government: a rationale

Considerable confusion regarding the purpose of cash transfers and processes of disbursement and targeting became apparent in both case study communities over the course of the research. The social realities of rural communities also shape the ways in which cash transfers are received and used, and the effects they have. While we were able to present the concerns of cash transfer beneficiaries to policy makers within city-based policy workshops, these contexts do not allow for active co-creation of knowledge with beneficiaries. To increase the uptake and impact of the research, a process was designed to promote engagement between stakeholders and beneficiaries.



## A process for engaging community members with government officials

### Step 1: Young adults convey their lived experiences

Following initial analysis by the research team, young adults from each community were brought together to discuss the research findings. They identified key issues of particular interest and explored which medium would work best to present their experiences of cash transfers to government officers. In both Malawi and Lesotho, the young adults chose to create a drama and a song, representing many of the issues that had previously been discussed, which they performed at a village meeting.



### Step 2: Bringing the government to the village

In order to facilitate co-creation of knowledge around cash transfer policies, representatives of local and (in Lesotho) national government departments were brought to the village meetings. The drama and songs, created and performed by the young adults, stimulated responses from the officials who also provided information about the cash transfers and about other forms of support available to rural youth. Community members were invited to ask questions and share their experiences. In this way, government officials had the opportunity to hear from, and respond to, young people and their communities.

### Step 3: Bringing the village to the government

In order to expose a wider range of policy-makers to the key messages emerging from the communities concerning the research, it was necessary to reach forums beyond the village meetings. In Lesotho, it was possible to bring some central government officials to the village. These individuals subsequently participated in a national-level policy workshop in Maseru with other stakeholders, sharing their experiences from the village. In Malawi, the distance between central Government and Thyolo District proved a barrier. However, we were able to show videos of the drama and song to policymakers at a workshop in Lilongwe, to put the perspectives of young adults from the community more vividly than would have otherwise been possible.



## Creating Policy Lessons

Bringing government together with communities can help to ensure cash transfer schemes are more effective. In this research, the process identified three key policy lessons.

### Creating a forum for engagement exposes government officials to diverse community perceptions, misconceptions and social dynamics around cash transfers

On the ground, cash transfers do not operate in the ways technocrats envisage. There are reasons for this that relate to social dynamics and structural constraints in rural communities, as well as limited awareness and misconceptions about the schemes. These perceptions and dynamics have the potential to undermine the intent and overall effectiveness of social protection programmes. It is therefore critical for policy makers to understand how cash transfer initiatives are understood and responded to within recipient communities. This can best be achieved by engaging with whole communities in their own village settings. Box 1 exemplifies the perceptions and misconceptions that emerged during the community meetings we organised. The cost for policy makers of not going to the field is higher than the cost of going to the field. More widely, government officials need to work to minimise the mismatch between how policies are conceptualised and how they are actually implemented at the community level.

In both Lesotho and Malawi, the drama, song and discussion gave participants an opportunity to openly convey their messages about structural constraints which negatively affect people's capacity benefit from the cash transfers. The issues discussed included logistical and human capacity challenges and low awareness about other programmes.

The dramas, songs and dialogue also vividly revealed unspoken everyday tensions that characterise cash transfer receipt at individual, household and community scales. These included conflicts between elderly people and young adults. One elderly informant in Lesotho stated: *"the elderly are in trouble. The cash transfers make them lose support from their children. If an elderly person doesn't give them (young adults) one tablet of soap, they will pay back for one year by withdrawing their children from providing support to the elderly."* From the community discussion in Malawi there were competing views that cash transfers create positive and negative relations. One respondent stated: *"Mtukula Pakhomo [cash transfers] leads to both peace and trouble. Kids go to school. Ganyu [casual work] becomes available even to non-beneficiary households. However, old people don't share the money with young people. The money goes to few people"*. Other sources of tensions emanate from the tendency to prevent beneficiaries from joining other public works programmes because they are receiving cash transfers.

Chiefs, too, were able to articulate to both officials and community members their experiences as intermediaries. While lacking a formal decision-making role in any of the schemes, and feeling powerless as a consequence, they were viewed suspiciously by community members and expected to resolve difficulties.

#### Box 1: Perceptions, conceptions, and misconceptions about cash transfers from Malawi and Lesotho community meetings

- Some people view the transfers as gifts or 'free money' that appear at random, not a regular entitlement.
- Communities do not understand why some households are selected or why some get more money than others.
- Beneficiaries do not know how to complain. They also fear losing their transfers if they report problems.
- Notwithstanding existing challenges, the elderly are grateful for the pension (see Policy Brief 3).
- Some people view cash transfers/grants as shameful (see Policy Brief 4). It is particularly shameful to be complaining as the money comes from other people.
- Government officers are understood to be the ones who decide the low value of cash transfers.
- Recipients are not aware that the cash transfers come from their own government to advance the welfare of children and elderly people.
- Cash transfers are understood as an individual benefit that can be inherited from one person to another.
- Young people are of the view that each household has its unique problems (problems vary from household to household). Therefore, everyone should receive a transfer (see Policy Brief 4).

*"Chiefs in Lesotho are 'bags of shit'. Everything bad comes to me. Parents don't sleep in their homes after receiving the grants. Yet everyone points fingers at the chief... 'The computer swallowed our names'. Names are registered but it is strange that majority of the names are missing from the final approved list when it comes back from Maseru"* (Lesotho village chief, community discussion).

Through the community discussion, both researchers and policy makers were better able to appreciate the everyday realities of social cash transfers, including but not limited to social tensions brought about by these poverty interventions.

### **Bringing government officials into communities also enables myths to be dispelled and constraints clarified**

Importantly, the interface between government officials and rural communities provided a space for two-way dialogue. Government officials had the opportunity to dispel misunderstandings about cash transfers, and were able to respond to the concerns raised. A process of this sort has the potential to increase a community's sense of ownership of cash transfer schemes, in contrast to the perception that they are a random gift from somewhere, over which a community has no entitlement to comment. Officials were also able to explain the constraints and challenges that they – and the policy community more widely – faced. They admitted that the money was not enough and that it was not reaching all eligible beneficiaries. At the same time, they could explain to the community the dilemma regarding increasing the amount versus increasing coverage on a limited budget.

### **The community setting is a space in which young adults have the confidence to articulate ideas**

Within the familiar setting of the village, and with some initial preparation, young adults as well as older community members are able to put forward proposals grounded in their own realities to improve the design and implementation of cash transfers. Box 4 identifies the key messages that emerged when co-creation of ideas took place in the Lesotho community.

#### **Box 4: Suggestions put to policymakers at the Lesotho community meeting**

- Unemployed members of the community, including all those excluded from social cash transfers, should be given jobs.
- People with disabilities should automatically be included in the social cash transfer programmes.
- Pensions should be increased because the elderly are not only individual recipients, but they also care for orphans, grandchildren and disabled family members.
- Since access is difficult, bridges should be constructed to connect recipient villages to the centre where they receive money.
- Child grants are too small: they should be revised upwards, more frequent and rotate around the community.
- Yearly assessments are needed so that new recipients can be added.

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