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Social protection

A synthesis of evidence and lessons from 3ie- supported impact evaluations

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Working Paper 34

Social protection

International Initiative for Impact Evaluation

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The International Initiative for Impact Evaluation (3ie) promotes evidence-informed, equitable, inclusive and sustainable development. We support the generation and effective use of high-quality evidence to inform decision-making and improve the lives of people living in poverty in low- and middle-income countries. We provide guidance and support to produce, synthesise and quality assure evidence of what works, for whom, how, why and at what cost.

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About this working paper

This paper, *Social protection: a synthesis of evidence and lessons from 3ie evidence-supported impact evaluations*, synthesises evidence from impact evaluations supported by 3ie under the Social Protection Evidence Programme and shares valuable lessons learnt from implementing the studies.

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Social protection: a synthesis of evidence and lessons from 3ie evidence-supported impact evaluations

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Acknowledgement is due to all the researchers and their implementing agency counterparts for their commitment to evaluation and overcoming innumerable hurdles to produce high-quality evidence that contributes insights on some of the most enduring questions in the field of social protection.

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Summary

Recent literature on social protection has cited its role in addressing issues of poverty and entitlement. Not surprisingly, the Millennium Development Goals and now the Sustainable Development Goals recognise the role that social protection programmes play in 'ending poverty in all its forms' (Sustainable Development Goal 1) through institutionalisation of nationally appropriate social protection systems.

Recognising the centrality of social protection programmes in alleviating poverty, 3ie's evidence programme, commissioned in 2011, was an endeavour in advancing knowledge about the effectiveness of such programmes. As several governments began implementing large-scale, national-level programmes, they felt a need for rigorous evidence to understand the impact of these programmes and the mechanisms through which they worked.

3ie funded evaluations of social protection programmes in Asia, Latin America and Sub-Saharan Africa. This paper is a synthesis of evidence on the impact of transfers and transfer modalities on the welfare of participating households and, in limited cases, on non-beneficiaries and the wider economy. The paper includes a discussion on the valuable lessons for programme implementers and researchers, on programme and evaluation fidelity, and on stakeholder engagement and evidence use. It draws on the documentation available to 3ie, and on interviews with researchers and implementing agency partners to provide insights on findings and lessons from implementing the studies.

Key findings

The paper synthesises evidence from evaluation of transfer programmes in Ecuador, Malawi, Sierra Leone, Tanzania, Uganda and Zimbabwe and from public works programmes in Ethiopia and India.

Cash versus in-kind or food transfers and conditional versus unconditional transfers are issues of extensive debate amongst implementers of social protection programmes. In Uganda, handing cash as opposed to food significantly improved cognitive development amongst children enrolled in early childhood development centres. In Ecuador, contrary to some expectations, cash transfers to women did not lead to increased intimate partner violence, in line with the finding for food and voucher transfers. However, factors such as household income levels and infrastructure availability to administer in-kind or cash transfers to programme participants also influenced the effectiveness of a transfer modality.

Different measures of welfare outcomes may respond differently to different modalities. For example, conditional cash transfers in Tanzania do not show any impact on consumption, but improve health and education outcomes triggered by behaviour change that conditionalities tried to influence. Unconditional transfers in Malawi and Zimbabwe, on the other hand, improve consumption and dietary diversity. Complying with conditions can have cost implications, which may lead to less surplus available for consumption.

Most studies also note some form of asset accumulation and investment in productive activities, but the impact of the latter on more downstream welfare measures, such as

household income, is either mixed or not investigated. Similarly, the evidence of impact on health outcomes is limited and divergent. Impact on education is measured through school enrolment and attendance (arguably outputs rather than outcomes) except in Ethiopia, where researchers looked at and found an impact on grade attainment.

Transfers can positively affect non-beneficiaries and the wider economy. Evidence from Ethiopia, Malawi and Zimbabwe indicates that transfer programmes can create production and income multipliers that benefit non-eligible households. The relative proportion of beneficiaries in the local population, and the level of integration of local markets, determine the exact distribution of spillover effects of the programme. General equilibrium effects need to be explored in greater detail in future research to understand whether these impacts manifest in other local economies and what factors likely contribute to amplifying the potential spillovers. Additionally, the programme's cost-benefit analysis should include an assessment of these effects.

Information on cost-benefit remains a gnawing gap. Studies in Sierra Leone and Ecuador comment on the cost-effectiveness of different transfer modalities, but no study does a thorough examination of the cost of delivering an intervention and monetising benefits to provide a comprehensive cost-benefit analysis. Large-scale government programmes that involve sharing of resources and cost subsidisation from other allied programmes pose a challenge in arriving at accurate cost estimates. In a few studies, researchers were unable to gain access to data on costs, particularly for government-implemented programmes. Programme cost-benefit analysis is a critical input in informing policy, and governments and donors need to work towards making this information more readily available to researchers.

Analysis of gendered outcomes remains limited. Even though feminisation of poverty is an important concept in international development, it remains grossly under-investigated. The Sustainable Development Goals highlight the importance of social protection in addressing inequality and reducing poverty, especially in addressing risks and barriers women face in accessing services and infrastructure. Most studies in this synthesis, however, stop short of discussing sex-disaggregated data. This is limiting, because an in-depth gender analysis can explain how and why programme impacts vary for women and men. Gender analysis can unpack how socially constituted roles, relations and relative power assigned to men and women influence their ability to access and benefit from social protection. There is a need to integrate a gender analysis framework when designing politically aware and context-specific impact evaluations.

Lessons in implementation

Programme implementation fidelity is important to track. To measure whether and to what extent a programme worked, we need to know whether the programme was implemented as originally planned. Several factors can undermine implementation fidelity, and poor implementation can lead to poor outcomes and impact. Most evaluations do not include a sufficient assessment of programme implementation fidelity, and instances such as poorly communicated programme objectives and changes to the duration, frequency and size of transfers are not discussed when interpreting findings.

Evaluation fidelity, too, can be a challenge. Studies supported under this evidence programme were often unable to comply with the original evaluation plans due to budgetary constraints and/or changing context-specific factors, including politico-economic factors. Although this is unavoidable, and possibly desirable if we are to ensure evaluation designs respond to implementation plans, aligning the implementation of the impact evaluations with shifting programmatic priorities has budget implications that are difficult to foresee.

Engagement is a key to ensuring relevance and usefulness of the evidence. Engagement with stakeholders to secure buy-in for the impact evaluations is critical in promoting the uptake and use of study findings. As many as 7 of the 10 completed studies contributed to either the design or scale-up of the programme being evaluated, helped institutionalise the use of evaluation findings, or informed the design of similar programmes in other contexts.

In synthesising findings from the evaluations and learning around issues of evaluation and programme fidelity, this paper fills some important knowledge gaps in the literature on social protection. At the same time, the paper highlights important limitations in the studies, including the lack of gender and cost-benefit analysis, as issues that future research on social protection should try to address. Key stakeholders in the evaluation ecosystem can benefit from the insights presented in this paper as they plan and prepare for future research.

Contents

List of figure and tables

Abbreviations and acronyms

CCT	Conditional cash transfer
DFID	Department for International Development (UK)
ECD	Early childhood development
MGNREGA	Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Guarantee Act
PSNP	Productive Safety Net Programme
UCT	Unconditional cash transfer
WFP	World Food Programme

1. Introduction

In 2011, the International Initiative for Impact Evaluation (3ie), in partnership with the UK Department for International Development (DFID), developed and launched the Social Protection Evidence Programme, a grant-making modality to increase the body of rigorous, policy-relevant evidence on social protection programmes.

This paper takes stock of the state of evidence in social protection at the time the programme launched, looks at other rigorous evidence that emerged in parallel to our programme, and examines how findings from 3ie-funded evaluations relate to these streams of evidence and our learnings from supporting evaluation of large-scale (often government-led) social protection programmes.

In developing the evidence programme priorities, 3ie produced a scoping paper that defined social protection as the set of measures that provide security for the poor and vulnerable (Gómez 2011). There is consensus on the critical role of social protection schemes in target 1.3 of Sustainable Development Goal 1, which aims to end poverty in all its forms everywhere. The target calls for implementing 'nationally appropriate social protection measures and systems for all', with emphasis on 'substantial coverage of the poor and the vulnerable'.

3ie's scoping paper presents the main types of social protection measures in a framework 3ie developed based on strategic documents (Costella and Kryeziu 2012) and consultation with experts. The framework includes three main types of social protection mechanisms:

- risk mitigation mechanisms that focus on ensuring income to those more vulnerable, via old-age security benefits and pensions;
- risk-coping mechanisms that focus on mitigating poverty by channelling resources and human capital interventions to the poor via non-cash and cash transfers and public works programmes; and
- risk reduction mechanisms that focus on investing in new generations with interventions in early childhood development (ECD) and youth training (Table 1).

Other interventions focus on the development and/or strengthening of social protection systems, and typically include all three risk management mechanisms.

This paper focuses primarily on sectors and sub-sectors to which the Social Protection Evidence Programme added new insights, namely conditional cash transfer (CCT) and unconditional cash transfer (UCT) programmes and public works programmes, all of which can be categorised as transfer programmes and fall under the risk coping category in Table 1. We also share experiences from implementing evaluations to assess the impact of a pension scheme in Peru and a nationwide apprenticeship programme in Ghana.

Table 1: Typology of social protection programmes

Risk mitigation	Risk coping	Risk reduction
Old-age income security (includes micro-pensions)	Non-cash targeted transfers (e.g. vouchers, school meals, food packages, seeds to poor farmers)	Integrated ECD
Unemployment benefits	Public works or work-fare programmes	Interventions specifically targeting youth at risk (youth training and labour insertion programmes)
Expanding health insurance to the uncovered	Unconditional or social cash transfer programmes	
Micro-insurance, in particular agricultural for smallholder farmers	CCT	

The report is structured as follows: Section 2 presents the state of evidence in social protection at the start of 3ie's evidence programme; Section 3 presents background information about how the social protection research programme was developed and presents a snapshot of impact evaluations supported under the programme; Section 4 describes the methodology used to prepare this synthesis report; Section 5 discusses the main findings across the studies and how they contribute to the existing body of evidence, as laid out above; Section 6 draws lessons from managing this portfolio of impact evaluations of social protection programmes; and Section 7 concludes.

2. State of evidence

CCT programmes, despite being amongst the development interventions most exposed to rigorous impact evaluations, continued to experience relative and absolute gaps in the evidence at the time 3ie's evidence programme was being conceptualised. As the scoping report states,

> Several evaluations have managed to demonstrate the impacts of a package of multiple interventions, but they have left aside analysis on specific sector outcomes (Gaarder 2010) and on the key incentives and institutional capacities needed for the intervention to succeed (Kabeer and Ainsworth 2010). This calls for more profound and better evaluations on CCTs (Gómez 2011).

The scoping report found little evidence about the impact of CCTs on growth and long-lasting poverty reduction (Barrientos 2008). The hypothesised causal routes to achieving this would be through strengthened human capital by way of improved nutrition, health and education outcomes, increased labour market participation and productive investments for poor households, and/or through locality- and economy-wide effects.

Social protection evidence available in 2011 did not confirm a strong link between CCTs and improved health and education outcomes, even though outputs such as health centre visits and school enrolment and attendance increased significantly. The evidence was summarised in subsequent systematic reviews, such as Gaarder and colleagues (2010), Snilstveit and colleagues (2016), Petrosino and colleagues (2016), and Tanner and colleagues (2014).

The impact on outputs seems to be driven more by programmes that were explicitly conditional (monitoring compliance and penalising non-compliance) than those with no conditions, or with some conditions that were not monitored (Baird et al. 2013; Gaarder et al. 2010). Supply-side constraints that directly affect the quality and adequacy of services in health and education (such as inadequate supplies, protocols, staff and training) are identified as a primary reason for the limited impact of transfer programmes on outcomes, as these mainly address demand-side barriers, such as the costs of schooling and healthcare.

A recent systematic review notes that CCT programmes were effective in promoting child health only in places that had a functioning healthcare system. Additionally, demand-side barriers are often assumed and not examined in enough detail. The programmes therefore do not always address some important constraints at the household level, such as poor parenting practices, inadequate information and intra-household decision-making dynamics (Owusu-Addo and Cross 2014).

Other studies find conditional programmes to have positive effects on household expenditures, food security and diet quality (Leroy et al. 2009; Gaarder et al. 2010). Manley and colleagues (2012) find conditional and unconditional transfers to have similar effects on child nutrition, as measured by levels of stunting. Conditional programmes, however, inhibited child growth when conditionalities were not related to health or education.

As for adult labour market participation and productive asset investments amongst recipient households, the evidence on the impact of CCTs is mixed. A systematic review by Kabeer and colleagues (2012) finds that some studies report a disincentive effect of CCTs on adult labour, whilst a few other studies find increased labour participation. The average effect from a meta-analysis is not statistically significant and varies by gender, size and duration of transfer, and type of employment.

On productive investments, the review concludes that CCTs lead to increased investment in productive activities and assets by relaxing liquidity constraints. The programmes increased the likelihood that those with few assets would use land for agricultural production and would start to produce foods of higher market and nutritional value. In Mexico, they were also found to increase households' savings (Kabeer et al. 2012).

Finally, the economic spillover effects of CCTs have been theorised about, but little research was available on their local and economy-wide effects at the start of the 3ie evidence programme. Typically, impact evaluations tend to focus on the intended impact of the programme on their recipients rather than on non-recipients or the wider community (or unintended effects). Angelucci and De Giorgi (2009) note that the effects of CCTs on the local economy could be substantial in relatively economically isolated communities and the total injection of cash could create inflationary pressure.

The little evidence available on spillover effects came from one programme in one country: the Progresa, or Oportunidades, CCT programme in Mexico. It suggested that CCTs were associated with a lower rate of increase in poverty village-wide. It also suggested an increase in food consumption amongst households that were ineligible for the programme, partly because of greater availability of resources in the village, but also because resources were shifted away from recipient households (Skoufias and di Maro 2008).

Although the evidence of the effect of CCT programmes on growth and long-lasting poverty is both thin and inconclusive, there is growing evidence of these programmes reducing short-term poverty by increasing household purchasing power and food consumption (Kabeer et al. 2012; Hagen-Zanker et al. 2011).

3. Background

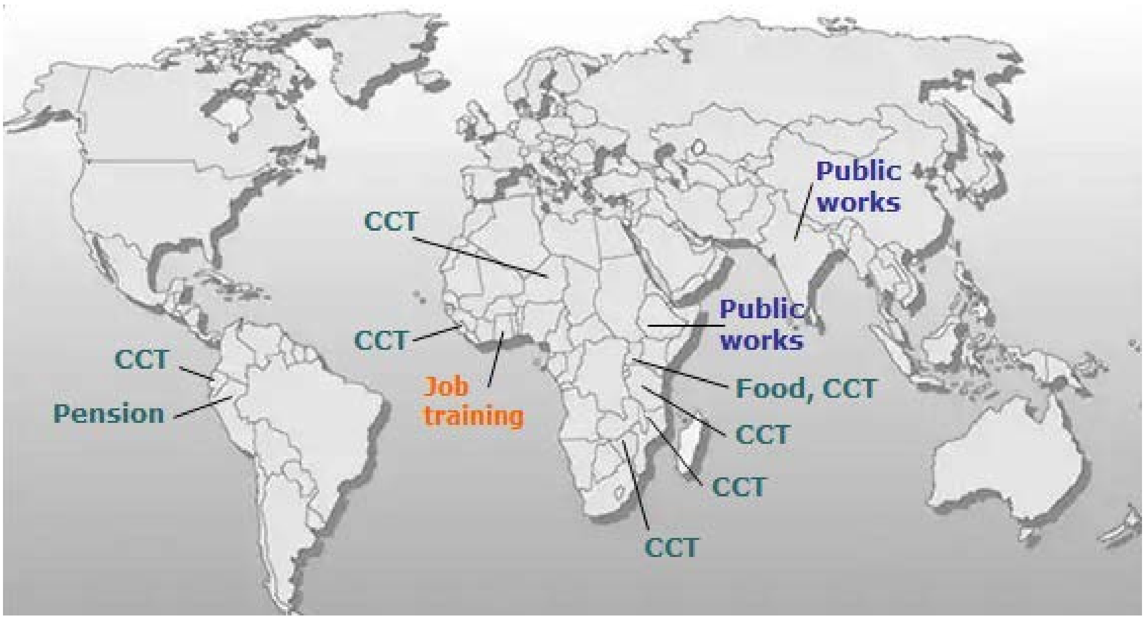
The 3ie Social Protection Evidence Programme was its first sector-specific evidence programme. It formed part of 3ie's ongoing drive to fund high-quality impact evaluations that would generate a body of evidence to help understand what works, why, and under what circumstances in particular sectors and sub-sectors. 3ie provided funding worth US$4.6 million to support 13 impact evaluations in 12 countries in Asia, Latin America and Sub-Saharan Africa under the following sub-themes in the sector: public works programmes, CCTs and UCTs, and youth training programmes. This section provides an overview of the process of setting up this evidence programme, together with information on geographical coverage and the methodologies the studies used.

In 2011, 3ie established an expert working group comprising Fernando Regalia, Joanna McGowan, Marie Gaarder, Matthew Greenslade and Tim Conway, to oversee the establishment of the evidence programme. Supporting this group's work were an extensive survey of developing-country and donor agency policymakers working on social protection and a literature review focusing on the gaps in the research. Based on this work, 3ie produced a scoping paper that identified important, unanswered evaluation questions in the social protection sector.

The findings of the scoping report informed a request for proposals, issued in September 2011, seeking expressions of interest under the evidence programme. The call received 221 expressions of interest, a subset of which were then invited to submit full impact evaluation proposals, which were evaluated by an international selection panel of policymakers and researchers. Research grants were awarded in March 2012. Prior to grant signing, the successful teams' full proposals were subjected to intensive review, wherein internal and external reviewers commented on quality, budget, and the stakeholder engagement and evidence use plans of the proposed evaluations. The research teams discussed the comments and incorporated them, as relevant, in the final evaluation design.

The studies funded under the evidence programme evaluated transfer, public works, and youth job training programmes in Ecuador, Ethiopia, Ghana, India, Malawi, Peru, Sierra Leone, Tanzania, Timor-Leste, Uganda, Yemen and Zimbabwe.[1] Figure 1 shows the geographic spread of funded evaluations (and associated transfer type). Table 2 provides a snapshot of the types of social protection programmes evaluated, the geographical spread, the evaluation designs and the main outcomes of interest.

Figure 1: Distribution of funded impact evaluations



[1] Three studies, one each in Peru, Timor-Leste and Yemen, had to be cancelled. Of the remaining 10 studies, findings from the Ghana study are not included in the paper given that the paper is focussed on learnings from evaluation of transfer projects.

Table 2: Overview of the impact evaluations included in the synthesis

Country	Study title	Type of social protection programme	Implementing actor	Outcomes of interest	Study design
Ecuador	The effect of conditional transfers on intimate partner violence: evidence from northern Ecuador (Hidrobo et al. 2016)	UCTs, vouchers and food transfers	International NGO	Intra-household violence	Randomised evaluation
Ethiopia	The Productive Safety Net Programme in Ethiopia: impacts on children's schooling, labour and nutritional status (Berhane et al. 2017)	Public works	Government	Children's schooling, incidence and magnitude of child labour, and anthropometric status of preschool children	Propensity score matching
Ethiopia	General equilibrium impact assessment of the Productive Safety Net Program in Ethiopia (Filipski et al. 2017)	Public works	Government	Economic outcomes, including the effects on the wider community	Propensity score matching and general equilibrium modelling
Ghana	Training for success: targeting and incentives in apprenticeship training in Ghana (Mbiti et al. 2018)	Job training	Government	Youth labour market participation, migration, fertility and asset ownership	Cluster randomised evaluation
India	Can e-governance reduce capture of public programmes? Experimental evidence from India's employment guarantee scheme in Bihar (Banerjee et al. 2015)	Public works	Government	Employment rates, spending rates	Cluster randomised evaluation
Malawi	Evaluating the effectiveness of an unconditional social cash transfer programme for the ultra poor in Malawi (Abdoulayi et al. 2017)	UCTs	Government	Consumption, productivity, health, education and transition to adulthood	Cluster randomised evaluation

Country	Study title	Type of social protection programme	Implementing actor	Outcomes of interest	Study design
Sierra Leone	The impact of earned and windfall cash transfers on livelihoods and conservation in Sierra Leone (Bulte et al. 2016):	Cash transfers and public works	International NGO	Social, economic and land-use indicators	Cluster randomised evaluation
Tanzania	Evaluating the effectiveness of a community-managed conditional cash transfer program in Tanzania (Evans et al. 2016)	CCTs	Government	Individual and household-level outcomes, including health-seeking behaviour, education, investments in health, asset ownership, savings, credit and consumption, and trust	Cluster randomised evaluation
Uganda	The effect of transfers and preschool on children's cognitive development in Uganda (Gilligan and Roy 2016)	UCTs and food transfers	International NGO	Cognitive and non-cognitive indicators of child development	Randomised evaluation
Zimbabwe	Impacts of Zimbabwe's Harmonised Social Cash Transfer programme (Angeles et al. 2019)	UCTs	Government	Food security, children's human capital (schooling, nutrition) and child protection	Propensity score matching

4. Methodology of the synthesis

This paper is a synthesis of impact evaluations funded under 3ie's Social Protection Evidence Programme. The synthesised findings show the impact of transfers and public works programmes at the national, community, household and individual levels for a range of outcomes. We used iterative coding to synthesise lessons from the studies and identify cross-cutting themes that are likely to be relevant and useful to researchers, programme managers and commissioners of evaluations. These include lessons on programme and evaluation fidelity, targeting, uptake, the impact of varying transfer modalities in different contexts, and lessons on engagement with stakeholders to improve the relevance and usefulness of the research supported through this evidence programme.

We supplemented the analysis with a review of all grant documents associated with each study, and with semi-structured interviews conducted with 14 researchers, 12 implementing agency representatives and other relevant stakeholders for each study (Appendix B). We also captured lessons and challenges the researchers faced for three studies – one each in Peru, Timor-Leste and Yemen – that were awarded but not implemented due to programme- and evaluation-related challenges.

5. Findings

We summarise below findings from eight studies that evaluate programmes providing in-kind or cash transfers to beneficiaries, either unconditionally or conditional on fulfilling specific requirements. It is important to note that the duration of the studies varied significantly, ranging from 9 to 50 months (with longer duration often associated with delays in evaluation or programme implementation). Thus, we recommend exercising caution in interpreting and generalising results across studies.

Longer-duration studies might have allowed for observation of more downstream impacts or, conversely, may have resulted in the dissipation of certain impacts in cases of delayed endline. Shorter-duration studies might not, by definition, have captured longer term impacts. However, we do find some trends in the study findings, which address the following key questions:

- Does transfer modality affect outcomes of interest?
- Do transfers impact more downstream measures of household welfare?
- What impact do transfers have on non-beneficiaries and the wider economy?

We also coded for evidence of unintended consequences in the studies and for data regarding cost-effectiveness, but there is very little to report under either heading.

5.1 How does transfer modality affect outcomes?

The field of transfers is grappling with two enduring questions: (1) the efficiency and effectiveness of conditional versus unconditional transfers; and (2) in what form to provide transfers: cash, in-kind or vouchers. Despite the ongoing debate, very few studies have compared transfer modalities, and only on a limited number of outcomes, such as nutrition, food security and use of maternity care services. Other less direct effects, such as on gender power dynamics or children's cognitive development, have not been investigated through rigorous research (Aker 2013).

Although a majority of studies in our portfolio involved cash transfers only, two studies compared the impact of different transfer modalities, including cash, on the outcomes of interest, primarily health, education and intimate partner violence.

In Ecuador, where the prevalence of intimate partner violence against women is high,[2] the World Food Programme (WFP) was keen to understand how assistance provided through different transfer modalities could improve the role of women in household decision-making, especially in matters related to food and nutrition. Women received transfers of food, cash or vouchers of equivalent value, conditional on their attendance at monthly nutrition training over a six-month period. The value of monthly transfers was equivalent to US$40, which was approximately 11 per cent of the household monthly consumption before the transfers. The food transfer consisted of specified quantities of rice, lentils, vegetable oil and canned sardines. The food voucher was redeemable at local supermarkets for a pre-approved list of nutritious foods, and the cash was distributed through pre-programmed ATM cards.

The study found that all kinds of transfers, including cash, decreased the incidence of certain types of violence against women. This finding is in line with a recent synthesis (Bastagli et al. 2016) that found that cash transfers can increase women's decision-making power and choices, including on marriage and fertility, and reduce physical abuse by male partners, although not necessarily emotional abuse, which two studies found increased.

Given this finding and recent literature (Buller et al. 2018), it should therefore not be assumed that giving cash to women (as compared to in-kind transfers) will lead to intra-household violence. It is important to note, however, that food transfers, as opposed to cash and vouchers, were found to be more likely to be controlled by women.

In Uganda, households with children aged 3–5 years who were enrolled in a UNICEF-supported ECD centre were entitled to receive a transfer. The ECD centres aimed to improve school readiness amongst children. ECD caregivers were volunteers from the community, who were remunerated through discretionary gifts by community members. The impact evaluation randomly assigned 98 ECD centres to 1 of 3 treatment arms: cash, food or control. . Households with a child or children enrolled in an ECD centre received a transfer in cash or food (control households received neither). The food ration consisted of micronutrient-fortified corn soya blend, vitamin A–fortified oil, and sugar; the cash transfer was set at 25,500 Ugandan shillings (around US$10.25) over the six weeks.

The study found that, unlike food transfers, cash transfers significantly improved cognitive development amongst children. To understand these differences, the researchers looked at intermediate outcomes and found that children in cash recipient households had a better diet, followed better hygiene practices, and were less likely to be anaemic, which could have contributed to children's improved cognition. The study found no impact on measures of non-cognitive development for either food or cash

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[2] According to Instituto Nacional de Estadistica Censos (2011), lifetime prevalence of intimate partner violence is estimated at 35% for physical violence, 14.5% for sexual violence and 43.4% for psychological violence.

transfer recipients. Additionally, ECD centres assigned to cash treatment were more likely to remain open, to be better equipped and to have had better attendance. This, too, may have contributed to more stimulation for children receiving cash transfers, leading to improved cognition.[3]

Two other studies that compared transfer modalities are also worth mentioning. A randomised experiment by Hidrobo and colleagues (2014) found all three modalities significantly improved the quantity and quality of food consumed, although with food transfers leading to significantly larger increases in calories consumed and vouchers leading to significantly larger increases in dietary diversity. A study by Aker (2013), comparing cash and vouchers to assist internally displaced populations in the Democratic Republic of Congo, found that voucher households purchased more food items than they would have otherwise had they been provided with cash and with no differential improvements in food security. However, cash transfer households were able to save a portion of their transfers, and the cash transfer programme was more cost-effective for the implementing agency.

A study in Sierra Leone compared three modalities of transfer to communities in the vicinity of Gola Rainforest National Park that were designed to promote sustainable land management and forest conservation practices. The study found that use of aid depended on who received it (an individual versus the chief of the community) and whether the transfer was conditional.[4] When aid to individuals was conditional on their participating in a public road improvement programme, the transfers were more likely to be used for household consumption, but with no discernible impact on any measure of household welfare, such as income from farm and wages, or productive asset ownership.

The researchers suggested that the small sample size could explain the limited observed impact at the household level. On the other hand, community projects were much more likely to be completed or near completion after two years when aid was provided unconditionally (through the chief or directly to households). However, the community infrastructure typically developed – building or rehabilitating the court *barri* (a community structure for meetings), a guesthouse or a mosque – was unlikely to provide easily identifiable welfare impacts for individuals or households.

The Sierra Leone study was the only one in which conditional and unconditional transfers were compared side by side; however, a number of programmes looked at either conditional or unconditional transfers and their effects on various outcomes.

Studies in Zimbabwe and Malawi looked at a range of household-level welfare indicators. The recipients of a UCT programme in Zimbabwe spent more on food and other consumption items, leading to improved food security, dietary diversity and subjective well-being. The study also noted improved mental well-being amongst beneficiaries, as measured by reduced fear of dropping out of school; significantly less worry about money; and improved relationships with people, both at home and in general. The effect

[3] Section 6.1.4 notes that food provided as transfers was not valued in the local context and could not therefore be easily sold.

[4] In this study, aid was distributed unconditionally either directly to individuals or through the chief. The third modality involved cash transfers to individuals conditional on work.

was also positive for ownership of productive assets, including livestock, increased agricultural yield and reduced household debt.

However, these positive impacts did not translate into improved health for children (as measured by reduced incidence of diarrhoea, fever or cough amongst children aged 0–5 years) or reduced adult morbidity (as measured by any sickness or injury reported by the respondent in the past 30 days). In fact, the study found an increased incidence of chronic illness and disability amongst cash recipients. Similarly, there is no impact on education (enrolment or progression), possibly due to pre-existing high rates of enrolment at the primary level and exclusion of recipients from the Basic Education Assistance Module scholarship programme, which targeted students in secondary school.[5] However, the programme improved the likelihood that school-going children aged 5–18 years owned a pair of shoes, two sets of clothing and a blanket. It was also found to have protective impacts on adolescents, promoting healthy sexual practices (such as delayed sexual debut) and reducing instances of violence.

In Malawi, the researchers found strong positive effects of the UCT programme on consumption, food security, and ownership of household and agricultural assets. There was also increased crop and livestock production. The authors stated that the large impact on ownership of agricultural tools, fertiliser and livestock is suggestive of the ways households may use transfers to generate a multiplier effect. Impact on health is less pronounced, although the researchers observed strong effects on school enrolment and attendance for children of all ages (noting, however, that there was no measure of enhanced learning outcomes).

As in Zimbabwe, adolescents in Malawi benefitted from the programme, as measured by delayed sexual debut and reduced instance of first pregnancy at midline and improved mental health at endline. However, another study in Malawi found that the impact of the transfer programme in bringing down levels of teen pregnancy, child marriage and HIV was not sustained two years after the beneficiary stopped receiving the cash (Baird et al. 2016).

The Tanzania study likewise found impacts on a few measures of household well-being. Unlike unconditional transfers implemented in Malawi and Zimbabwe, the conditional transfers in Tanzania did not lead to improved consumption. Conditionalities concerning health and education led to improvements in some measures of household welfare. Children aged 0–5 years were less likely to fall ill or injure themselves, with health improvements being more marked for villages with above-median numbers of health staff. Impact on education was limited to children's being more likely to have ever attended school. Asset ownership increased, mostly of shoes and slippers, but also of productive assets such as goats and chicken. Treatment villages reported increased trust in their leaders, which could have been because the programme was community managed.

[5] See Section 6.3.3 for more detail on the Basic Education Assistance Module scholarship and programme linkages.

The Productive Safety Net Programme (PSNP) in Ethiopia targeted food-insecure households, offering every able-bodied adult up to five days of work each month for six months in a public works programme, hence a type of conditional transfer. The programme had positive impacts on girls' education. Increased payments under the PSNP were accompanied by increased grade attainment and schooling efficiency amongst girls.[6] Although it had no impact on education of boys, the programme did bring down the hours spent on family farm activities. This is in line with what Bastagli and colleagues (2016) find, especially in Latin America, where studies linked transfers to significant reduction in the prevalence of child labour.

Evaluating a public works programme in India – the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) – Islam and Sivasankaran (2014) found an increase in the time spent in education for children in households participating in MGNREGA,[7] similar to PSNP households in Ethiopia. However, this was limited to younger children, with older children spending more time working outside the household.

Afridi and colleagues (2012) explored the impact of MGNREGA on educational outcomes in light of women's participation in the workforce and find mothers' participation in the programme to be associated with younger children's spending more time in school. In poorer households, the researchers also found higher grade attainment amongst children. The PSNP, however, did not reduce chronic or acute malnutrition amongst children, nor did it improve children's consumption of pulses, oils, fruit, vegetables, dairy or animal-source proteins. The quality of diet continued to be poor.

Although it is difficult to summarise these findings given the divergence of programme designs and the large range of effect-indicators measured, there seem to be some indicative trends. The evidence from our portfolio suggests that transfers in cash have similar effects as non-cash transfers and, in fact, can perform better, given that they let people prioritise and put money to optimal use based on what they believe is important. There is some evidence, in particular, from the unconditional transfer programmes of increased food security, dietary diversification and consumption at the household level. Similarly, the unconditional transfer programme studies found positive impacts on sexual practices of adolescents.

Studies of conditional transfer programmes that looked at education outputs, such as school enrolment and attendance, found some positive effects. Further, several studies in our programme also noted some form of asset accumulation and investment in productive activities. Nevertheless, downstream measures of welfare and human capital accumulation were more limited and the findings were more mixed. For example, the impact of productive activities on income was either mixed or not investigated. As for education outcomes, only in the Ethiopia study did the researchers look at (and find) an impact on grade attainment. Similarly, the evidence of impact of the transfers on health outcomes was found to be limited and divergent.

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[6] Schooling efficiency is measured by relative grade attainment, which basically tells us whether the child is in the grade befitting their age and therefore progressing as per expectation.
[7] MGNREGA in India is the largest social protection programme in the world, with close to 50 million beneficiary households.

5.2 What impact do transfers have on non-beneficiaries and the wider economy?

As mentioned earlier, transfers, especially those handing out cash, are likely to have an impact on local economies, driving up the cost of products and services in relatively closed economies by putting more money in circulation (Angelucci and De Giorgi 2009). Increased buying power, however, will likely affect production and sale of goods, thus creating potential benefits for non-participants. Such gains are amplified for programmes that transfer cash conditional on participation in public works. Aside from income gains, investment in local infrastructure can lead to productivity gains and create its own income multipliers, further boosting the local economy.

In Ethiopia, researchers studied the economy-wide impacts of the PSNP, estimating gains to the economy at local, regional and national levels. It is a nationwide programme, implemented in 262 of Ethiopia's 690 *woredas*.[8] With a reach of more than 8 million households, the PSNP is the largest public works programme in Africa. At the local level, the study found that soil and water conservation and irrigation projects increased agricultural yields. At the regional level, there was a 6.4 per cent increase in total output, driven by increased agricultural yields, demand for more goods and services, and shifts in prices. Production multipliers were lower for regions that were primarily pastoral and derived little benefit from the public works carried out by the programme. Increases in real income for households in the region ranged from 9.5 per cent to 19 per cent, depending, once again, on the local economy. Impacts at the national level were also positive. The PSNP increased total output by 0.91 per cent, with the vegetable sector registering the highest level of growth. Household real incomes increased by 3.9 per cent, with those in agricultural economies of the humid highlands of Ethiopia benefiting the most.

Researchers on the Malawi and Zimbabwe studies also investigated these impacts, although not as part of a 3ie-supported grant. In Zimbabwe, the researchers found an income multiplier of US$1.73 in nominal terms and US$1.40 in real terms in the project area (Angeles et al. 2019). Although impact on income varied by sector, the retail sector was found to benefit most. Productive impacts were found to be primarily in favour of non-recipients, triggered by increased demand for local goods and services.

The impacts on the local economy in Malawi were very similar, in that production and income multipliers created by the programme primarily benefitted non-eligible households. However, the exact distribution of spillover benefits between beneficiary and non-beneficiary households was determined by the 'the type of commodities purchased, the relative proportion of beneficiaries in the local population and the structure of local markets' (Thome et al. 2015).

Public works have the potential to create even larger economy-wide impacts, given the asset creation that happens as part of the projects. In 2013, 3ie funded an evaluation to understand the general equilibrium impacts of MGNREGA. Deininger and Liu (2017)

[8] A *woredas* is an administrative unit in Ethiopia, which is an equivalent of a district. Ethiopia is divided into regions, which are further subdivided into *woredas*. *Kebeles* are the smallest administrative units, which make up a *woreda*.

found that MGNREGA increased consumption expenditure and nutritional intake for households in programme areas, including non-participating households. The welfare effect was greater for poor households than non-poor households. Imbert and Papp (2015) found MGNREGA to have an impact on the rural labour economy, crowding out private sector employment one for one and increasing market wages, especially during the time when public works were being implemented.

More recently, Muralidharan and colleagues (2017) showed that when well-implemented, public employment programmes were highly effective at raising the incomes of the rural poor. These gains were not directly attributable to income from the programme, but indirectly to the general equilibrium changes it induced.

It is difficult to draw any generalised conclusions on the impact of CCTs on the wider economy from the small pool of studies. Further research is needed to understand whether, and how, these impacts manifest in other local economies and what factors likely contribute to amplifying these potential spillovers – the scale of the programme being one important determinant.

5.3 Gender and cost benefit: do we know enough?

Six studies – evaluations of five transfer programmes and one public works programme – discussed the gender dimension of evaluation findings.

The programme in Malawi was implemented by the Ministry of Gender, Children, Disability and Social Welfare. A gender dimension was built into the analysis, including the qualitative research design. The study looked at the differential impact of female- and male-headed households on a range of outcomes. It found female-headed households in the treatment group to be significantly more likely than male-headed households to seek health treatment and participate in nutrition programmes for children, but less likely to report any illness, injury or wasting amongst children. Male-headed households, however, were more likely to seek treatment in a health facility in cases of child diarrhoea; this may not be surprising, given that children in male-headed households were more likely to fall ill at endline. Anthropometric measures found male children to be significantly less wasted than female children in the control group (the impact on female treatment children is insignificant).

Gender was fundamental to the study of intimate partner violence in Ecuador. The study in Zimbabwe provided sex-disaggregated data for a range of outcomes, including time use, adult chronic illness, morbidity, disability, health-seeking behaviour, children's health and material well-being, and household decision-making. The pre-analysis plan for the Tanzania study referred to the possibility of examining heterogeneous impacts by sex and by age, and the study did examine these impacts. For example, impacts on education outcomes such as literacy and school attendance were disaggregated by sex, given that parents often make differential investments in education based on the child's gender. Treatment effects on expenditures on non-food items, such as clothing and footwear, were also disaggregated by sex. Qualitative research also examined demands on women's time and changes in attitudes towards girls' education.

In Ethiopia, too, the study looked at the differential impact of the PSNP on education and labour for boys and girls in the 7- to 16-year age group, and on nutrition for children up to

5 years. These are critical factors for examination in the context of a public works programme, where parental participation is likely to have an impact on children, especially girls, who may substitute for parents to take care of younger siblings.

Information on cost-benefit remains a gnawing gap in most of the studies. Studies comparing transfer modalities (conditional versus unconditional and cash versus non-cash) in Sierra Leone and Ecuador commented only on the relative cost-effectiveness of the different modalities in light of how these affect outcomes of interest. Studies in Malawi and Zimbabwe led to interesting observations on the cost to beneficiaries for participating in the programme – an area often overlooked in programme cost analysis.

A comprehensive cost-benefit analysis is conspicuous by its absence in studies included in the synthesis. Two factors may be contributing to this lack of analysis. First, large-scale government programmes that involve sharing of resources and cost subsidisation from other allied programmes pose a challenge in arriving at accurate estimates of costs. Second, researchers are often unable to gain access to administrative data from the government. Whilst researchers need to consider how to arrive at a mechanism for costing large-scale government programmes and monetising benefits accruing to programme participants and non-participants, governments and donors need to facilitate information sharing, which will help researchers conduct an accurate cost analysis and provide key inputs to policy and programming.

6. Lessons in programme evaluation

This section summarises key lessons for governments and for national and international NGOs concerning implementation and evaluation of social protection programmes. We elaborate on how external and context-specific factors can have an impact on the effectiveness of a programme, and we identify challenges associated with implementing rigorous impact evaluations of large-scale social protection programmes in dynamic contexts.

We also discuss lessons on engaging with key stakeholders to improve the relevance and usefulness of the research and point to a few key takeaways for the grant-makers, commissioners and users of impact evaluations. The lessons we identify here are drawn from all 10 completed studies and from the studies that were discontinued due to programmatic and implementation challenges. We discuss issues around implementation and evaluation fidelity and draw on these to present lessons for designing future impact evaluation.

6.1 Programme implementation fidelity

Implementation fidelity, also known as treatment fidelity or integrity, refers to the extent to which a programme is implemented as originally intended. Several factors can undermine implementation fidelity, such as local adaptations, variations in logistics and resources at the local level (including the capacity of ‘last-mile’ workers and their adherence to the programme requirements), programme participant attrition and changing local contexts. Poor implementation fidelity may lead to poor programme outcomes and impact. Understanding implementation fidelity is therefore critical to differentiating implementation failure from programme design failure.

This section summarises how the included studies assess (or fail to assess) some of the key dimensions of fidelity, such as adherence to original implementation plan, quality of programme delivery and participant responsiveness.

6.1.1 Monitoring programme implementation

Most of the studies collected useful information on programme implementation, with some using qualitative surveys for this purpose.

The India study evaluating the efficacy of electronic fund transfer in streamlining worker payments required provisioning participating blocks[9] with infrastructure, such as computers and data entry operators, as a necessary first step.

Regular programme monitoring at the block level showed that required infrastructure was available only in 50 per cent of the sites. The monitoring also helped put in perspective evaluation findings that showed delayed payments to labour as resulting not from flawed programme design but instead from contextual factors such as lack of programme funds at the state level and worker strikes by *Panchayat Rojgar Sahayaks*, the lowest village-level employment assistants.

The Ethiopia study provided extensive programme-related information and used case studies to provide site-specific information. As part of the case studies detailed information was collected on the nature and duration of all public works carried out under the PSNP, as well as community members' perception on how public works projects influenced agricultural productivity, economic activity or market integration in the community.

Qualitative analysis in the Tanzania study, which looked at the impact of community-managed CCT programmes, found that people who were politically connected had higher chances of being included in the beneficiary lists. The researchers carried out a more expansive survey to obtain a better assessment of qualifying beneficiaries using community scorecards, and this led to midterm course corrections in programme targeting, particularly in the eligibility criteria for qualifying for the transfers.

Poor programme monitoring often affects the way programme outcomes are realised. More importantly, lack of information about programme implementation often makes it difficult to understand reasons behind why better outcomes do not translate into better impact. Attendance at the ECD centres in Uganda was often overstated (noting some caregivers were illiterate) and the quality of attendance records varied from centre to centre. The study also found that, in certain instances, children both younger and older than the targeted 3- to 5-year age group attended the ECD centres.

In Sierra Leone, the study team worked with the implementing agency, Gola Rainforest National Park Program, to refine the programme theory of change to be more responsive to the goals of the programme, thus ensuring the evaluation would assess the true impact of the programme on relevant outcomes. Spillovers presented a challenge, however, since villages were randomised without accounting for spatial proximity, leading to exchange of information regarding differing modalities of transfer and benefits between villages.

[9] Blocks are administrative units in India that together make up a district in a state.

A proposed impact evaluation of a cash transfer programme in Timor-Leste was cancelled due to challenges with rolling out the programme. Linked to a productive works project, the programme was delayed by more than a year after baseline data collection, and there were variations in dosage and amounts of transfers across districts. Finally, the number of transfers was also reduced to a level the researchers thought was inadequate to produce any impact on the food consumption patterns of the beneficiary households.

All studies, whether of transfers or public works, provided some information on the process of beneficiary targeting and associated challenges. However, the studies did not discuss beneficiary perceptions, differences in service providers' ability to deliver the programmes, local adaptations, variations in logistics and resources at local levels, or programme participant attrition.

6.1.2 Communicating programme modalities to stakeholders, especially programme recipients

Programme modalities are often not entirely understood by those delivering the programme. This may especially be true for last-mile workers, especially in cases where programmes see mid-course corrections. Not surprisingly, therefore, what evaluations measure is the programme as delivered, not the programme as designed. And although the two can be very different, absence of monitoring and qualitative data can often lead to evaluations' confirming or debunking the wrong theory of change.

In Uganda, food and cash transfers were both intended to be conditional on children's regular attendance at ECD centres. However, due to challenges with monitoring attendance, the conditionality had to be dropped; meanwhile, the parents were possibly not informed of this change.

The UCT programme in Zimbabwe suffered from wrong messaging by district staff. Around 42 per cent of respondents believed receipt of the cash transfers required spending money on programme-prescribed things, such as education and health. Many beneficiaries noted getting this information from the programme representatives at the payment points. Further, eligibility conditions were not made explicit, and beneficiaries were unclear about why they had been selected to receive the transfers. In Malawi, too, 80 per cent of beneficiary households at midline and 73 per cent at endline believed they must follow certain rules to continue receiving payments.[10]

The assessment of the National Apprenticeship Programme in Ghana documents the programme implementation glitches, including limited awareness by participants about the programme's objectives and modalities. Although the programme was envisioned as a one-year apprenticeship training programme targeted towards youth, the trainers understood it to be a three-year programme, similar to an earlier programme with similar objectives. The study also documented shortfalls in programme implementation. The original intention was to provide each trainee with tools they could use during training,

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[10] In the case of Tanzania (a community-driven effort), health clinic workers in some villages travelled to the location where transfers were being given to encourage people to sign up for the government insurance scheme and, in some communities, teachers and community management committee members travelled to beneficiary households to persuade beneficiaries to comply with the CCT programme conditions.

and subsequently in their businesses; however, only very few trainees received the promised tools. Furthermore, a fiscal crisis in Ghana severely limited the government's ability to pay the trainers. Finally, standardised syllabi and training materials were released only late in the programme.

Programme impact therefore needs to be examined in the context of the limitations of the implementation failure, and is an important input for programme managers and policymakers when making decisions about future roll-out.

6.1.3 Ensuring transfer size and frequency are predictable

Expectations about payments are crucial to allow beneficiaries to plan and make longer-term decisions. Erratic transfers are likely to affect a programme's ability to achieve its objectives, and have an impact on indicators of household well-being.

'Lumpy' spending patterns observed amongst the beneficiaries in the Zimbabwe study might indicate the impact of uncertainty around receipt of transfers. This issue was exacerbated by funding gaps, triggered by the country's economic crisis, which also had stalled the evaluation for a few months.

The Uganda study found that the beneficiaries across both food and cash modalities received only three transfers, on average, as compared to the originally planned six. However, delivery of cash was lumpy and more uneven than food, largely because cash was a new modality for the WFP, leading to initial complications in cash distribution. Food transfers had been ongoing in the area for years. Despite the lumpy nature of the transfers and initial implementation challenges, cash still had relatively more impact than food.

In Sierra Leone, the study noted that the per capita aid amount of US$15 distributed to beneficiaries was too low, compared to cash transfers distributed in other Sub-Saharan African countries, and may have been the reason for the lack of impact at the household level.

In Malawi, too, a key recommendation the study team made in presenting baseline findings from the unconditional transfer programme was the need to increase the transfer size. They recommended setting the transfer size at 20 per cent of consumption share (to make it comparable with transfer levels in other countries in the region), which is the level at which one would expect to see substantive impacts. The team responded to the Ministry of Gender's request to produce simulations and their expected impacts on selected indicators at various transfer amounts.

6.1.4 Influence of context on transfer modalities

Very often, contextual factors play a key role in determining the impact of transfers and how they are valued at the individual and household levels. Findings from the evaluation of ECD centres in Uganda showed no impact of food transfers on cognitive or non-cognitive outcomes, noting that recipient households were already receiving food transfers through other programmes. On the other hand, cash transfers, which households perceived to be more valuable, had an impact on cognition. Additionally, the food transfers included micronutrient-fortified corn soya blend, which households did not value, despite its nutritional content. Households preferred maize flour, which was sold at the same price. The relatively low local value attached to corn soya blend may have contributed to the limited impact of food transfers.

The Sierra Leone study found no evidence of the impact of the transfers on households' livelihoods or on environmental conservation. The authors indicate that this lack of impact could have been due to a strong sense of community and associated use of funds for community projects, which dampened the individual-level impacts of the transfers.

In Uganda, the existing infrastructure at the ECD centres was limited. For example, basic facilities, such as drinking water and latrines, were often not available. Caregivers cited lack of incentives and access to learning materials as other serious challenges in running the centres. WFP wanted to provide incentives to ECD caregivers (both treatment and control) anticipating increased workload due to higher attendance of children at the centres in response to the transfers. However, due to legal restrictions, caregivers, whose work is otherwise unpaid, could not receive payment from external parties. Compensation could only be made by way of gifts from parents or communities. The lack of incentive to take on additional work may have had an impact on the quality of the caregivers' instructions to children.

In Tanzania, health improvements (measured as reduction in sick days) were largest in villages with more baseline health workers per capita, which is consistent with improvements' being sensitive to capacity constraints.

In summary, perceived value of cash transfers (in a context where households may be receiving other types of transfers), local food preferences, inadequate infrastructure for service delivery and lack of motivation amongst programme staff in the absence of incentives can affect programme outcomes.

6.2 Evaluation fidelity

Budgetary constraints or contextual factors can adversely affect study implementation and the ability to comply with the original evaluation plan. Such challenges range from lack of usable secondary data to triangulate study findings to budgetary constraints that restrict the level of data collection. Shifts in implementing agency priorities also influence what outcomes are studied.

Due to budgetary limitations, the ECD study in Uganda conducted individual child assessments for anthropometry and cognitive and non-cognitive tests for only a subset of sample households from the overall study sample. In Sierra Leone, the budgetary constraints of the implementing agency limited the researchers' ability to work with a sample that was powered enough to detect impacts. Meanwhile, the research team did not anticipate sample attrition and found itself financially and logistically constrained in tracking respondents (for example, farmers who temporarily moved away from their households and were unavailable for survey).

In Malawi, evaluation of unconditional social cash transfers targeted towards ultra-poor, labour-constrained households raised challenges during data collection, as beneficiaries assumed they were being interviewed regarding their eligibility to receive transfers. This led households to give inaccurate responses to qualify for transfers. To address the issue, the survey team wore badges to show they were not affiliated with the government. The enumerators avoided using the social cash transfers committee members to conduct research, since they were known to the community. Also in Malawi, an initial delay of six months in releasing the transfers affected the evaluation timeline, making the duration between baseline and midline too short. In response, the study team moved the midline survey to allow enough of a gestation period for the initial impact to set in.

As part of the cross-comparison in Ecuador and Uganda, the researchers also planned to implement studies in Yemen and Timor-Leste. The Yemen study had to be cancelled due to data quality issues and the security situation, which hampered the research team's ability to monitor field activities. The study team had initially planned to collect data on the impact of transfers on marriage outcomes; however, the survey firm employed to undertake data collection collected imprecise, poor-quality data. The team shifted its focus to education outcomes for girls; however, due to poor timing of the survey, baseline data did not reflect actual school attendance and enrolment, or differences between treatment arms and/or between beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries.

Contextual factors compounded the challenges of collecting data for certain subgroups. In Zimbabwe, adolescents were difficult to track down for the youth module interviews. Many adolescents who had participated in the baseline survey were not available for follow-up interviews, and replacements were difficult to identify. A similar issue was encountered in Malawi, where data collection coincided with the school break.

In Ghana, tracking down highly mobile young beneficiaries in the informal sector was a challenge. Despite extensive efforts, including assistance from specialist surveyors with experience tracking hard-to-find respondents – and assistance from representatives of the local assembly, technical and vocational education and training coordinators, and chiefs who participated in applicant recruitment – the researchers could locate only 75 per cent to 92 per cent of respondents in the surveyed districts.

3ie has increasingly been focusing on the role of formative and preparatory phases for impact evaluations to ensure evaluation designs are responsive to the complex realities on the ground.

6.3 Lessons in designing impact evaluations

6.3.1 Agree on tools and measures of implementation fidelity

Implementation failure may be a key in explaining why evaluation of real-world interventions fails to demonstrate impact similar to that achieved for trials or interventions in more controlled contexts. Understanding implementation fidelity is critical for differentiating design failure from implementation failure. Further, understanding implementation processes and associated challenges also provides valuable lessons to policymakers who plan to scale up or replicate a programme.

This portfolio of studies shows that there is no agreed-upon, systematic way to assess implementation fidelity. Research programmes similar to this 3ie Social Protection Evidence Programme should require research teams to adopt a consistent approach to assessing and measuring implementation fidelity, and to explaining how the findings will be used in analysing outcomes. This will help identify generic fidelity measures and tools across different modes of transfers, public works and training, enabling better generalisability of findings across interventions and contexts.

6.3.2 Develop evaluation designs that are responsive to implementation plans

A key challenge observed across all impact evaluations under this evidence programme has been aligning the impact evaluations' implementation with governments' existing priorities for the roll-out of programmes.

In Malawi, the study was designed to align with the plans for national expansion of the programme, so late entrants into the programme would serve as the control group against early entrants. However, the endline survey had to be conducted earlier than planned, as the government wanted to disburse cash transfer payments to households assigned to the control arm (to ensure those affected by failed harvests in the previous season had resources in time for the upcoming rains). From the evaluation perspective, this led to a risk of anticipation effects in the control group. The study team met with UNICEF and other partners regarding measurement of this effect, which was done by nesting a section in the operations module of the survey. Ultimately, the data did not show any significant effects on behaviour as a result of early enrolment.

In Zimbabwe, the districts that would receive cash transfers were predetermined. This inhibited the possibility of conducting a randomised evaluation, particularly from the perspective of the Ministry of Labour, which was implementing a decision to target everyone in a district once the process of scaling up the transfer programme had begun (partly driven by the government's not wanting to invest in targeting households if they were not going to immediately enter the programme). In this case, the team employed a propensity score matching design.

Researchers at the Group for the Analysis of Development were planning to evaluate a non-contributory pension scheme in rural Peru, a flagship programme of the newly elected government. The programme was piloted in 2011 and was expected to be scaled up in 2013, but scale-up occurred earlier for political reasons. A previously proposed randomised evaluation was not feasible, as the new implementation plan did not set aside any control group. The team undertook several consultations with the government to work towards a feasible evaluation design, including a shift from individual-level randomisation to village-level randomisation. Lack of baseline data also restricted the possibility of using any other quasi-experimental method, including regression discontinuity. Further, there was little buy-in for the evaluation from the implementing agency in the new scenario. 3ie eventually decided to discontinue the grant.

6.3.3 Explore links with complementary programmes to understand impact

One key area the impact evaluation in Malawi tried to address was the issue of linkages and referrals to other social service programmes, such as school feeding, a fertiliser input subsidy, and credit and loans. The study showed beneficiary demand for other services. Key implementing partners are using the impact evaluation findings to advance the dialogue on improving linkages and referrals to social services. The findings complemented the current approach of the donors, UNICEF (the key technical assistance provider) and the government, which had previously worked on developing a pilot programme on household linkages and referrals in two districts. The impact evaluation findings and recommendations have reinforced the need to improve access to essential services such as health, education and livelihoods opportunities by building on the existing Social Cash Transfer Programme linkages and referral systems.

In Ecuador, the authors elaborate on the unique characteristics of the study sample. Households in receipt of support from the government-funded UCT programme, *Bono de desarrollo humano*, were excluded from the sample. The programme targets poor households with school-aged and young children. As such, the sample for the Ecuador study excluded many households with young children. Future studies may wish to assess the impact of the combination of transfers with *Bono de desarrollo humano* to achieve the programme objectives and reduce intimate partner violence.

In Zimbabwe, the possible impact of cash transfers was limited due to a lack of linkages to other programmes. Around 60.5 per cent of the programme recipients reported they had been excluded from accessing other programmes (other NGO programmes and government drought relief and farming input support programmes) because they received the Harmonised Social Cash Transfer. There was a clear assumption in the theory of change that eligible households would automatically be enrolled in the government school scholarship, the Basic Education Assistance Module, but the study found a decrease in the proportion of secondary school children of beneficiary households receiving the scholarship. It appears that many programme staff were under the impression that Harmonised Social Cash Transfer households should not receive the scholarship in addition to the transfer. The study notes this to be consistent with evidence from an earlier process evaluation. Linkages to the scholarship continued to be problematic at endline, despite a memorandum of understanding between the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Public Service, Labour and Social Welfare to ensure synergy.

6.3.4 Understand how political economy of aid and local context affects impact
In Zimbabwe, political realities and national elections affected the responses of beneficiaries, some of whom feared harassment based on political affiliation. The government reviewed survey tools, asking the team to remove questions on household risk preference. There was also growing pressure from donors to undertake a midterm review of the programme, and this required an early baseline conducted during the harvest season, when households were flush, rather than, as planned, in the lean season (October–November). This meant the impact of the cash transfer would be harder to observe.

Another situation unique to Zimbabwe concerned the manner in which development aid was administered. A private company administered transfers from a large trust fund, managed by UNICEF.

In Malawi, the aftermath of the 'cashgate'[11] scandal prompted donor partners to embed an external consultancy within the secretariat responsible for managing and implementing the programme at the Ministry of Gender, Children, Disability and Social Welfare. The consultancy group is helping strengthen the management and implementation of the programme and the financial management information systems.

[11] The Capital Hill Cashgate Scandal was a financial scandal involving looting, theft and corruption at Capital Hill, where the government of Malawi is based. Approximately US$32 million (about 1% of Malawi's annual GDP in 2014) was reported to have been embezzled.

6.3.5 Engage to ensure relevance and usefulness of the evidence

The Social Protection Evidence Programme was the first programme 3ie commissioned with a thematic focus. Through our grant-making and quality assurance process, we stress the need for intense engagement to secure buy-in from stakeholders that will ensure the relevance and utility of evaluations, particularly for implementing partners.

In that regard, the questions the studies in Ecuador and Uganda addressed were operationally relevant to WFP and implementing partners. WFP, which was investing in the design of cash transfer programmes, wanted to observe the impacts of cash transfer programmes on dietary quality and intimate partner violence. On the other hand, staff buy-in and engagement was limited for the study in Yemen, which was ultimately cancelled. This related to a number of factors, including staff attrition and changes in management, and because WFP-implemented interventions were funded for a limited duration. Delays in programme roll-out, particularly logistical and operational difficulties due to the context, affected the impact evaluation timeline.

The governments were deeply engaged in the processes in Malawi, Tanzania and Zimbabwe. They ensured compliance with the randomised evaluation and ensured the impact evaluations were implemented according to the original plans. Programme staff and monitoring and evaluation staff from the implementing agencies were particularly embedded in the evaluation process, and they provided relevant contextual information to inform data collection and analysis. In some cases, even the beneficiaries were informed of the emerging findings. For example, the Tanzania research team presented the results to various subpopulations of beneficiaries and on various processes to enable comparison between where the community-managed CCT was most effective and where it was less so. This helped inform programme scale-up and programme changes.

In Malawi, donors, particularly bilateral and multilateral donors, played an important role in embedding a strong evidence-informed agenda in the Social Cash Transfer Programme. Close coordination between the donor partners, managed by UNICEF, meant there was a coordinated effort to demand rigorous evidence on a range of outcomes, some of which were crucial in informing donor priorities and strategic programming in Malawi.

For a brief period, DFID, the primary donor for the Harmonised Social Cash Transfer programme in Zimbabwe, decided to indefinitely suspend funding for the programme, due to results the study team presented in an inclusion and exclusion errors report. Thereafter, the study team worked with DFID, UNICEF and the Ministry of Labour towards ensuring the results were being correctly interpreted. The evaluation team produced briefing notes on the targeting results and ran additional simulations and comparisons to explain the results in comparison to other programmes in the region. This informed DFID’s decision to continue funding the programme.

The evaluation findings of the India study resonated with government officials in Bihar, due to the role of one of the principal investigators in the research team. A senior Indian Administrative Services officer participated in the study as a principal investigator, and this helped in securing buy-in from the Department of Rural Development in Bihar and at the central government. Informed by the study results, India’s Union Cabinet approved a national reform in August 2015 to improve the MGNREGA fund flow for beneficiary payments. The cabinet note cites the findings from the 3ie-supported impact evaluation on the impact of improved fund flow reforms on service delivery and reduced fund leakages. This informed the establishment of the National Electronic Fund Management System to make the MGNREGA wage payments, now adopted by 21 Indian states.

The results from the study in India also informed the broader national-level discourse on improving fund flow in government. The 2015–2016 economic survey, an annual review undertaken by the Ministry of Finance, cites the study recommendations to advocate for technology-enabled transfer of payments in real time to beneficiaries for all government programmes. In 2016, the Ministry of Finance extended the use of the public financial management system, which integrates expenditure-based fund flow systems, into all centrally funded government programmes.

The Ethiopia study found that the PSNP had no impact on either chronic undernutrition or acute undernutrition, possibly because the programme did not lead to consumption of more nutritious foods and did not change the poor health practices. This triggered introspection amongst government officials and donors about the focus of the programme. The government invited the research team to provide input into the second phase of the PSNP, with nutrition as one of the targeted outcomes.

The team's prolonged and persistent engagement with key policymakers was instrumental in securing them a seat at the discussion table. The next phase of the PSNP is expected to include a range of measures that address the concerns the authors raise in the evaluation report, including tighter linkages between the health and nutrition services and between PSNP beneficiaries and behaviour change communication activities designed to encourage families to feed preschool children foods rich in proteins and micronutrients and to improve water and sanitation practices.

7. Conclusion

In 2011, as national governments continued to race to achieve the Millennium Development Goals, there was increasing recognition that social protection systems needed to be integrated into other forms of development programmes to meet key targets. There was also a growing need for rigorous evidence on the impact of several types of social protection programmes on poverty, as several governments began implementing large-scale programmes.

It was during this time that 3ie, in partnership with DFID, launched its evidence programme on social protection to address some of these key knowledge gaps and evaluate the impact on the lives of the people living in poverty. This paper synthesises evidence from evaluation of transfer programmes in Ecuador, Malawi, Sierra Leone, Tanzania, Uganda and Zimbabwe and public works programmes in Ethiopia and India. The studies supported under this evidence programme evaluate large-scale government- or NGO-implemented social protection programmes

The studies provide evidence on the impact of transfers on downstream measures of household welfare, the impact of different transfer modalities on outcomes of interest, and their impact on non-beneficiaries and the wider economy. To the extent possible, they also provide gendered outcomes.

This synthesis highlights that the transfer modality, as well as conditionality, continue to be a debatable area. Different measures of welfare outcomes may respond differently to different modalities. Complying with conditions associated with cash transfers can have cost implications, which may lead to less surplus being available for consumption. Most studies included in the synthesis show impact on asset accumulation and productive activities. However, the impact of transfer programmes on downstream measures of welfare, such as household income, is either mixed or not evaluated, demonstrating key gaps in the evidence base.

The synthesis also highlights the positive impacts transfers have had on production and the local economy in countries such as Ethiopia, Malawi and Zimbabwe. More studies should assess the general equilibrium effects to understand whether these impacts manifest in other local economies and what factors likely contribute to amplifying these potential spillovers.

The synthesis shows major gaps in cost-benefit analysis of the programmes and the need for more detailed gender analysis in future evaluations to assess the gendered outcomes of the programme.

In summarising findings from the evaluations and synthesising learnings around issues of evaluation and programme fidelity, this paper fills some important knowledge gaps in the literature on social protection, especially around impact (or lack of thereof) of large-scale government programmes. The insights in this paper are therefore particularly illuminating for stakeholders in the evaluation ecosystem as they plan and prepare for future research in social protection.

Appendix A: Study descriptions

This appendix summarises the interventions, beneficiaries and intended outcomes that were evaluated. This includes summaries of the studies that were terminated.

A1. Completed studies

The effect of conditional transfers on intimate partner violence: evidence from northern Ecuador (Hidrobo et al. 2016): In April 2011, WFP expanded its assistance to address the food security and nutrition needs of Colombian refugees and poor Ecuadorians. The programme also sought to improve the role of women in household decision-making, particularly related to food and nutrition, and therefore targeted women as recipients of transfers. WFP wanted to learn whether transfers to women increased incidence of intimate partner violence and if this varied depending on the modality of the transfer.

The study was conducted in seven urban centres selected by WFP across two provinces (Carchi and Sucumbíos), and involved three kinds of transfers – cash, food and vouchers, conditional on women attending monthly nutrition training. Randomisation was stratified at the province level and conducted in two stages. In the first stage, neighbourhoods (or *barrios*) in these urban centres were assigned to the treatment or control group. In the second stage, clusters within neighbourhoods were randomised to receive cash, vouchers or food transfers.

The Productive Safety Net Programme in Ethiopia: impacts on children's schooling, labour and nutritional status (Berhane et al. 2017): This study explored a different impact dimension of the PSNP. Focusing on the beneficiary households, the study examined whether increased cash income could translate into more investment into children's education and nutrition. Using household-level panel data collected between 2006 and 2012, the study estimated the impact of the PSNP on children's schooling, incidence and magnitude of child labour, and anthropometric status of preschool children. The researchers used non-experimental matching methods to assess the impact of public works participation on these outcomes and how these vary by age and sex of the child.

General equilibrium impact assessment of the Productive Safety Net Program in Ethiopia (Filipski et al. 2017): A nationwide programme, the PSNP operates in 262 *woredas* identified as chronically food insecure. This study looked at the economy-wide impacts of the safety net programme, which launched in 2005. Eligible households are entitled to transfers, which are either conditional on their participating in the public works, or unconditional, if the households have no able-bodied adult members. Households are eligible if they have repeatedly faced food shortages in the past three years or have been recipients of food assistance. Programme participants are chosen by a committee of village peers who are best positioned to identify food-insecure households.

The study used panel data from four survey rounds to understand how community assets, especially new roads, soil and water conservation structures, and irrigation projects, affect agricultural yields for beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries. Additionally, the transfers could create spillover effects and impact production and incomes not only locally, but also regionally and nationally. The researchers used local economy-wide impact evaluation and computable general equilibrium modelling, in combination with case studies, to estimate economy-wide impacts.

Training for success: targeting and incentives in apprenticeship training in Ghana (Mbiti et al. 2018): The National Apprenticeship Programme in Ghana provides access to apprenticeship training in informal sector trades for better youth labour market participation, earnings and other life outcomes. The national-level programme is implemented in 78 districts by the Council for Technical and Vocational Education and Training, a government agency, and targets youth who are unable to continue education beyond junior high school. The programme recruits youth to one of five trades (carpentry, cosmetology, garments, masonry and welding.).

The study was rolled out in 32 districts using population-weighted random sampling and stratified by region to understand the impact of the programme on youth labour market participation, migration, fertility and asset ownership. The researchers used an over-subscription design to randomly allocate limited slots in each programme district and trade.

Can e-governance reduce capture of public programmes? Experimental evidence from India's employment guarantee scheme in Bihar (Banerjee et al. 2015): MGNREGA in India is the largest social protection programme in the world, with close to 50 million beneficiary households. Poor service delivery, involving corruption and lack of financial resources, is often cited as one of the primary reasons for its poor performance. This study assesses the effectiveness of a redesigned fund flow mechanism that allowed *panchayats* (village bodies) to draw money directly from the state in enhancing the system's efficiency by reducing the number of agents involved in wage payment. The new fund flow was piloted in 69 randomly selected blocks across 12 districts in Bihar state. The remaining 129 blocks in the districts served as control.

The study compared *panchayats* in the intervention and control blocks to look for any changes in the spending and employment rates triggered by the newly instituted fund flow mechanism. In addition to beneficiary surveys and in-depth qualitative interviews with village leaders, the researchers used administrative data to triangulate and validate findings.

Evaluating the effectiveness of an unconditional social cash transfer programme for the ultra poor in Malawi (Abdoulayi et al. 2017): The Malawi Social Cash Transfer Programme, a government-supported UCT programme, aims to ensure food security and improve consumption amongst ultra-poor, labour-constrained households. By May 2016, the programme had reached 170,000 eligible households across 18 districts. Beneficiary selection is managed using a community-based approach, with oversight by local administration.

The study assessed the programme's impact on consumption, food security and diet diversity, productivity and wealth accumulation, health and nutrition of young children, child labour outcomes amongst older children, safe transition into adulthood amongst youth, and health and well-being of caregivers. The impact evaluation used a mixed-method, longitudinal experimental study design that included qualitative interviews, group discussions and simulation models to demonstrate wider community economic impacts.

The impact of earned and windfall cash transfers on livelihoods and conservation in Sierra Leone (Bulte et al. 2016): The Community Development Fund was set up to promote sustainable land management practices amongst communities residing in the vicinity of the Gola Rainforest National Park in Sierra Leone and practicing slash-and-burn agriculture. Three types of transfer modalities were implemented in 91 villages across the six chiefdoms of Bauri, Gaura, Koya, Malema, Nomo and Tunkia. One version provided aid as an unconditional transfer to the household, the second allowed the chief to distribute the aid as he saw fit in the community, and the third operated as an aid-for-work programme that made transfers conditional on households supplying labour.

The study allocated treatments randomly to villages, with stratification at the chiefdom level. The researchers compared outcomes across a range of social, economic and land-use indicators.

Evaluating the effectiveness of a community-managed conditional cash transfer programme in Tanzania (Evans et al. 2016): In 2010, the Tanzania government launched the community-based CCT programme. Transfers to households were made conditional on children aged 0–5 years visiting a health clinic at least six times per year, elderly aged 60 and over visiting at least once per year, and children aged 7–15 years enrolling in primary school and maintaining an 80 per cent attendance record. This programme involved community members in its implementation. The pilot was rolled out in 40 randomly selected villages across three relatively poor districts – Bagamoyo, Chamwino and Kibaha. Another 40 villages served as the control group.

The study assessed the impact on both individual and household-level outcomes, including health-seeking behaviour, education, investments in health, asset ownership, savings, credit and consumption, and trust. The randomised evaluation included three rounds of data collection between 2009 and 2012 and included a qualitative component – a community scorecard exercise, two rounds of focus groups and a series of in-depth interviews – to determine the programme's effects and the channels of transmission.

The effect of transfers and preschool on children's cognitive development in Uganda (Gilligan and Roy 2016): In northern Uganda, UNICEF has supported ECD centres since 2007. The caregivers at these centres are volunteers from the neighbouring communities, and the centres rely on donations from the community. WFP selected three particularly food-insecure districts with UNICEF ECD centres to roll out its transfer programme. Transfers of cash or food were made every six to eight weeks to households enrolled at a UNICEF-sponsored ECD centre, and accounted for approximately 70 per cent of households' value of food consumption reported at baseline. The intervention lasted approximately one year. Although the timing of the transfers did not remain contemporaneous across the two modalities, both intervention groups received a similar number of transfers.

The impact evaluation randomly assigned 98 ECD centres to 1 of 3 treatment arms (food, cash or control) across the 3 districts of Kaabong, Kotido and Napak. The researchers collected longitudinal data on households across the food, cash and control groups to assess the impact of transfers on cognitive and non-cognitive indicators of child development.

Zimbabwe's Harmonised Social Cash Transfer programme (Angeles et al. 2019): This UCT programme was launched in 2012 as a response to chronic food insecurity and deep poverty in rural Zimbabwe, with an explicit focus on addressing the vulnerability of orphans and children. The 'harmonised' feature of the programme was to try and focus a set of child protection interventions on food-poor households. The impact evaluation presents the results from a mixed-method, quasi-experimental evaluation. The evaluation undertook 3 rounds of surveys between 2013 and 2017 in 90 wards across 6 districts, with 60 wards in the treatment sample and 30 wards in the comparison group. The study relied on the phased roll-out of the programme to assess the impacts of the programme on food security, children's human capital (schooling and nutrition) and child protection.

A2. Terminated studies

Pension-65 and more – the economic and social impact of a non-contributory pension scheme in rural Peru and its interactions: Pension-65, a non-contributory pension scheme in rural Peru, is a flagship programme aimed to reduce poverty amongst the elderly (aged 65 and above) by providing a monthly allowance of 125 Peruvian soles (US$46). The research design was a matched-pairs district randomised evaluation whereby districts would be matched on the basis of a composite index that incorporated poverty rates, incidence and depth, as well as a geographic component. However, implementation experienced several adjustments, including rapid scale-up, which rendered the evaluation design unfeasible. 3ie terminated the grant in March 2015, once it was clear alternative methodologies would not be able to rigorously evaluate the programme.

Impact of transfer modality on food consumption patterns in Timor-Leste: The transfers in Timor-Leste were conditional on targeted beneficiaries' participation in public works projects. The transfers were made in cash. For a subset of study participants, cash was accompanied with messages designed to encourage beneficiaries to use the transfers for food. The reminders were delivered in the form of a short speech, through pamphlets or as a spoken reminder when participants received the cash. The study was rolled out in 42 clusters with comparison households drawn from a purposively sampled nearby district. It was expected that the findings, in combination with other evaluations in Ecuador, Uganda and Yemen, would inform impact of different transfer modalities on dietary patterns and nutrition of the participating households. The study was cancelled due to challenges with rolling out the programme.

The impact of cash transfers on marriage markets in Yemen: WFP targeted severely food-insecure households for six months, transferring food or cash unconditionally every two months. Food transfers consisted of 50 kilograms of wheat flour and 5 litres of vegetable oil, roughly the equivalent of US$50 in cash. The study tried to assess whether cash transfers had differential effects on female schooling, pursuits of marital arrangements or other indicators of marital preparation, as opposed to in-kind or no transfers. In the governorates of Hajjah and Ibb, 136 food distributions points were randomly assigned to provide transfers of either food or cash. Ineligible households residing in the catchment area of the food distribution points were matched to serve as a comparison group. The Yemen study had to be cancelled due to data quality issues and the security situation, which hampered the research team's ability to monitor field activities.

Appendix B: Stakeholders interviewed for the paper

Researchers

Ben Schwab, Department of Agricultural Economics, Kansas State University
Clement Imbert, University of Warwick
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Maxton Tsoka, Centre for Social Research, Malawi
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Harry Mwamlima, Ministry of Finance, Economic Planning and Development
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Lisa-Marie Ouedraogo, UNICEF Malawi
Nicolas Tubbs, Cambridge Conservation Initiative
Patrick Cholopi, Malawi District Social Welfare
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Were Omamo, WFP

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This paper is a synthesis of evidence on the impact of transfers and transfer modalities on the welfare of participating households and, in limited cases, on non-beneficiaries and the wider economy. The authors synthesise evidence from evaluations of transfer programmes in Ecuador, Malawi, Sierra Leone, Tanzania, Uganda and Zimbabwe and from public works programmes in Ethiopia and India. In highlighting programme implementation challenges, they elaborate on how certain external and context-specific factors play a critical role in shaping overall programme effectiveness.

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