Chronic Poverty Research Centre

Policy Brief

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Social assistance and the 'dependency syndrome'

Key points

- Social assistance is critical to counter the insecurity and vulnerability experienced by chronically poor people. Evidence shows that as well as preventing people from sliding into poverty, social assistance supports human development, helps people to access opportunities to exit poverty, and interrupts the intergenerational transmission of poverty.
- An obstacle to progress on social assistance involves arguments around the 'dependency syndrome' – concerns about recipients becoming permanently dependent on 'handouts' and losing any inclination to improve their circumstances as a result of it. An associated assumption is that if poor people are given social assistance they will inevitably 'waste' it on negative purchases (e.g. alcohol), as opposed to using it constructively.
- Concerns around the propensity for social assistance to induce 'dependency' in Southern countries are largely based on anecdotal evidence, rather than empirical realities.
- Empirical research shows that social assistance supports savings, human capital development, investment, and enterprise; improves labour-market participation and reduces dependence on adverse contractual employment arrangements; and far from crowding out informal systems of support, it can help improve social networks and support private (informal) forms of protection
- Evidence from the global South overwhelmingly finds that social assistance is affordable, that recipients make rational choices to improve their circumstances, and that social assistance reduces dependency in the long-term. In other words, social assistance is an important response to chronic poverty.
- Children overall tend to be the main beneficiaries of social transfers – not just child benefit.

Introduction

It is now widely recognised that social assistance is necessary to counter the insecurity and vulnerability experienced by chronically poor people. Social assistance plays a crucial role in protecting people from uninsured shocks that could send them sliding into chronic poverty. There is significant evidence showing that as well as preventing people from being propelled into poverty, social assistance supports human development, helps people to access opportunities to exit poverty, and interrupts the intergenerational transmission of poverty.

Many middle- and some low-income countries have begun to invest in social

What is Chronic Poverty?

The distinguishing feature of chronic poverty is extended duration in absolute poverty. Therefore, chronically poor people always, or usually, live below a poverty line, which is normally defined in terms of a money indicator (e.g. consumption, income, etc.), but could also be defined in terms of wider or subjective aspects of deprivation. This is different from the transitorily poor, who move in and out of poverty, or only occasionally fall below the poverty line.

assistance to various degrees as a response to poverty. Programmes range from conditional cash transfers and pensions in Latin America, and employment guarantees in South Asia, to unconditional cash transfers and social grants in east and southern Africa. Tens of millions of households around the world are covered by existing programmes, and more are being introduced.[1] Moreover, compelling new research points to 'a wave of new thinking that is sweeping across the global south' where it is considered beneficial to provide cash transfers to the poor so that they can find effective ways of escaping poverty.[2]

Nevertheless, several factors have hindered progress on this front. First is the issue of affordability. Governments recognise that social assistance involves long-term financial commitments that must be tax-based, and are concerned that they will not be able to sustain the cost. Donors have not been able to offer enough financial commitments. The second, and arguably more challenging barrier to progress is the issue of political reluctance. If states are to dedicate tax revenue to social assistance, there needs to be a groundswell of support across tax-paying and tax-allocating stakeholders.

One critical argument against social assistance that underpins political reluctance concerns the 'dependency syndrome'. Concerns about recipients of social transfers becoming permanently dependent on 'handouts' and losing any inclination to improve their circumstances as a result of it are often raised by donors and governments that are skeptical about making firm, long-term commitments to social assistance programmes.[3] This policy brief draws on existing evidence to analyse these concerns about social assistance and its propensity to induce dependency.

Social assistance and the 'dependency syndrome'

Social assistance programmes are often criticised on the grounds that they create 'moral hazard' – where individuals who are 'insured' change their behaviour in adverse ways in response to incentives offered by insurance. A common argument against social assistance, generally put forward by elite and some middle-class circles, is that it breeds 'dependency' among beneficiaries, undermining people's self-sufficiency and motivation to climb out of poverty through their own efforts. Some neo-liberal economists argue that recipients of predictable, free social transfers are discouraged from working. Opponents of social assistance claim that beneficiaries will lose the incentive to save, accumulate assets, invest in diversification and business development, and to participate in the labour-force. In other words, it is assumed that social assistance breeds 'laziness' and a permanent 'dependency' on 'handouts'. There is also an associated assumption that if poor people are given social assistance – particularly cash transfers – they will inevitably 'waste' it on alcohol or spend it in other unproductive ways, as opposed to using it constructuvely.

These arguments, however, largely come from industrialised countries, where political and academic social welfare discourses entail a strong focus on the 'problem' of 'welfare dependency'. There is also a socially conservative ideology that sees welfare recipients as 'scroungers' likely to transmit their dependency on 'hand-outs' to their children. It is this concern that has shaped recent welfare reforms in countries such as the United States and the United Kingdom, with benefits being increasingly tied to conditions on finding work, policies to limit benefits, and continual efforts to reduce the number of people receiving social assistance.

The issue of responsibility also informs debates around social assistance and dependency. The argument here is that individuals have sole responsibility for taking action to lift themselves out of poverty – 'to pull themselves up by the bootstraps' – and social assistance can ameliorate, rather than encourage, this responsibility. For example, in Bangladesh, the preference given to social assistance in the form of micro-credit programmes over direct cash-transfers can be seen to largely result from such anxieties. There is a further concern that informal social assistance will be crowded out, leaving society dependent on tax-financed formal social assistance.

In some cases, and to varying degrees, these concerns may be valid. However, much of the anxiety around social assistance and 'dependency' in Southern countries is largely based on anecdotal evidence, and makes little reference to empirical realities. As such, it is important to look at the arguments for and against social assistance, particularly with regard to the notion of 'dependency' and to review the experiences that various countries have had in implementing such programmes.

Considering the arguments against social assistance

Social assistance reduces 'dependency' in the global South

The notion of 'dependency' generally carries negative connotations, largely based on generalisations about human behaviour. Many hold that this, coupled with anxieties around recipients of social transfers engaging in negative expenditure, takes a patronising and neo-colonial view of poor people in Southern countries. Research on social assistance, and in particular groundbreaking new evidence on cash-transfer programmes from around the world, highlights the affordability of social transfers and shows that it has the opposite effect – in that it reduces dependency in the long-term.[4]

In the first instance, it is important to recognise that in every society there are vulnerable groups who are unable to participate in productive activities and hence, require long-term support, such as older people, people with disabilities, chronically ill people, and vulnerable young children. There are strong moral and human rights-based arguments underpinning the belief that the state and society have a responsibility to ensure their right to an adequate standard of living.

Evidence from east and southern Africa, for instance, suggests that rather than creating dependency, cash-transfer programmes are a vital response to growing dependency, particularly in contexts where HIV is prevalent. Cash transfers have been shown to support the most vulnerable children and households. Such programmes help ease the burden on older people or other community members who are poor themselves, of caring for AIDS/HIV orphans.[5]

Secondly, generalised dependency resulting from social transfers is unlikely in Southern countries because the amounts provided to beneficiaries are usually too small to depend on for all their needs to be met. In most cases, they contribute only a portion of what people need for basic subsistence. While the payment is an important addition to a very poor household's income, it is just that – an *important addition*. An evaluation of the implementation of India's public guaranteed employment scheme, NREGA (the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme), across India's six poorest states, found that wages received through the programme provided poor rural households with a small additional income to supplement their agricultural earnings. This marginal increase in income enabled people to meet their contingency needs, and was mainly directed at improving food consumption, children's education, and healthcare.[6] Available evidence also suggests that the 'dependency syndrome' is very rare in African social assistance programmes because transfers are rarely guaranteed, regular, or large enough to justify behavioural change (e.g. stopping work), and accessing social assistance often comes at a cost (e.g. heavy manual labour in public works programmes).[7] Moreover, social transfers further tend to be time-limited rather than permanent (e.g. old age pensions, child benefit).

However, the opportunities that reliable social assistance offers in terms of enabling people to get out of poverty traps are significant. For example, evidence from cash transfer schemes in Africa shows that most beneficiary households will invest part of the social transfer in livestock or agricultural supplies at some point in time.[8] Chronically poor people face numerous barriers to accessing work and working capital, and social assistance provides an important means of overcoming such obstacles to exiting poverty. Social transfers that alleviate these constraints are typically put to good use – looking for work, invested in family farms, or generating income – thus enhancing livelihoods and reducing dependency on external support.[9] Many social assistance programmes have broad and ambitious goals that, while appearing to create dependency on the state in the short-term, could reduce dependency in the long-term. Child benefits, school feeding, and cash-transfers for example, provide immediate relief to poor households but have the objective of enhancing children's health, nutrition, and access to education, as well as enabling children to remain in education, with big potential returns to livelihoods and the national economy in the next generation.[10]

Moreover, anxieties about poor people wasting social transfers on negative purchases, such as alcohol or other non-priority expenditure, are largely based on anecdotal evidence, rather than empirical reality. In their review of four cash transfer schemes in Africa, Devereux *et al*. (2005)[11] show that individuals and households make careful strategic decisions about how to use additional income in the best interests of the household.

Chronically poor people are not a homogenous group. And rather than being 'passive' or 'lazy', many chronically poor people work incredibly hard to try and climb out of the poverty-traps in which they are locked into, and do make rational choices. Recent evidence based on the implementation of cash-transfer programmes across Southern

Box 1: 'Just give money to the poor': cash transfers transform lives

Compelling new research based on studies of long-term cash transfer programmes across the global South, from Mexico, Indonesia, and South Africa, to India, Mongolia, and Namibia, argues that the biggest problem for people in poverty is a basic lack of cash – rather than a lack of motivation or knowledge. Many people have so little money that they simply cannot afford to send children to school, to eat better, or to find work. Small amounts of money can thereby make a big difference and transform lives. This research concludes that cash transfer programmes are affordable; recipients use the money well and make rational choices instead of wasting it; cash grants are an efficient way to directly reduce current poverty; and they have the potential to prevent future poverty by facilitating economic growth and promoting human development. It shows that giving 'boots' to people with little money does not make them lazy or reluctant to work; rather, the opposite happens. A small guaranteed income provides a foundation that enables poor people to transform their own lives, and cash-transfers provide a ladder to climb out of the poverty trap.

Source: Hanlon et al. (2010)

countries overwhelmingly finds that people tend to work harder when they are provided with cash transfers because it helps them to see a way out of chronic poverty. People in chronic poverty have more to lose from squandering cash assistance, and so tend to spend it wisely and efficiently.[12]

Responsibility: you cannot 'pull yourself up by the bootstraps' without boots

When it comes to concerns about 'responsibility' – that people are responsible for pulling themselves up by the bootstraps – two points are of note. First, the causes of chronic poverty are often structural, and chronically poor people face overlapping difficulties in various spheres of life. The CPRC has identified five chronic poverty traps as insecurity, limited citizenship, spatial disadvantage, social discrimination, and poor work opportunities.[13] As such, no amount of hard work on the part of the poor person will be sufficient by itself. Breaking the poverty traps in which people find themselves in requires outside intervention *in addition* to individual efforts.

While education, health, assets, and work opportunities are important in the process of escaping poverty, social assistance is crucial to enable poor people to access these opportunities. An ill and under-nourished child who is not able to afford books or a school uniform cannot take advantage of school education without some form of social assistance to help her climb out of the poverty trap. In other words, you cannot 'pull yourself up by the boot-straps' if you do not have 'boots ', and 'giving 'boots' to people with little money does not make them lazy or reluctant to work; rather, just the opposite happens' as it eases intense pressure on households and provides people with a foundation on which to change their lives.[14]

Second, it is an inherently individualistic conceptualisation of responsibility that gives rise to hostility towards social assistance. A different understanding of responsibility may expand this notion to include governments' or societies' responsibility to its citizens to assist them in exiting poverty and ensuring an adequate standard of living. Here, social assistance programmes would be consistent with the responsibility to address poverty.

Box 2: India's school midday meal scheme

Numerous studies carried out on India's school midday meals scheme across various states found that where it was efficiently implemented, class-room hunger was alleviated, and that enrolment, attendance, and performance – particularly among girls – improved significantly. These schemes benefit the poorest children as they tend to come to school hungriest, which inhibits their ability to take advantage of the opportunities afforded by education. Moreover, the implementation of the free school midday meal scheme has had social benefits too. Communities have come together to participate in the process of providing school meals, and children learn about inclusion and equality as those belonging to different castes eat lunch together. Moreover, the scheme further offers the opportunity of employment for scheduled caste/scheduled tribe women as cooks, who may otherwise face exclusion and barriers to accessing employment.

Social assistance supports savings, human capital development, investment and enterprise.

Most social assistance will undoubtedly be used to finance consumption – its primary purpose. Increased consumption is critical to productivity and human capital investment. Hungry breadwinners will find it difficult to hold down a job and malnourished children will have trouble performing in school. For example, in Ethiopia and Rwanda, policy makers acknowledge that people use social assistance delivered as Public Works wages or Direct Support grants primarily for food consumption or to meet other basic needs.[15] In Mexico, families receiving child benefit (an average of $40 per family per month) eat better and spend more on protein, fruit, and vegetables, improving the health of the entire family and cutting days off work due to illness by one-fifth. Moreover, Mexican children who do not go to school hungry perform better in class and are less likely to fail at the end of the year.[16] In South Africa, evidence suggests that social pensions have a direct effect on children, with children living in pensioner households being better nourished and more likely to attend school.[17] Children overall tend to be the main beneficiaries of social transfers – not just child benefit. For example, cash transfers in whatever form – including pensions – have been shown to improve child health, reduce malnutrition, increase school attendance, and reduce child labour. In Brazil, a non-contributory pension not only increases the income of the elderly, but also significantly increases school registration and attendance by children of the household.[18]

Evaluations suggest that some cash transfers are used as working capital – funding agricultural inputs and asset accumulation. Much of this evidence remains anecdotal, but a growing number of studies are producing more systematic information. Almost one-third of the money transferred to beneficiaries of Zambia's Kalomo Pilot Scheme was invested, either in farming (hire of labour or agricultural inputs) or for informal enterprise (working capital for making baskets).[19] At a higher economic level, an analysis of household survey data from rural regions in Brazil found that about half of pension benefits are used to finance economic activities encouraging shifts from subsistence to surplus agriculture.[20]

Social assistance and labour market participation

There is little evidence to suggest that social assistance reduces participation in the labour market or encourages poor people to 'choose leisure'. For example, a study of the labour market impacts of the Child Support Grant and Old Age Pension in South Africa has found that adults living in recipient households were more likely to seek, and find, work as opposed to people in similarly poor households not in receipt of these grants. With these social transfers, the older person can afford to provide child-care and small amounts of money for food and bus-fare for the job seeker.[21] Similarly, a study of PROGRESA in Mexico found that some men and women used their grants to find salaries work, and to shift from informal family enterprises to higher-paid formal work, although this trend was not sustained over time. Nor did recipients choose 'leisure'. Instead, the study showed that there was no evidence to support that leisure time had increased under PROGRESA.[22]

Social assistance may also reduce dependence on adverse contractual arrangements. Cash transfers in Ethiopia have enabled poor households to renegotiate contractual sharecropping and livestock arrangements with richer households.[23] A similar result was attributed to an emergency relief programme in South Wollo, Ethiopia.[24] Other research, also in Ethiopia, found that 'cash transfers enabled recipients to obtain higher crop prices, partly because they were able to sell when prices were more favourable, rather than when they were desperate for cash'.[25] Cash transfers to landless labourers in India have also been found to transform the conditions of otherwise exploitative clientelistic relationships by decreasing the beneficiaries' need for such arrangements, giving them greater bargaining power.[26] So whilst cash transfers may not be sufficient to substitute for employment (and therefore are unlikely to produce dependency), they can provide sufficient financial security to allow recipients to bargain for fairer returns.

Decreased labour-market participation is not always a bad thing. In some cases, transfers serve to reduce households' dependence on child labour. Moreover, it is often the case that labour markets are over-supplied. This results in low wages and insecure employment, perpetuating poverty. Tightening those labour markets so that real wages increase significantly over time will help reduce poverty. Here, social assistance can contribute by taking marginal earners out of the labour market or reduce their participation rates. At the individual level, grants may allow carers to provide more and better care, and to reduce the need to work excessive hours in unhealthy work conditions.

Social assistance helps improve social networks, and public (formal) social assistance can support private (informal) protection

On concerns that formal social assistance crowds out informal protection, 'the empirical evidence for this is scant and inconclusive'.[27] Programme beneficiaries do not necessarily experience a decline in informal remittances, as was found by an evaluation of Mexico's Progressa.[28] What's more,

Box 3: Abusamat Asma Katum's story

Abusamat is in her 40s, lives in a village 40 km from Dhaka, in a relatively prosperous, quite urbanised rural area, and has a 10 year old daughter with learning difficulties, the result of a pregnancy complication. She separated from her husband 9 years ago after he had married again. She returned to her father's house, but her brothers, who were also poor but looking after her father, wanted her to give her child to the father; she got her father's support to keep the child, but her brothers refused to take care of her. Her father died soon afterwards and the family conflict effectively rendered her destitute. She started begging soon after her daughter was born. A Caritas shelter program provided her with a house on her parents' land 9 years ago. Eventually, when she was able to put her daughter down for a time (at three years of age) she was able to work as a domestic worker in others' houses, and she combined this very poorly paid work with better paid post-harvest work when it was available, and begging when all else failed. She occasionally got relief from the local government. She asked for a Vulnerable Group Development card, but was not allocated one. Her brothers did not help her, except on special occasions.

Five years ago, Abusamat started receiving a destitute women's allowance following a year of sponsorship by her local government (Union Parishad) representative. This is worth 220 Taka per month (about US $3), and is paid in two annual installments. She has spent this on repairing her house as well as consumption, including some fish. The main effect is that where she used to have to work every day of the month she can now spend more time caring for her daughter, including trying to get her into a special school (which she has not been able to do – she goes to a local school), and can stay at home of the weather is bad (eg in the monsoon). This is in a situation where real wages have not increased in five years, and domestic work is still very badly paid (a meal and 15-20 Taka for a third or half of a day). Now Abusamat works about 15 days a month instead of 30. Her *obusa* (well-being) is steadily improving, and she is optimistic about the future. She would like to buy a goat, but has not been able to save the 2000 Taka it would take. She has bought a bed and cooking pots, though. She is hopeful of getting her daughter a disability allowance and would like to deposit this and other money in an account for her so she can 'provide for her to settle'. She is optimistic about the future, so long as she is physically well and continues to get help from neighbours in difficult times.

Source: Shepherd, A.,own fieldwork, 2008

many traditional informal 'vertical' (from rich to poor) social assistance practices are rapidly disappearing across Africa and South Asia.[29] Although 'horizontal' support networks (among the poor) remain widespread, their ability to support people is weakest in times of crisis such as droughts.[30] Horizontal support is generally both insufficient for beneficiaries, and burdensome on donating poor households, often increasing the latter's vulnerability. For example, recent research on poverty dynamics from Senegal argues that community support networks are in themselves insufficient as a response to poverty and emphasises that they need to be complemented by central and local government support mechanisms.[31] Vertical and horizontal transfers also often fail to support people who are socially excluded. Finally, in some cases, social assistance programmes have served to strengthen social and kinship networks, with cash transfers actually becoming incorporated into informal safety nets.

Far from crowding out informal safety nets, social assistance programs can permit them to flourish. Intensive work in South Africa[32] has painted a complex picture of the more substantial grants and pensions being used to support consumption but also to lubricate social networks and improve marginal peoples' participation in them, in part by supporting caring roles. This in a context where families are spread out over wide distances, but keep in touch, and provide each other with significant support as they struggle to make ends meet in the informal economy.

Many of the stories from this research demonstrate that public and formal grants become intertwined with the private, transferred informally to and from migrants and between family members. Sometimes grants are fragmented to enable several purposes to be achieved, and sometimes they are concentrated to enable an investment; regardless, they are usually used quite strategically. While they nominally attach to an individual (a child allowance, a disability allowance, a pension) they may be used to benefit others in the network.

Conclusion

Social assistance is critical to counter the insecurity and vulnerability experienced by chronically poor people, and is an important response to chronic poverty. Research overwhelmingly shows that as well as preventing people from sliding into poverty, social assistance supports human development, helps people to access opportunities to exit poverty, and interrupts the intergenerational transmission of poverty. Moreover, social assistance supports savings, human capital development, investment, and enterprise; improves labour-market participation and reduces dependence on adverse contractual arrangements; and far from crowding out informal systems of support social assistance can help improve social networks and support private (informal) forms of protection. Empirical evidence from the global South suggests that social transfers are affordable, that recipients ultimately make rational choices to improve their circumstances, and that social assistance reduces dependency in the long-term.[33]

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The **Chronic Poverty Research Centre** (CPRC) is an international partnership of universities, research institutes and NGOs, with the central aim of creating knowledge that contributes to both the speed and quality of poverty reduction, and a focus on assisting those who are trapped in poverty, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia.

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