



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Social assistance programmes in South Asia: an analysis of socio-economic impacts

Yannick Markhof, Isabela Francison, Nicolò Bird and Pedro Arruda



Research Report No. 61

Executive Summary—Social assistance programmes in South Asia: an analysis of socio-economic impacts

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International Policy Centre for Inclusive Growth

United Nations Development Programme and the United Nations Children's Fund

This publication is one of the outputs of the UN to UN agreement between the International Policy Centre for Inclusive Growth (IPC-IG)—and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF).

The International Policy Centre for Inclusive Growth (IPC-IG) is a partnership between the United Nations and the Government of Brazil to promote South–South learning on social policies. The IPC-IG is linked to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in Brazil, the Ministry of Economy (ME) and the Institute for Applied Economic Research (Ipea) of the Government of Brazil.

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Suggested citation: Markhof, Yannick, Isabela Franciscon, Nicolò Bird, and Pedro Arruda. 2021. "Social Assistance Programmes in South Asia: An Analysis of Socio-Economic Impacts". IPC-IG Research Report No. 62. Brasília: International Policy Centre for Inclusive Growth.

ISSN: 2526-0499

**SOCIAL ASSISTANCE PROGRAMMES
IN SOUTH ASIA: AN ANALYSIS OF
SOCIO-ECONOMIC IMPACTS**

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This is the final report in a series of knowledge products about social protection in the South Asia region produced through a partnership between the International Policy Centre for Inclusive Growth (IPC-IG) and the UNICEF Regional Office South Asia (ROSA).

We would like to express our thanks to Abdul Alim, Gaspar Fajith and Jessica Owens (UNICEF ROSA) for their support throughout the elaboration of this report. We are especially grateful to Jessica and Ivan Coursac for their valuable feedback on a near-final version of this report. UNICEF ROSA and Country Office colleagues provided much-appreciated feedback concerning programme information: we thank Maha Muna, Luis Gorjon Fernandez, Stanley Gwavuya, Mekonnen Woldegorgis, Urvashi Kaushik, Misaki Akasaka Ueda, Soumen Bagchi, Usha Mishra, Louise Moreira Daniels, Shilohni Sumanthiran, Juliette Haenni, Jigme Dorji, Munir Safieldin and Ibrahim Naseem for their inputs. Lastly, we would like to thank Gabriela Iturri for excellent research assistance.

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Background and introduction

Over the last two decades, the number of social assistance (non-contributory social protection) programmes has increased across South Asia, as changes in government policies and unprecedented economic growth have led to greater domestic attention to poverty alleviation and social exclusion. Governments across South Asia have reinforced their commitments to deliver effective social protection policies, contributing in the process to Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) Target 1.3, calling for governments to implement “nationally appropriate social protection systems and measures for all”; and Target 10.4, to “adopt policies, especially fiscal, wage and social protection policies, and progressively achieve greater equality.” These targets conform to life-cycle and rights-based approaches to social protection, which have been promoted by the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF).

Following the introduction of new social assistance initiatives and the greater availability of quality individual and household survey data, social scientists have in the past decade increasingly focused on empirical analysis of programme impacts, using experimental or quasi-experimental techniques to estimate the true impact of public interventions. However, despite this growing empirical literature on social assistance now available across the region, there are very few meta-studies that analyse and summarise these findings beyond specific programmes or types of intervention. To fill this knowledge gap, this report provides a critical review of the literature to summarise the impacts of different types of social assistance on socio-economic outcomes across South Asian countries.

Methodology of the evaluation

To summarise findings across studies, this report conducts a meta-review of rigorous impact evaluations of social assistance programmes on socio-economic outcomes. Experimental and quasi-experimental methods differ from descriptive studies by aiming to infer causal effects—i.e. establishing whether a programme does indeed have a causal effect on a given measure of human development and/or economic welfare.

The programmes considered for this report are based on those mapped in the 2020 report *Overview of non-contributory social protection programmes in South Asia from a child and equity perspective* (Arruda et al. 2020). They are considered ‘flagship’ programmes, in that they tend to be larger initiatives, with a national or quasi-national focus, and are (mainly) government-led. Of the 51 social assistance programmes in South Asia identified in Arruda et al., the meta-analysis includes evaluations for 17 programmes (33 per cent), grouping results from 63 differed studies. Table A shows the programmes covered in the study. They are defined as **social assistance** (non-contributory social protection), based on a slightly expanded definition which includes cash-for-work or public works programmes (PWP). Given the considerable differences across South Asian countries, larger countries with better data availability are disproportionately represented in the evaluation.

To summarise the impacts across studies, a disaggregated table of results was first compiled, containing 126 different outcomes (**proxies**) mapped across the 63 studies assessed. At the first stage of aggregation, we grouped the 126 proxies into 31 corresponding **indicators** measuring similar outcomes. These 31 indicators were subsequently grouped under 5 different **categories**, which correspond to the chapter headings for the results. The five categories (and sub-categories for poverty and finances, and health and nutrition) are presented in Figure A, along with corresponding indicators.

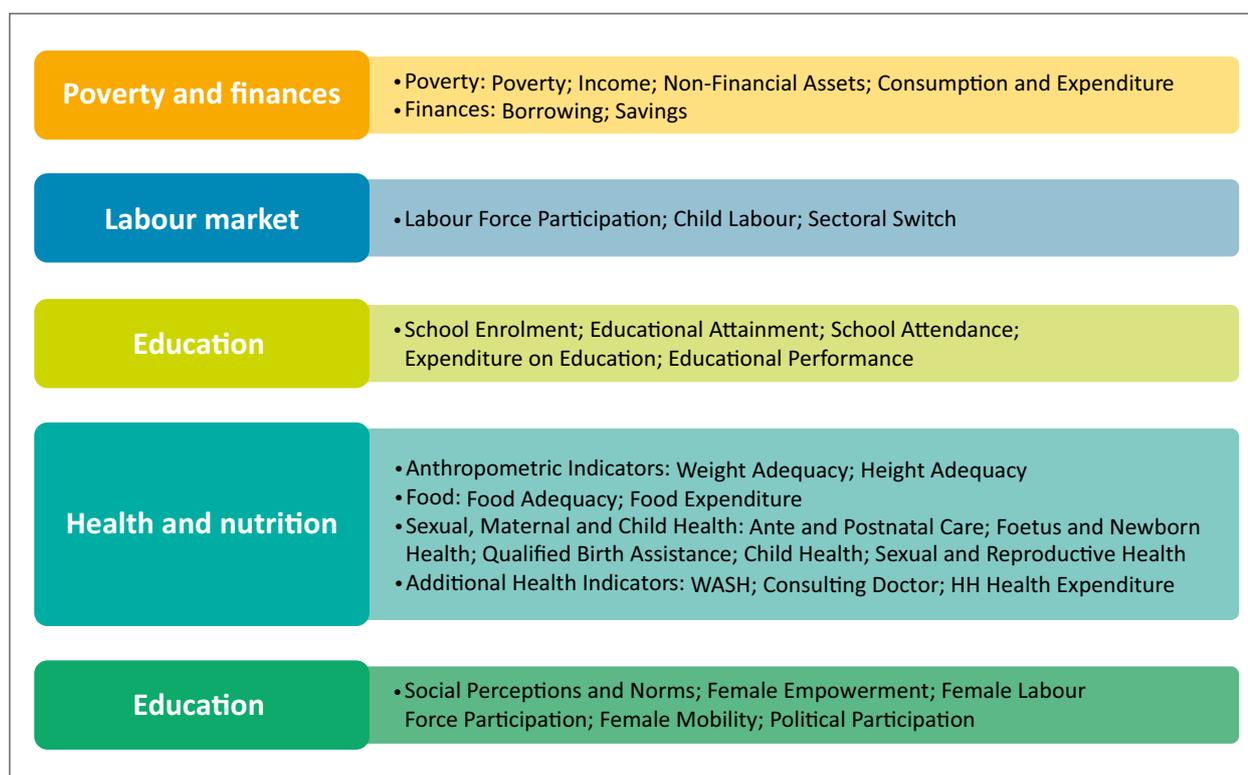
In practice, there are many channels through which social assistance can impact socio-economic outcomes. Figure B presents a theory of change framework illustrating potential channels leading to changes in outcomes. **Growth-mediating processes** of social assistance (e.g. reduced credit and liquidity constraints) present the main drivers of change. **Impact mediators** (e.g. attitudes to risk) examine how psychological and behavioural decisions

might affect outcomes. **External moderators** (e.g. price changes; quality and quantity of services and infrastructure; social norms) are important—generally local—factors that influence programme impacts. The figure also distinguishes between outcomes that apply more generally (at household level) and outcomes that are specific to individuals and their position along the life cycle.

Table A. Social assistance programmes covered in the study

Afghanistan	1 programme
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Citizens' Charter Afghanistan Project/National Solidarity Programme (NSP, predecessor) 	
Bangladesh	4 programmes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Employment Generation Programme for the Poorest (EGPP) • Primary Education Stipend Programme (PESP) • Maternity Allowance for Poor Lactating Mothers (MAPLM) • Secondary Education Stipend Programme (SESP) 	
Bhutan	No programmes
India	5 programmes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Janani Suraksha Yojana (JSY) • Mid-Day Meal (MDM) Scheme • Target Public Distribution System (TPDS) • Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) • National Social Assistance Programme, Old Age Allowance component (NSAP's OAP) 	
Maldives	No programmes
Nepal	4 programmes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aama Programme/Safe Motherhood Programme • Old Age Allowance or Senior Citizen's Allowance • Child Grant (CG) • Scholarships 	
Pakistan	1 programme
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Benazir Income Support Programme (BISP) or National Cash Transfer Programme 	
Sri Lanka	2 programmes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Divineguma Programme or Samurdhi • National Supplementary Food Programme or Thriposha 	

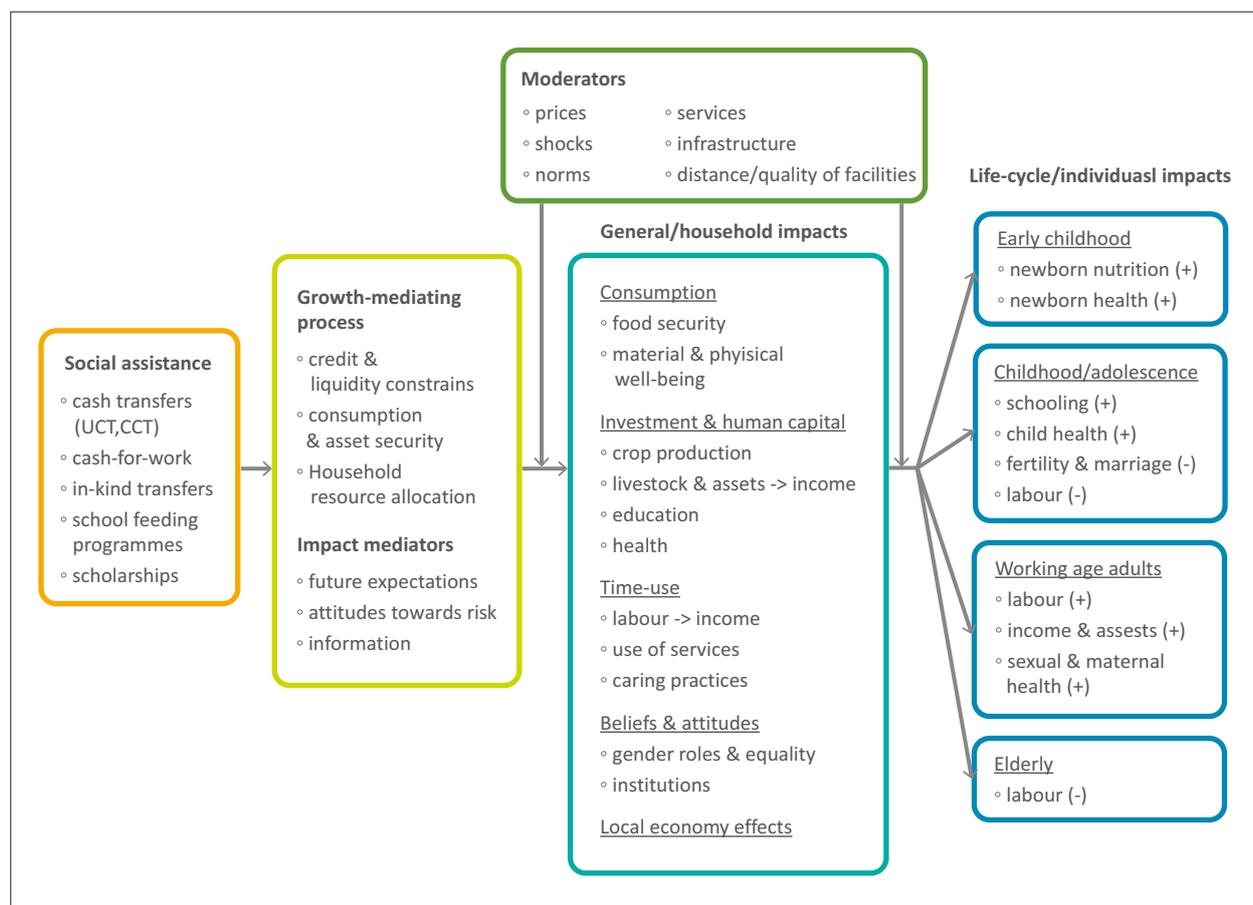
Figure A. Categories and indicators



After selecting the indicators, a process was developed to classify estimates of programme impacts. These are grouped under five different categories:

- **Desirable:** the effect is statistically significant and reflects a desirable outcome (e.g. increase educational attainment or decrease in child labour);
- **Desirable for subgroup:** desirable outcome only for a subgroup of beneficiaries or during certain time periods (e.g. during the rainy season);
- **Insignificant:** no detectable, statistically significant effect different from zero;
- **Undesirable:** the effect is statistically significant and indicates an undesirable outcome; and
- **Undesirable effects for subgroup:** undesirable outcome for a subgroup of beneficiaries.

Figure B. Theory of change framework for socio-economic impacts of social assistance



Source: Authors' elaboration based on Barrientos (2012,12) and Davis and Handa (2016, 57).

With the criteria for outcomes and effects defined and categorised, estimators for programme impacts were consistently classified across studies. A modal approach was adopted, with—as a general rule of thumb—the majority finding determining aggregate results (e.g. if two estimators find statistically significant desirable outcomes, and another finds a statistically insignificant one, then the indicator is marked as desirable). Impacts were first assessed

at the study level for both proxies (lowest level of aggregation) and indicators (intermediary level). Indicators at the study level were then grouped across studies evaluating identical social assistance programmes to determine programme-level impacts. The methodology section elaborates in further detail the modal approach and its nuances.

The report presents indicator results at the programme level, with results grouped by category and sub-category. At the end of the report, Annex E presents aggregated results at the programme level, Annex F presents aggregated results at the study level, and Annex G provides an overview of the disaggregated results (study level).

Summary of findings

Poverty and finances

The **poverty sub-category** examines programme-level impacts for indicators of (relative) poverty status; income; non-financial assets; and consumption and expenditure. Impacts are generally positive, with **7 desirable impacts**, **3 desirable impacts for subgroups**, and **10 insignificant impacts** (see Figure 6). India's Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Act (MGNREGA) shows a clear impact on income, although lasting impacts on non-financial assets are more limited. Meanwhile, Pakistan's Benazir Income Support Programme (BISP) is one of the few programmes to find clear positive impacts on poverty and non-financial assets. In general, the scope and timing of the analysis is strongly related to the result on impacts (e.g. studies assessing ongoing programmes are much more likely to find significant impacts than post-programme evaluations assessing lasting effects). The value of the transfer and regularity in delivery are also key determinants to finding desirable results. Lastly, the results show a certain 'order of urgency', whereby households tend to allocate new income based on their needs, from urgent disparities, to lasting deficiencies, to more productive investments.

The **finances sub-category** includes two indicators: borrowing and saving. Only four programmes recorded results for these indicators (see Figure 7). Out of seven programme-level indicators, **three show desirable impacts**, and **four show insignificant results**. In the case of Bangladesh's Employment Generation Programme for the Poorest (EGPP) and India's MGNREGA (both PWPs), results show a decrease in recipients' borrowing, suggesting that the more reliable income reduced the need to borrow money. Limited impacts on savings might reflect the 'order of urgency' of beneficiaries (savings might be beyond the scope of immediate and lasting needs). A lack of focus on complementary banking services and education might mitigate stronger impacts on finances.

Labour market

This category includes three indicators: labour force participation (LFP); employment type; and child labour. Out of the 12 different programme-level indicators assessed, **3 were desirable**, **5 were desirable for subgroups**, **3 were insignificant**, and one was undesirable for a subgroup (some studies on MGNREGA finding an increase in labour among teenagers). Regarding the type of employment, the results suggest that certain programme types—such as unconditional cash transfers (UCTs) (e.g. the BISP), conditional cash transfers (CCTs) (e.g. the Female Secondary School Stipend Programme—FSSSP—in Bangladesh) and PWPs—may positively affect the type of employment chosen by beneficiaries. Targeting strategies (e.g. female household heads), conditionalities and human capital components (linking CCTs to educational outcomes) can prove determinant in changing labour market outcomes. Results from India's Old Age Pension show that UCTs for elderly people can significantly reduce their labour force participation (a positive outcome). Lastly, programmes that increase general employment can lead to negative spillover effects on child labour, either through the incentive of leaving school early to pursue employment (generally boys and young males) or by taking on household chores while adults work outside the household (generally girls and young women). Impacts are nonetheless heterogeneous across regions, suggesting that both implementation quality and provision of complementary services are key to limiting negative outcomes.

Education

Indicators under the education category include school enrolment; educational attainment; school attainment; educational performance; and expenditure on education. Programme-level indicators vary to a certain extent: **five desirable; four desirable for subgroups; eight insignificant; two undesirable for subgroups; and one undesirable**. There is a strong correlation between programme objectives and educational outcomes, with some programmes including strong educational components (e.g. FSSSP in Bangladesh; Mid-Day Meal (MDM) in India; and *Waseela-e-Taleem (WeT)* in Pakistan), and other programmes with no strong focus on education. Undesirable impacts of PWPs (including the MGNREGA and the Primary Education Stipend Programme (PESP) in Bangladesh) provide a warning that new low-skilled employment opportunities might entice children and teenagers to leave education prematurely, hence the need to provide strong safeguards to pursue education. Positive results from Afghanistan's National Solidarity Programme (NSP) show that community-led initiatives can provide information and help educate parents about human capital choices for their children, ultimately leading to better outcomes (in this case, mostly for girls).

Health and nutrition

Because this category contains the broadest set of outcomes, the report divides health and nutrition into four different sub-categories (each with its own set of indicators): **food; anthropometric indicators; sexual, maternal and child health; and additional health measures**.

The **food** sub-category includes two indicators: food adequacy, which includes measures of food quality (diversity), quantity and security; and expenditure on food. Outcomes for this sub-category are positive but not unanimous: with **five desirable; three desirable for subgroups; eight insignificant; and one undesirable for a subgroup** for programme-level indicators. A study of the MDM in India found mixed impacts on food adequacy, with positive impacts on children but negative results for other household members. While more research is needed to corroborate this finding, programmes that require additional expenditures from households—in this case, the cost of sending children to school—should ensure that the well-being of children does not come at the expense of other household members. In Pakistan, evidence from the **BISP** points to the regularity of the transfer playing a crucial role in determining whether cash transfers allow households to increase food expenditure.

The Anthropometric sub-category includes two indicators: weight adequacy; and height adequacy. Results are largely encouraging, as programme-level indicators find **two desirable; nine desirable for subgroups; and five insignificant impacts**. Positive results for child subgroups are not always consistent: results vary by age and gender. Furthermore, the child development literature suggests that counteracting stunting and wasting might be most effective at an early age, as opposed to after years of accumulated malnourishment.

Sexual, maternal and child health is a large sub-component with five indicators: ante- and postnatal care (ANC and PNC); qualified birth assistance; foetus and newborn mortality; child health; and sexual and reproductive health. Programme-level indicator results are varied, with **10 desirable; one desirable for a subgroup; 12 insignificant; and 3 undesirable for subgroups (all for the MGNREGA)** outcomes. Mixed outcomes reflect to some extent the different schemes assessed, which include programmes with strong health and child-care dimensions (e.g. *Tripasha* in Sri Lanka; Maternity Allowance for Poor Lactating Mothers (MAPLM) in Bangladesh; the *Aama* Programme (AP) in Nepal; and *Janani Suraksha Yojana* (JSY) in India), and programmes with no clear focus on health (e.g. Nepal's Old Age Allowance (OAA) and India's MGNREGA). Nevertheless, mixed findings for ANC and PNC, qualified birth assistance and sexual and reproductive health for programmes that focus especially on these areas shows the importance of addressing supply-side obstacles, (better) outreach to potential patients, and assessing conditionalities and incentives for treatment. Undesirable impacts of the MGNREGA highlight the necessity to relax working conditions for pregnant women and new mothers, and instead link transfers to sexual and child health goals.

Additional health measures include three indicators: water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH); consulting a doctor when sick; and expenditure on health. There are fewer studies assessing these outcomes, although they are generally positive, with **five desirable; one desirable for a subgroup; five insignificant; and one undesirable** outcomes. While WASH and expenditure outcomes generally show positive results, Afghanistan's NSP programme is the sole initiative finding a positive impact on doctor consultations, perhaps influenced by supply-side interventions accompanying the programme. Health expenditure results for the MGNREGA are inconclusive, with one study finding small positive impacts on households with children, and another study finding a negative impact.

Gender

This category focuses on outcomes concerned with gender equality and the role of women in society. Indicators include: female labour force participation (FLFP); freedom of movement; political participation; social perceptions and norms (i.e. changes in attitudes to women); and female empowerment (views on the agency of women). Results across indicators are overall very positive, with programme-level effects showing **seven desirable; four desirable for subgroups; and five insignificant impacts**. Results for female empowerment, political participation, and social perceptions and norms were particularly encouraging; however, improvements in these categories did not always lead to positive impacts on FLFP (as found for the BISP and the FSSSP). Mixed results for FLFP might be explained by the need to actively engage women at different stages of implementation—for example, through local governance, as done in Afghanistan's NSP, or through more work opportunities, as exemplified by the MGNREGA. The reason why no significant effects are observed for the BISP and the FSSSP is most likely because these effects measure secondary (indirect) impacts of the original interventions, which are not primarily focused on FLFP. However, the BISP was successful in raising female participation in voting, and in encouraging women to move freely in public spaces.

Implications for policy

While the review process was very careful to select only rigorous impact evaluations of social assistance programmes in South Asia, a second aim was to gather evidence from as many programmes (and countries) as possible. Therefore, the meta-review includes studies that vary in terms of scope; sample size; methodology; outcomes measured; quality of data; and degree (and quality) of programme implementation. Thus, inevitably, certain limitations and caveats arise when grouping and summarising results across studies. These and other issues are further elaborated in the methodology section and throughout the report. The main takeaways from the study and general policy recommendations are summarised below:

Impact evaluations and monitoring and evaluation

- Except for very few programmes that have been extensively researched (e.g. MGNREGA) and studies with multiple follow-up rounds (BISP and NSP), **the impact evaluation literature on social assistance in South Asia is fragmented**, with many programmes potentially benefiting from new and updated evaluations. Evaluations with detailed follow-ups would be a valuable resource, although these studies can be expensive and time-consuming. Beyond impact evaluation studies, **better monitoring and evaluation of social assistance programmes**, including both quantitative and qualitative information, can make data collection **significantly easier to undertake**, and can provide **valuable insight into issues of effectiveness**.

Cash transfer programmes

- A consistent finding from the literature, including studies assessing the BISP in Pakistan and the Child Grant in Nepal, is that both regular delivery of transfers and consistent cash amounts are strongly correlated with

successful programme impacts—especially with regard to food and other recurring expenditures.

Ensuring that transfers are regular and predictable and, thus, that beneficiaries have clear expectations about transfer receipts allows better time and resource allocation for households, which allows for better time

- Large-scale **social assistance interventions can greatly alter the demand for complementary social services**, especially when interventions include either hard or soft conditionalities. To ensure that new, programme-induced demands are met, **a corresponding investment in supply-side interventions (e.g. physical materials and buildings, and quality public health and education services) is often needed**. Incentives for public servants to deliver support are often overlooked, yet crucial for programmes to prove effective, especially for education and health outcomes.
- **Conditional and unconditional cash transfer programmes vary significantly by objective and target groups**. Impacts on individual household members can be determined by **who receives the transfer and household composition**, leading to changes in intra-household allocations and employment. For instance, old-age pensions can increase LFP for working-age adults in the household, as elderly household members take care of domestic chores instead.

School feeding programmes (SFPs)

- **When successfully implemented, SFPs show strong positive impacts on food adequacy for child recipients**. They also have the potential to improve educational performance, particularly for children exposed to the programme for a longer period, suggesting a cumulative effect.
- However, these programmes might come at a higher cost for poorer and more vulnerable households having to pay to send children to school (i.e. for materials, transportation, tuition etc.), as in the case of the MDM. Furthermore, SFPs are unlikely to provide enough of a financial incentive to keep adolescents and older children from poorer backgrounds in school. Social assistance initiatives could aim to promote education outcomes for older children from more disadvantaged backgrounds, such as through **free public education and/or targeted transfers to poor households with children (e.g. child grants)**.

Scholarships

- **Scholarships and their values should be designed to disincentivise child labour**. Schemes that target children more likely to drop out can help avoid losses to human capital, while communication strategies and information on human capital formation can also contribute.
- **Scholarship values should outweigh the income available from child labour**. Schemes that target children more likely to drop out can help avoid losses to human capital, while **communication strategies and information on human capital formation** can also contribute.
- Scholarships should be accompanied by **compatible labour market policies** to ensure that there will be enough positions for higher-qualified graduates, accompanied by higher salaries.
- Beyond immediate effects, **scholarships can increase human capital for women**, leading to **greater empowerment and better living conditions for children**. This result is found most clearly for the FSSSP in Bangladesh.

Public works programmes (PWP)

- PWPs that provide equal pay and complementary services for women and mothers can **significantly reduce gender pay gaps**, as found in the case of the MGNREGA. Evidence from India suggests these schemes are **largely pro-poor**.
- Large-scale PWPs can have **significant impacts on labour market dynamics at the local (meso) level**. Results from the MGNREGA indicate that private agricultural wages increased in programme districts, **providing support not only to the direct beneficiaries but also to the wider community**.
- PWPs can act as **safety nets smoothing out seasonal and shock-related income fluctuations**. This **insurance effect** is an important characteristic of PWPs, especially in rural areas. By smoothing consumption over time and improving risk management, PWPs may also provide **options** for certain beneficiaries to **pursue riskier, but higher-yielding livelihood strategies**.
- PWPs potentially contribute to **negative spillover effects on child-related outcomes**, especially among older children and adolescents. Evidence from India suggests that these effects are likely determined by the quality of programme implementation. **Policymakers should carefully assess these potential impacts when designing PWPs**.

Gender and children

- Social assistance programmes should **consider gender- and child-sensitive programme designs to increase participation and limit negative external impacts on children**, bearing in mind that women tend to be primary caregivers. Relevant programmes from South Asia include the AP, JSY, MAPLM and *Thripasha*. Policymakers should consider focusing **on relaxing conditionalities**, and **offering Cash Plus interventions and/or complementary social services, such as childcare**.
- For more gender equality, programme designs should balance the immediate needs of children and short-term efficiency with the long-term need to advance gender equality, **and not reinforce gender disparities** (e.g. gendered division of labour). In addition to programmes that promote human capital and empowerment for women, more gender-inclusive **communication and outreach strategies** to promote more male involvement in child-sensitive social assistance and schemes should be considered.
- Social assistance programmes that are not specifically focused on women or children can, nevertheless, **significantly promote inclusion and increase efficiencies by carefully considering child- and gender-sensitivity**. Results from the MGNREGA, for instance, show that **promotive social protection**—when well designed—can have a concrete impact on reducing the gender wage gap, with complementary care services limiting negative externalities to children. Meanwhile, **design features** such as delivering transfers to female household heads (BISP) or providing a framework for the political participation of women (NSP) can help balance household resource allocations and gradually shape social norms.

Expenditure over time

- **Cash**—as opposed to in-kind—transfers provide **greater flexibility** for households to **allocate money to pressing or specific needs**.

- Patterns concerning the use of money and the poverty status of beneficiaries can be framed within an **order of urgency framework**, moving from (basic) food needs toward investments in assets.
- Given consumption priorities among beneficiaries with credit constraints, **asset ownership is more likely to be observed as time passes**. Investments in productive assets are more likely to lead to **continued income effects** after the programme ends.

Variations in governance and implementation

- Studies that examine large-scale programmes across regions and different implementation bodies show that there can be significant disparities in how programmes are managed and executed. In the present study, this applies most clearly to evidence from India (e.g. MGNREGA and JSY), where states are responsible for implementing national schemes, with occasionally important variations in effectiveness. **Safeguarding harmonisation of programme delivery across geographic areas and implementing authorities** can help provide best practices and lessons learned from top performers, and **adapt design and implementation features at the local level**.



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