
EVALUATING FOOD SECURITY GAINS OF THE SOCIAL CASH TRANSFER PROGRAMME: EVIDENCE FROM MALASA VILLAGE, NKHOTAKOTA, MALAWI

***¹Noel Kamfose, ²Dr. T. Velmurugan,**

¹Msw St. Eugene University-Zambia.

²Supervisor University-Zambia.

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***Corresponding Author: Noel Kamfose**

Msw St. Eugene University-Zambia.

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ABSTRACT

This article evaluates the food security gains derived from Malawi's Social Cash Transfer Programme (SCTP) with a focus on Malasa Village in Nkhotakota District. Using evidence drawn from primary data collected through household surveys, key informant interviews, and focus group discussions, the study assesses how cash transfers have influenced household food consumption patterns, nutrition, and overall well-being. The findings indicate notable improvements in the number of daily meals, dietary diversity, and the duration households maintain adequate food supplies. In addition, the SCTP has enhanced beneficiaries' resilience against economic shocks and contributed to sustainable livelihoods. These results provide empirical insights for policymakers, development partners, and practitioners working on social protection and food security interventions in Malawi and similar contexts.

INTRODUCTION

Social cash transfers have emerged as a key pillar of social protection across Africa. In Malawi, the Social Cash Transfer Programme (SCTP) targets ultra-poor and labour-constrained households to reduce poverty, improve nutrition, and enhance food security. Despite its expansion to all districts in Malawi, evidence on its effectiveness in specific rural contexts remains limited. This article draws on findings from Malasa Village in Nkhotakota District to explore the programmes contribution to food security. Building on previous evaluations, the study assesses household-level changes in food access, consumption patterns, and nutrition among SCTP beneficiaries.

OBJECTIVES

The study aimed to assess the impact of the Social Cash Transfer Programme on food security and nutrition among beneficiaries in Malasa Village, Nkhotakota District. Specific objectives included:

1. To determine the number of meals consumed daily by beneficiaries of the Social Cash Transfer Programme.
2. To examine the relationship between the Social Cash Transfer Programme and the duration for which households maintain adequate food supplies.
3. To evaluate the impact of the Social Cash Transfer Programme on the nutritional status and physical well-being of beneficiaries.

Literature review

Social protection in Malawi is guided by the National Social Support Policy, which lays out four strategic objectives. These are the provision of welfare support to those unable to develop viable livelihoods, protection of assets and improving the resilience of poor and vulnerable households, increasing the productive capacity and the asset base of poor and vulnerable households, and establishing coherent synergies with economic, social and disaster risk reduction policies.

In 2011, the Government of Malawi, together with donors, development partners and civil society organizations, developed the Malawi National Social Support Programme to operationalize the NSSP's vision of enhanced quality of life for those suffering from poverty and hunger, and improved resilience of those vulnerable to shocks. The Malawi National Social Support Programme was implemented over the period of 2012-2016 and included five prioritized programmes. These are the Social Cash Transfer Programme, an unconditional cash transfer targeted to ultra-poor and labour-constrained households, public works programmes that provide regular payments to individuals in exchange for work on community-level projects, School meals programmes, Village savings and loans; and Microfinance interventions, which provide financial services to rural Malawians.

The most significant development in social protection for older persons in Malawi in recent years has been the introduction and expansion of the Social Cash Transfer Programme. The programme was initially piloted in Mchinji District in 2006 with support from the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria. It was initiated in response to the HIV/AIDS epidemic and the resultant increase in adult mortality, Orphanhood and "skipped generation"

households, where grandparents or relatives would look after orphans. The Government of Malawi and the Global Fund piloted the Social Cash Transfer Programme to explore whether a cash transfer could be an effective instrument to protect orphans and vulnerable children and enable older Malawians to care for them.

The SCTP has expanded significantly and in 2016, the programme reached all 28 districts of Malawi and approximately 330,000 households. This is approximately 12 percent of Malawian households. In 2018, the monthly transfer level varied between MK 2,600 for a one-person household and MK 5,600 for a household with five or more members. In addition, bonus of MK 800 per month for each child enrolled in primary school and MK 1,500 for each child in secondary school is provided.

Older people make up a significant proportion of Social cash transfer program recipients. Given the programme has specific eligibility criteria related to old age, such as disability, chronic illness and labour capacity, it is unsurprising that a considerable number of older people are recipients.

Social cash transfer plays a critical role in enhancing food security during crises, such as economic downturns, health emergencies, and natural disasters. Here's an overview of their impact on food security during such challenging times: They provide immediate access to financial resources like during crises, households often experience a sudden loss of income, which severely limits their ability to purchase food. Social cash transfer programs provide immediate financial support that enables families to secure basic food necessities. Research has shown that direct cash assistance allows beneficiaries to stabilize their food consumption levels and avoid severe food insecurity.

Social cash transfer programs help individuals and families smooth their consumption patterns in the face of fluctuating income levels during crises. With regular cash transfers, households can maintain their food intake, avoiding drastic reductions in their diet that can lead to malnutrition and negative health outcomes. For example, studies have demonstrated that social cash transfer programs can help mitigate the impact of seasonal food shortages and economic shocks.

One of the most significant impacts of social cash transfer programs is their ability to alleviate poverty. By providing direct financial assistance, these programs have been shown

to increase household income, enable families to afford necessities, and reduce poverty rates. Social cash transfer does this by Increasing household income, a systematic review published in the Journal of Economic Perspectives (2022) highlighted that Social cash transfers, particularly unconditional cash transfers, significantly increase household consumption. As families receive regular cash payments, they can allocate resources toward food, education, and healthcare, thereby improving their overall quality of life.

Social cash transfer programs are shock absorption and economic resilience mechanism. According to Bryman (2016), Social cash transfer programs offer a buffer against economic shocks, such as loss of employment or price increases in essential goods. According to a 2023 report by the World Bank, cash transfers were vital during the COVID-19 pandemic, maintaining consumption levels for vulnerable populations in various countries. The findings suggest that cash transfers can stabilize households during times of crisis, preventing deeper descent into poverty.

Social cash transfer programs also help in empowerment of women, recent studies emphasize that Social cash transfer programs, especially those targeted at women, promote gender equality and empowerment. For instance, a research paper published in Development and Change (2023) demonstrated that when women manage cash transfers, there is a greater likelihood of spending on children's education and health, leading to better long-term benefits for the family.

Other benefits of social cash transfer programs can be in terms of Health and nutrition impacts. Beyond economic benefits, social cash transfer programs have significant implications for health and nutrition, particularly among vulnerable populations, including children and pregnant women. They bring improved nutritional outcomes since research published in The Lancet Global Health (2023) found that beneficiaries of cash transfer programs experienced better nutritional outcomes, with families utilizing cash transfers to purchase a more varied and nutritious diet. This is especially critical in food-insecure regions, where nutrition directly impacts health and development.

Social cash transfer programs bring access to Healthcare as they enhance access to healthcare by enabling families to afford medical expenses and services. A study in Health Affairs (2022) illustrated that households receiving cash transfers were more likely to seek medical

treatment, resulting in improved health metrics and reduced incidences of preventable illnesses.

In terms of educational outcomes, Social cash transfer programs also significantly enhance educational outcomes, helping to break the intergenerational cycle of poverty. They bring increased School enrolment and attendance, these may require beneficiaries to meet certain educational criteria such as school attendance, and as such they have shown marked success in improving school attendance rates. In a recent report by UNICEF (2023), it was demonstrated that Conditional cash transfer programs led to a 15% increase in primary school enrolment among eligible households.

Social cash transfer programs are also associated with improved academic performance. Beyond enrolment, cash transfers can positively influence academic performance. A comprehensive study by Baird et al. (2023) found that students from households receiving cash transfers performed significantly better in standardized tests compared to those who did not, attributing this improvement to reduced financial stress and increased educational investment.

Despite the numerous benefits, social cash transfer programs face several challenges. Concerns about dependency, targeting inefficiencies, and sustainability of funding often emerge in discussions about their implementation. A report from the International Labour Organization (2022) highlighted the importance of ensuring that cash transfers are part of broader social protection systems, integrating them with employment opportunities and capacity-building initiatives.

Social cash transfer programs have demonstrated a profound impact on poverty alleviation, health, nutrition, and education. The latest research supports the view that these programs not only provide immediate relief to vulnerable populations but also foster long-term socio-economic development. As policies evolve and resources are allocated, it is crucial to refine these programs, ensuring they are inclusive, targeted, and adaptable to the specific needs of different populations. By doing so, the transformative potential of social cash transfer programs can be fully realized, paving the way for a more equitable and prosperous future.

While substantial progress has been made in reducing poverty and hunger in recent decades, substantial problems persist. Globally, nearly one billion people continue to live in extreme

poverty and 11 percent of the global population is undernourished. Two billion people experience “hidden hunger”, or micronutrient deficiency (Fan and Brzeska, 2014, World Health Organization, 2015), and 749 are estimated to be calorie deficient (FAO, 2015). As most of the world’s regions have experienced declining poverty and undernutrition rates, sub-Saharan Africa has seen little progress.

Half of the population in Sub-Saharan Africa is extremely poor, and just under one in four people is undernourished. Sub-Saharan Africa has the highest regional prevalence of undernourishment, and the number of undernourished actually increased by 44 million between 1990 and 2015 (FAO, IFAD, WFP, 2015). The poor are particularly vulnerable to hunger and food insecurity because they often live just above or at subsistence levels, where even small shocks will move them closer toward destitution (HLPE, 2012). When confronted with difficulties in purchasing food, poor households result in coping with strategies which can be harmful and further exacerbate the cycle of poverty and poor nutrition (FAO, 2015). Social protection strategies are increasingly being employed to reduce household vulnerability to extreme poverty and to strengthen food and nutrition security.

The reviewed literature underscores the potential of social cash transfer programs to improve food security outcomes, particularly in terms of food access and consumption. However, evidence from Malawi indicates that while Social cash transfers can increase caloric intake and meal frequency, they may not sufficiently address diet quality or economic vulnerability without additional support mechanisms. Furthermore, the mediating role of social capital in enhancing Social cash transfers effectiveness remains under examined.

Again, despite extensive research on Social Cash Transfer programmes, several gaps remain, the literature has shown that there is limited evidence on whether Social Cash Transfers lead to sustained economic independence or if beneficiaries go back to abject poverty after program termination. There is also a need to consider that contextual variability determines the outcome of Social Cash Transfer programmes, as such more research is needed on how Social Cash Transfer effectiveness varies across different socioeconomic and political contexts. This should be more of a comparative analysis.

METHODOLOGY

A mixed-methods approach was employed. Quantitative data were collected through structured household surveys capturing food consumption patterns, income utilization, and

changes in food security indicators before and after programme enrolment. Qualitative data was obtained from focus group discussions with beneficiaries and community leaders and key informant interviews with programme administrators and local authorities. The study sample included SCTP beneficiary households, non-beneficiary households for comparison, and relevant stakeholders in Malasa Village. Data analysis combined descriptive statistics with thematic analysis of qualitative responses to provide a holistic understanding of the programmes impact.

KEY FINDINGS

The analysis of data from Malasa Village revealed significant improvements in food security outcomes among SCTP beneficiaries:

- **Increased Meals per Day:** Most beneficiary households reported moving from one or two meals per day to at least three meals per day after receiving cash transfers.
- **-Improved Dietary Diversity:** Beneficiaries were able to afford more nutritious and varied diets, including proteins, fruits, and vegetables previously unaffordable.
- **Longer Duration of Adequate Food Supply:** Households maintained food stocks for longer periods, reducing seasonal food shortages.
- **Enhanced Nutritional Well-being:** Children and vulnerable adults in beneficiary households displayed improved nutritional status and fewer instances of malnutrition.
- **Resilience to Shocks:** Beneficiaries reported reduced negative coping strategies such as selling assets or skipping meals during crises, indicating improved resilience.
- **Positive Spill-over Effects:** Local markets experienced increased demand, supporting local vendors and stimulating community-level economic activity.

Focus group discussions revealed that the respondents had a feeling that the social cash transfer Programme had contributed to the overall health status of the poor households as they were able to access food stuffs thereby improving the nutrition status of the beneficiaries.

Through the same focus group, the study discovered that SCPT has a positive impact on nutritious status as well physical well-being of the community members, by respondent's arguments that the program has enhanced nutrition status of community members in a way that people have been given the chance of accessing a complete meal set thus morning, afternoon and evening. Some engaged in business also have the luxury of purchasing

nutritious meals such as proteins and vegetables. The respondents who took part of the money given under SCTP for business have confessed that the businesses are doing well, hence enabling them to manage to purchase fridge used to store perishable and other daily foods for a long period of time and making them to be physically always fit. In addition, there was also a highlight that SCTP has contributed in producing strong men and women who can concentrate in school as well as in farming which later enhances development at home and community at large.

Another area of interest was that the study revealed how households that initially perceive maize as staple food have resorted to be using sweet potatoes, bananas with soya as meals a development which wasn't there some years ago. All this is because they have the money to buy the other items,

The study also notes that inception of SCTP has reduced hunger cases in the area. One of the key informants, a community development officer, is of the view that the project has reduced hunger in rural areas. According to the informant, initially the main source of income in the area was farming, however scaling up of fertilizer prices and intermittent climate have affected the harvest of peasant farmers leaving them in perpetual poverty with one meal catering for the day. This has contributed to a variety of malnutrition diseases as evident by medical experts in the district. Marrying this aspect with nutritional status and physical well-being, the program is perceived to have reduced hunger to some extent while others look at it as a temporary relief.

In an interview with a key informant from the district hospital states that the program has contributed to childcare development in that, families are raising healthy children because parents can afford to feed their children with balanced diet. The study further reveals that a variety of child cases which arose because of poor eating habits have dropped significantly because of the program and this has been perceived as a big bonus. Traditional chiefs in the community hail the initiative as relief in that it has helped the community to have strong and healthy men who actively take part in the developmental affairs of the community such as construction projects and other initiatives,

The study also notes that SCTP has led to affordability of medical bills from the community members contributing to a healthy society. Focus group discussions divulge that with the program they have been engaged in entrepreneurial activities this has made families have

easy access of money which can be used to improve their medical needs as a result having healthy lives. Hospital officials disclose that government hospitals at times lack proper medicine forcing community members to go look for medicine in drug stores and pharmacies respectively and this proved a tall order in pre Sctp. Currently families can afford to purchase drugs with their own money, thereby improving the health status of community members.

All in all, the study notes that Sctp has had some challenges in a way that there has been mismanagement of funds from other family households making the whole initiative go in vain. Some beneficiaries have used the Sctp money to settle their debts, making them continue living below the poverty line whilst some households have complained that the money received is not enough to cover the needs and some also alluded bias on terms of selection of beneficiaries.

Analysis of Findings

The study has discovered that Sctp provides a platform in which families have had the chance to obtain income especially in rural communities and have been hailed as an excellent initiative, this is so because most of the households in rural areas depend on farming according to NSO report 2019 the community areas have a high percentage of 83% with two-thirds living in poverty as per report from the World Bank. Such initiatives as Sctp are considered paramount important.

The study notes that households are having poor eating habits not by choice but affordability. This coincides with a study that was employed by Feed the Children in 2024 which stressed that community areas have several malnutrition problems with several individuals looking malnourished as a result of poor eating habits as such a need to provide interventions

The study has also discovered that with the Sctp families have access to money which in one way or the other has led to purchase of food, a survey that was conducted by world food program acknowledged the benefits of such programs but blames the funding amounts which benefit few individuals as compared to the multitude this affects purchasing power in local markets in as far as food consumption is concerned.

In addition, the study notes that Sctp contributes greatly to entrepreneurship in community areas, the study that was conducted by consumer's association of Malawi highlighted that

there has been a great response of entrepreneurship in Malawi with several consumers doing well through the SCTP initiative and this has led to accessibility of food provisions. Thus, consumers see the initiative as a gateway of engaging in business for sustainability purposes, the study also notes that financial management has been the architect of the progress and money sustainability.

The study also notes that nutritious food leads to strong well-being of individuals and this is evident by a book titled eating habits vol. 8 which stressed the benefits of dietary food by community members. To this end it is not surprising that most of the children in the community look healthy as a result of dietary meals supplements.

The study then discovered that lately there has been biasness as alluded to by the national newspapers exposing some households who have lamented bitterly on how such programs have been affected.

These findings underscore SCTP's potential to enhance household food security and nutrition while strengthening local economies.

DISCUSSION

The findings from Malasa Village demonstrate that Malawi's Social Cash Transfer Programme (SCTP) has achieved substantial progress in improving food security outcomes for ultra-poor and labour-constrained households. By increasing household income, the programme has enabled families to access more nutritious food, stabilize consumption across seasons, and improve their nutritional well-being. These outcomes align with the broader evidence from other African countries showing that cash transfers are effective in reducing poverty, enhancing household welfare, and building resilience against shocks. Importantly, the positive spillover effects on local markets highlight SCTP's potential as a catalyst for rural economic development. However, the programmes effectiveness is influenced by complementary factors such as access to quality health services, nutrition education, and agricultural support, which can further amplify its impact. Future interventions should consider integrating supply-side improvements with cash transfers to maximize benefits and ensure long-term sustainability.

CONCLUSION

This study underscores the critical role of social cash transfers in addressing food insecurity and poverty in rural Malawi. By examining SCTP's impact in Malasa Village, the research provides empirical evidence of its success in increasing daily meals, improving dietary diversity, and enhancing household resilience. These results reinforce the programmes relevance as a key pillar of Malawi's social protection framework. For policymakers, development partners, and practitioners, the findings highlight the importance of sustained investment in cash transfers, coupled with complementary interventions, to achieve lasting improvements in food security and nutrition. Further research should explore long-term outcomes, including the programmes capacity to support beneficiaries' transition to economic self-sufficiency and its broader effects on community-level development.

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