Helpdesk Research Report: Beneficiaries' perspectives in research on cash transfer and social protection programmes

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Query: What research, academic, NGO or government, has included the perspectives of beneficiaries of cash transfer or social protection programmes in developing countries and what results have emerged and how robust has been this participatory qualitative evidence? Are there any lessons learnt from the approaches taken to such participatory research?

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1. General challenges

The extent to which beneficiaries are included in cash transfer/social protection programmes, and the success and nature of this inclusion depends on a variety of factors, including the circumstances surrounding the programme's inception and implementation; the ethos of the organisation(s) involved; and the nature of the programme itself. Researchers recognise that beneficiaries have in-depth knowledge and understanding that they lack, and that their participation can increase buy-in and applicability and facilitate the overall process. However, the research also shows that in some cases, participation must be carefully managed, particularly in heterogeneous or divided communities.

Problems associated with participatory research and qualitative evaluations of cash transfer and social protection programmes include:

- Relying primarily on beneficiaries at the targeting stage, can lead to significant inclusion/exclusion errors
- Challenges of meaningful community engagement in difficult operating environments, for instance during an emergency (PEFSA 2011)
- Lack of sustainability and community ownership in programmes that have not been truly community-driven or demand-led, even when the community has been involved (PRP 2009)
- Unreliability of responses which primarily rely on individual recollection (Kardan, MacAuslan, and Marimo 2010).
- Candid perspectives are difficult to generate and hard to interpret (Kardan, MacAuslan and Marimo 2010 – in their study of Zimbabwe, conservatism resulting from recent political and economic experiences, a fear of witchcraft that often made people unwilling to speak out against their peers, and previous extensive research which had resulted in respondents becoming adept at dealing with researchers, all influenced the content of information received).
- The process can be time consuming and taxing (Kardan, MacAuslan, and Marimo 2010).
- There is a general concern that such research is not robust and lacks generalisability (Brewin 2009).

However, as the discussion below demonstrates, steps can be taken to mitigate these constraints, including incorporating a variety of methods in the research, and taking specific measures to address specific concerns. The report considers areas of particular concern in the literature – such as community engagement in beneficiary selection processes – and highlights steps researchers and programmes have taken to address these. It also highlights some innovative approaches, such as ‘Most Significant Change’ that attempt to incorporate beneficiary perspectives in a meaningful way, and examines the purposes to which common approaches (focus groups, case studies and life histories) are applied.

2. Community targeting

The decision to include beneficiary perspectives in identifying target groups is often a pragmatic one to speed the early stages of a project, but it can have both advantages and disadvantages.

In Pakistan, in the aftermath of the 2010 flooding during the Monsoon season, an alliance of six agencies, the Pakistan Emergency Food Security Alliance, was created. Due to the urgency of the situation, some agencies relied largely on community selection processes to identify beneficiaries, as agency selection processes would have been more lengthy and costly. The programme evaluation compared community- and agency-led community selection processes, finding that with community-led processes, which tend to be faster, beneficiaries were more likely to understand the criteria and there was less danger of beneficiary dishonesty. However, the process was more likely to be hijacked by powerful elites, exclusion/inclusion errors were more difficult to address, and the process was particularly problematic in divided communities (PEFSA 2011).

In another case, Concern Worldwide's DECT project required households to disclose household size, as cash transfers were set up to be done on a per-capita basis (Devereux 2008). However, a number of evaluations highlighted the challenges of meaningful community engagement and the difficulties encountered in defining and identifying vulnerabilities in difficult operating environments. There have clearly been inclusion and exclusion errors and many programmes have not been community-driven nor demand-led, and hence neither sustainable nor community-owned, even when the community has been involved, or even central to initial processes of targeting and beneficiary selection (PRP 2009).

Similarly, Kardan, MacAuslan and Marimo (2010) highlight the problems associated with prioritising beneficiary perspectives at the start of Zimbabwe's Emergency Cash Transfer (ZECT) Programme, implemented by Concern Worldwide. The programme relied on community selection of recipients, which introduced significant inclusion errors. While some recipients were selected on the basis of agreed need, non-recipients complained that some recipients had canvassed for support before the targeting process, such that recipients with large social networks had a higher probability of being selected than others. The problem was compounded by the fact that the process did not have much oversight from Concern staff. The evaluation showed that community selection had failed to select all of the most vulnerable households.

Avoiding these problems requires a thorough approach to community sensitisation and targeting. (PEFSA 2011; Kardan, MacAuslan, and Marimo, 2010). The PEFSA study also recommends that where communities are heterogeneous, and targeting more complex and conflicted, special measures are required, such as separate community committees for each group, and greater attention to communication, transparency, and equitable targeting. Under such circumstances, agency-led targeting may be comparatively efficient, more effective and ultimately more accountable and transparent to beneficiaries.

MacAuslan and Riemenschneider (2011) note that the extent to which existing social relations and social norms are often unknown during the programme design stage is striking. They argue that social relations should be carefully taken into account when designing cash transfer schemes, and, by extension, in designing participatory processes. PRP in Zimbabwe sought to address this by developing a community targeting framework that would act as a guide to PRP partners and ensure a shared visioning in the identification of the right geographical niche and the beneficiary communities and vulnerable households.

This has entailed the initiation of community profiling as a process that initially takes place over an extended period of time and is eventually adopted as part of the community's way of life. Profiling uses a range of approaches to enable the community to develop an understanding of itself. The approaches combine group working and group interaction techniques with data collection and presentation techniques. The focus is on participatory methods which are visual in order to generate interest and make the process accessible to the illiterate and those unused to verbal communication. The idea is that a profile that is undertaken by the community with the full cooperation and involvement of all members of the community will result in a fuller, more comprehensive and accurate description of that community and, as such, will form a strong foundation on which they can build their action plans (PRP 2009).

3. Most Significant Change

An example of participatory evaluation is the Longitudinal Approaches to Impact Assessment, Monitoring and Evaluation (LIME) approach to evaluating Zimbabwe's Protracted Relief Program (PRP). Both the process of selecting evaluation participants, and aspects of the LIME methodology (integrating three complementary methodologies: Most Significant Change (MSC – discussed below), Household Economy Approach (HEA) and Benefit Cost Analysis (BCA)) are participatory. Community members from existing PRP structures and district level government representatives, conducted a community wealth breakdown exercise to establish the determinants of wealth at each of the 26 sites. At each site, beneficiary households, drawn from the PRP partner beneficiary database, were classified by the community into different wealth groups and 35 households representing the different wealth groups, were selected to participate in LIME (Chifamba, Makhurane and Mutangi, 2010).

The Most Significant Change methodology was a highly qualitative and participatory aspect of LIME, incorporating the collection of stories in each of six identified domains of change: Quality of Life; Improved Social Status; Empowerment; Improved Social Relations; Community Level Improved Social Cohesion; Community Level Improved Quality of Life; and Negative Change.

An evaluation of the participatory MSC methodology identified several strengths and weaknesses of the approach. Strengths included (Zimbizi and Eliot 2010: 4):

- It brings out qualitative aspects such as restoration of dignity and enhanced social standing, which are difficult to measure using quantitative methods.
- It enhances ownership among participants and allows beneficiary households to showcase successes.
- It is ideal for complementing and cross-validating quantitative data
- It is a rapid way of getting an overall impression of programme impact and is easy to implement.
- Least significant Change and Negative Change stories are useful for programming and re-design.

Challenges of the approach include:

- Communities can be slow to understand the concept of MSC and tend to associate it with beneficiary selection for subsequent interventions.
- Selection of Stories can lead to competition and tensions among those story tellers not selected.
- Baseline information, which was lacking, is essential in order to identify change.
- Negative Stories were difficult to collect, as communities may have assumed that these would be a negative reflection of their commitment to the interventions and may trigger subsequent pullout.
- There was limited verification of stories, resulting in inconsistencies with the other data collection methods.
- The training period for facilitators was relatively short for a relatively new concept.

4. When to seek beneficiaries' perspectives and how

Beneficiaries' perspectives can be sought at all stages of a social protection programme. As the above discussion shows, it is usually incorporated in targeting and selection processes, but beneficiaries' views are often sought during action research, usually undertaken during the course of the programme, to improve on-going implementation, as well as during end-of programme evaluations. The main methods are case studies, life histories, focus group discussions and life histories. The table below summarises the main purpose of these methods from three different research programmes.

Methodology	Purpose
Case studies and life histories	• to shed light on people's livelihood circumstances and the influences on past events (Mvula 2007) • to better understand the social impacts of cash transfers on people's lives and livelihoods (Mvula 2007) • exploring in-depth individuals' gendered experiences of risk and vulnerability (Jones et al 2010) • exploring the individual, household, community and policy-level factors which shape available coping/ resilience strategies(Jones et al 2010) • gaining an understanding of the relative importance of the focus social protection programme intervention in diverse individuals' lives (Jones et al 2010)
Focus group discussions	• examine the link between vulnerability and the food insecurity arising from crop failure in previous years (Mvula 2007) • understanding the strengths and weaknesses of the implementation of the focus social protection intervention (Jones et al 2010) • To understand the strengths and weaknesses of the focus social protection intervention in terms of shaping community experiences of inclusion/ exclusion and/or discrimination (Jones et al 2010) • Understanding process. i.e. the way the project worked (Brewin 2009) • Understanding how cash was used (Brewin 2009) • Understanding changes in livelihood status over the duration of the project and the contribution of the project to these changes (Brewin 2009) • Assessing the sustainability of the gains made (Brewin 2009)
Key informant interviews	• Understanding the aims, structure and problems associated with the project (Mvula 2007)

Focus group discussions

Focus groups are often used in qualitative and participatory research and are considered to have many advantages, including: comments from group participants can trigger recollections and opinions from other participants that might not otherwise emerge; focus groups enable a larger number of individuals to be interviewed in a shorter period of time compared to individual interviews. Focus groups can also be used to confirm or probe, within a larger group, the responses received from individual interviews or observations. However, there are several disadvantages associated with the approach, relating to the fact that some individuals may be less inclined to speak out due to social dynamics within the group (Adato 2008).

Thus, facilitators need to be able to encourage individuals that appear less inclined to speak, or those who might hold a minority opinion or represent a particular social group with different views. For these reasons, some researchers only use focus groups in selected circumstances, such as with informal groups gathered in households, or with groups of individuals of the same standing, such as service providers or government officials (Adato 2008). Other recommendations include ensuring a gender balance (or having same-sex groups as appropriate), and keeping the group size small between five and twelve people (Brewin recommends six), with pains taken to ensure a neutral environment (Kardan, MacAuslan and Marimo 2010).

5. Integrating participatory methods with other approaches

Often, qualitative and participatory approaches are critiqued for being unscientific and therefore unreliable. At best, such methods can only be a complementary approach to quantitative approaches. An evaluation of the cash component of a German Agro-Action drought mitigation programme in Kenya (Brewin 2009) illustrates that such research can stand on its own, however. The researchers collected data using focus group discussions with beneficiaries but in order to arrive at a quantitative assessment of impact, ranking and piling tools were used. For example, to assess beneficiaries' perceptions of various aspects of 'process', FGD participants were asked to 'vote' on the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with various statements related to the issue in question. 'Voting' was done by each participant placing a stone in one of five boxes labelled 'strongly agree, 'agree', 'don't know / no opinion', 'disagree' and 'strongly disagree' in response to each question. Use of cash data was collated by asking informants to allocate 100 beans into different piles representing different items of expenditure. Five areas of impact were assessed – health, education, food security, asset ownership, and self esteem. Changes in each over the project period were measured by asking respondents to add or remove stones from a nominal 'pre-intervention' baseline of 10. The respondent was then asked to attribute the reasons for the change by allocating 10 stones proportionally to six boxes representing the various reasons for the change in circumstances (Brewin 2009: 11).

This approach was particularly suitable in a context where a baseline was lacking, which precluded survey techniques. However, there were still some constraints including (Brewin 2009):

- 'central tendency' (respondents try to avoid giving extreme responses)
- 'acquiescence' bias (portrayal of the subject in question in a more favourable light)
- 'consensus' bias (less decisive group members tend to follow the responses of those who are more dominant).

Because it is difficult to get around these biases, most evaluations agree that it is important to integrate methodologies, 'so as to utilise their complementary strengths to provide a rigorous qualitative and quantitative information base that informs the quality of programming, enables comprehensive measurement of program impact and supports questioning the programme appropriateness' (PRP 2010).

An examination of 57 mixed method studies from the 1980s identifies five purposes for mixing methods (Greene, Caracelli, and Graham 1989): 'triangulation', seeking convergence of results; identification of 'complementarities', examining overlapping and different facets of a phenomenon; 'initiation', discovering paradoxes, contradictions, and fresh perspectives; 'development', using the methods sequentially, such that the results from the first method inform the use of the second method; and 'expansion', adding breadth and scope to a project (Adato 2008: 6).

6. References

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Zimbizi, G. and Eliot, Z., 2010, Most Significant Change (MSC) Technical Support to PRP Partners under the LIME Programme, Report No 11 (available from author)

7. Additional information

Selected websites visited

The Cash Learning Partnership Library
http://www.cashlearning.org/library.html

Protracted Relief Programme
http://www.prpzim.info/default/#

Experts consulted

Killian Mutiro, Knowledge Management Unit (KMU), GRM International
Rebecca Holmes, ODI Social Protection Programme
Alex Hurrell, Oxford Policy management
David Mckenzie, World Bank
Rajesh Dhungel, Oxfam
Mike Brewin, Food Security and Livelihoods Consultant
Paul Harvey, Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium
Shannon Hayes, Oxfam
Ralph Ofuyo
James Davey, Concern Tanzania
Nupur Kukrety, Oxfam
Breanna Ridsdel , The Cash Learning Partnership

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