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Executive Summary Report



Highlights from the Research 4 Action Workshop on Cash and Nutrition

From available scientific evidence to informed action



Evidence review by Bridget Fenn



#R4ACT

Background

Undernutrition is a major public health issue worldwide. The 2017 Global Nutrition Report notes that 88% of countries suffer from a significant burden of two or three forms of malnutrition (1). Among children under the age of five, 52 million are acutely malnourished and 155 million are stunted. To tackle the global burden of undernutrition, nutrition-sensitive interventions have been identified with a high potential to prevent undernutrition in all its forms (2). Among these, cash transfer programs are a key program modality that could allow scaling-up of interventions.

Following the presentation of the Grand Bargain agreement at the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit, the use of cash transfers has become a key component of humanitarian assistance. Simultaneously, humanitarian actors and policy-makers increasingly recognize the need for more evidence-based interventions to support their programmes and policies.

There is strong evidence and consensus that cash transfers are efficient and effective in covering basic needs. Cash transfers offer dignity, choice and flexibility to affected populations, and play a key role in reaching food and nutrition security for all. The number of studies and reviews addressing the impact of cash transfers on nutrition is limited but growing, and multiple efforts are being made to build on the existing evidence.

WORKSHOP OBJECTIVES

The Research for Action (R4ACT) Workshop, organized by ACF and WFP (November 2017), was part of a pilot process aiming to improve the uptake of scientific evidence. It brought together stakeholders including decision-makers and technical experts from a broad range of institutions including governments, the United Nations, non-government organizations, academia, and donors to discuss the impacts of cash transfers on nutrition, highlighting current evidence gaps as well as implications for action by humanitarian and development actors. The following points were considered during the workshop:

- Current evidence, and evidence gaps, on the effect of cash-based transfers on nutrition outcomes.
- Broad programme and policy recommendations.
- Specific steps that can be taken to translate recommendations into action.

This activity followed a pilot methodology for engaging with scientific evidence. The methodology included four main stages: 1) synthesis of current evidence into a working report; 2) circulation of the report with anticipated participants prior to the workshop for consideration and comment; 3) one-day workshop to present the report and determine key recommendations using consensus methodology; 4) drafting of a work plan with concrete programme and policy actions.



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(1) Development Initiatives, 2017. Global Nutrition Report 2017: Nourishing the SDGs. Bristol, UK: Development Initiatives.

(2) Ruel MT, Alderman H. Nutrition-sensitive interventions and programmes: how can they help to accelerate progress in improving maternal and child nutrition? The Lancet. 2013;382(9891):536-551.

Evidence

INTRODUCTION

The literature focusing on the impacts of cash-based transfers on nutrition outcomes is steadily growing. The report prepared for the workshop considered the findings from recent robust studies and systematic reviews, including several studies currently under review for publication.

The available evidence reaffirms the importance of context as a critical factor determining the effectiveness of any intervention involving cash. Further, many reviews have noted the heterogeneity in programme design and implementation across interventions, which makes extracting definitive conclusions on the best interventions for achieving nutrition impact difficult. Finally, much of the available evidence to date

has focused on ‘what’ works for achieving outcomes. There has been much less documentation on the pathways between cash-based transfers and nutrition outcomes (i.e. ‘why’ and ‘how’ an intervention is successful or not), as well as the programme design and implementation factors that may lead to success. It is this information that would help to increase the generalisability of research findings across contexts.

Tables 1 and 2 below summarize the areas of inquiry and assessment of evidence of the impacts of cash transfers on nutrition outcomes, described in detail in the full report (3).

Table 1. Nutrition Outcomes and Determinants

Area of Inquiry	Assessment of Evidence of Nutrition Outcomes
Household food consumption and/or dietary diversity	CONSISTENT EVIDENCE OF POSITIVE IMPACT
Household expenditures and/or food expenditures	
Household economy (e.g. increase in income, protection of assets)	GROWING CONSISTENT EVIDENCE OF POSITIVE IMPACT
Use of preventive health services	
Child dietary intake	
Child wasting	
Child stunting	
Household caloric intake	LIMITED BUT CONSISTENT EVIDENCE OF POSITIVE IMPACT
Water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH)	
Mother (or caregiver) individual dietary intake	
Access to micronutrients	
Child underweight	
Household coping strategies	NO EVIDENCE OR LIMITED INCONSISTENT EVIDENCE OF IMPACT
Care practices	
Caregivers’ physical health and/or empowerment	

(3) For a list of the studies and reviews considered, as well as further details on each area of inquiry, please see the full report, available at: <https://docs.wfp.org/api/documents/WFP-0000071735/download/>.

Table 2. Programme Design and Implementation Features

Area of Inquiry	Assessment of Evidence of Nutrition Outcomes
<p>Conditionality (e.g. healthcare visits)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> No difference between UCT and CCT in development contexts Emerging studies in humanitarian contexts showing improvement on wasting and stunting with conditionality 	<p>GROWING CONSISTENT EVIDENCE</p>
<p>Modality (i.e. cash, voucher)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Cash and vouchers are often better than food transfers (i.e. HH food baskets) at increasing dietary diversity 	
<p>Cash transfer amount</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Consensus that the amount needs to have a significant contribution to the household economy 	
<p>Complementarity (e.g. cash ‘plus’)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Deemed necessary in any setting 	<p>LIMITED BUT CONSISTENT EVIDENCE</p>
<p>Cash delivery mechanism (e.g. physical, mobile)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> No effects on WHZ comparing different cash modalities Electronic transfers are better and preferred to physical transfers 	
<p>Targeting (e.g. children under five)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sex and age of child and caregiver need to be considered 	
<p>Duration</p> <p>Limited evidence but strong logic that longer duration may be associated with improved outcomes</p>	
<p>Unintended effects (e.g. change in household dynamics)</p> <p>Limited evidence due to heterogeneity of indicators</p>	
<p>Cost-efficiency</p> <p>Cash transfers and vouchers may be more cost-efficient than in-kind food distribution</p>	
<p>Transfer recipient (i.e. men, women)</p>	<p>NO EVIDENCE OR LIMITED INCONSISTENT EVIDENCE</p>
<p>Timing of delivery (e.g. lean season)</p>	
<p>Frequency (i.e. regular payments versus one-time lump sum)</p>	
<p>Communication and labeling (e.g. child grant)</p>	
<p>Preferences and behavioral responses</p>	
<p>Linkages with shock-response programmes</p>	
<p>Other processes (e.g. grievance mechanisms)</p>	

Recommendations

After a discussion of the evidence, participants worked in groups to determine key topic areas and broad recommendations for programme and policy action. The recommendations in turn were used to outline more concrete actions, which the participating organizations will pursue to advance the global agenda on the use of cash-based transfers for nutrition outcomes. These actions are summarized in a work plan that will guide future interaction and collaboration between the workshop participants (4).

KEY TOPIC 1

Generation of evidence on nutrition-sensitive outcomes through research and evaluation

Recommendations established:

- Advocate for funding to capture programme learning on impacts of CBIs on nutrition outcomes
- Conduct research focusing on the pathways of impact between CBT and nutrition, including inquiry around design and implementation features
- Standardize indicators and robust methods for monitoring and evaluating the nutrition sensitivity of CBIs

KEY TOPIC 2

Maintain nutrition focused cash based interventions through longer term social safety nets and other programmes

Recommendations established:

- Advocate for enhanced nutrition focus in operations, policy, and research on shock-responsive social protection systems and safety nets
- Support national governments to design nutrition-sensitive social protection systems, leveraging humanitarian CBIs
- Develop appropriate exit strategies for cash programmes with specific nutrition objectives, linked to SP programmes where feasible

KEY TOPIC 3

Definition of the optimal package(s) of assistance involving cash to maximize nutrition outcomes across contexts

Recommendations established:

- Improve understanding of how complementary interventions involving cash can improve nutrition outcomes
- Increase understanding and document good practices on optimal context specific package of assistance and services

KEY TOPIC 4

Make current cash interventions more nutrition-sensitive across contexts

Recommendations established:

- Advocate for increased donor support on upstream and downstream activities
- Provide support and capacity building to programmers across sectors to implement nutrition-sensitive cash-based programmes
- Promote the use of cash in programmes with nutrition as a primary objective, beginning at design stage

KEY TOPIC 5

Improving multi-sectorial coordination between stakeholders to support the use of cash for achieving nutrition outcomes

Recommendations established:

- Enhance existing coordination between nutrition, food security, health and cash
- Build the capacity of nutrition experts on cash-based programming

CONCLUSION

The R4ACT Workshop created a platform for key stakeholders and experts to discuss the current state of evidence on cash-based transfers for nutrition outcomes, as well as recommendations for concrete actions moving forward. This summary report, as well as the full report, will help to formalize learning from the workshop, maintain the momentum for increased collaboration in research and programming, and provide guidance for humanitarian and development actors across sectors to better integrate cash-based transfers and nutrition programming.

(4) The work plan is considered an internal working document, but can be made available upon request to interested parties.

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Full report available on: <https://docs.wfp.org/api/documents/WFP-000071735/download/>

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