

Getting the Most Out of Participatory Impact Assessment: Reflections from a Multi-Country Cash Transfer Impact Assessment

Abstract Mixed methods approaches are widely used in impact evaluations, but all too often a ‘methodological gap’ emerges between broad, large-scale surveys and in-depth, small-scale qualitative investigation that can be difficult to bridge. In this CDI Practice Paper by Jeremy Holland, Ramlatu Attah, Valentina Barca, Clare O’Brien, Simon Brook, Eleanor Fisher and Andrew Kardan, we reflect on a multi-country impact assessment of cash transfer programmes in sub-Saharan Africa. Within a broader mixed methods suite of research modules we discuss specifically the design of a qualitative module that used participatory methods to integrate quantitative and qualitative data and analysis. We conclude that future impact assessment design can utilise this self-standing ‘within-module’ participatory research approach to move beyond an impact assessment norm of often poorly integrated large-scale quantitative surveys and in-depth qualitative investigation.

1 Background

The poorest households in sub-Saharan Africa are particularly vulnerable to household and livelihood shocks. Cash transfers (CTs) are social protection mechanisms that can reduce vulnerability by maintaining welfare, health, and human capital. CT programme coverage has grown at pace globally. In sub-Saharan Africa in 2012, there were some 123 CT programmes operating across 37 countries.

Beyond looking at their primary welfare impact, studies have been widely commissioned to examine the broader economic and social impacts of CT programmes. One such initiative was the joint FAO–UNICEF ‘From Protection to Production (PtoP)’ project (Davis *et al.* 2016).¹ This was a multi-country impact assessment of CTs in sub-Saharan Africa (see Figure 1). The project expected positive impacts of CT programmes beyond welfare, covering household economic decision-making, the local economy, and social networks and risk sharing.

Figure 1 Research fieldwork locations



Source: Fisher *et al.* (2017), © Elsevier, reproduced with permission.

Table 1 Six-country study: livelihood characteristics and key findings

Country	Livelihood characteristics	Key findings
Ghana	<p>Komenda District: rural, rain-fed agriculture but good agro-ecology; subsistence farming, boat making, salt mining, petty trade and services</p> <p>Tolon Kumbungu District: rural, rain-fed agriculture; subsistence farming with poor productivity and high food insecurity; petty trade, smock weaving, head portering, shea nut and groundnut oil extraction</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Increased beneficiary self-respect and social ‘mingling’ ■ Improved beneficiary household diet ■ Reduced child labour ■ Increased entry into petty trading (low start-up capital) ■ Tolon Kumbungu: bulk buying grains to eat in the ‘hungry season’ ■ Tolon Kumbungu: able to hire an additional farm labourer or buy inputs such as fertiliser ■ Increased participation in livelihood-based groups (male beneficiaries) or savings groups (female beneficiaries)
Ethiopia	<p>Hintalo Wajirat Woreda: rural, rain-fed subsistence agriculture supplemented by animal husbandry</p> <p>Abi Adi Woreda: urban, trade and services; rural–urban in-migration; day labouring, skilled work, trade. Residents also own rural land and generate income from share cropping</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Increased beneficiary self-respect, cleanliness, and social inclusion ■ Improved and greater variety of diet ■ Reduced destructive coping mechanisms (begging, distress sales of assets or labour) ■ Increased informal savings and entry into <i>iqqub</i> (a rotating savings and credit association) ■ Increased investment in own-farm production ■ Abi Adi: Increased entry by women beneficiaries into <i>tella</i> (traditional beer) brewing (low start-up capital)
Kenya	<p>Kangundo District: rural, semi-arid – access to water constrains production; subsistence and commercial agriculture – livestock, food crops, horticulture, coffee; migration to Nairobi is common</p> <p>Owendo District: rural, good biogeography; subsistence and commercial agriculture – sugar cane through ‘out-grower’ production, livestock, sugar cane jaggery, petty trade and services</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Orphans and vulnerable children (OVC)-targeted CT: Children dressed in school uniform and not chased out of school, resulting in improved school attendance and performance ■ Reduced hunger and begging ■ CT income used for savings schemes to invest in chickens or livestock for eggs and milk by some beneficiaries ■ Increased beneficiary participation in contribution-based networks
Lesotho	<p>Leribe District: rural with urban centres; subsistence agriculture and livestock rearing, sale of wool and mohair, petty trading, piecemeal and factory jobs; migration to South Africa is common</p> <p>Mafeteng District: similar profile to Leribe District but without factory labour</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Improved children’s voice in household decision-making ■ Improved school attendance and performance ■ Children clean, clothed, and have three meals a day ■ Decreased piecemeal jobs, but only around CT pay days ■ Prioritised spending on children (including orphans) over agricultural investment, reinforced by programme messaging and community norms
Malawi	<p>Salima District: borders Lake Malawi, near lakeshore fishing, subsistence crops, and petty business; on Rift Valley Escarpment, subsistence agriculture and cash cropping of cotton, sunflowers, or tobacco</p> <p>Phalombe District: rural, subsistence agriculture with fishing, some commercial tobacco and sunflowers, opportunities for non-farm activities are limited except for casual labour</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Better clothed and socially accepted beneficiaries, from being ‘practically nobodies’ ■ Reduced <i>ganyu</i> (casual labour) ■ Increased investment in small business, e.g. selling boiled maize and brewing beer (female beneficiaries), and selling firewood, making brooms, and mats (male beneficiaries) – near road communities ■ Constrained beneficiary entry into contribution-based networks due to unpredictable CT payments

cont./

Table 1 Six-country study: livelihood characteristics and key findings (cont.)

Country	Livelihood characteristics	Key findings
Zimbabwe	<p>Chivi District: rural, semi-arid, high food insecurity; subsistence and commercial agriculture – groundnuts and cotton, livestock, fishing, gold panning, wild-fruit collection, and handicraft making</p> <p>Goromonzi District: bordering Harare, coincides with the Highveld Prime Cereal and Cash Crop Resettlement Zone, with fertile soil and good rainfall; also the Highveld Prime Communal Zone where farming is hampered by poor access to inputs, labour, and infrastructure</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Better clothed beneficiaries, including children’s school uniforms, bringing dignity and confidence ■ Children bathing with soap ■ Grain purchased as insurance against later hunger ■ Increased purchase of fertiliser and maize seeds for own-farm production with less <i>maricho</i> (casual labour) ■ Insufficient CT to extend to contribution-based networks ■ Chivi: Limited productive investment, with 70 per cent of beneficiaries aged over 60 ■ Goromonzi: Higher incidence of beneficiary productive investment in this resource-rich district, e.g. purchasing goats and broilers, buying milk for resale, improving poultry production

Source: Adapted from Fisher *et al.* (2017).

The PtoP impact assessment implemented a suite of quantitative and qualitative methods. This was intended to integrate econometric analysis of impact evaluation data with qualitative insight. Within this suite of methods, a qualitative research module was implemented on a relatively modest budget. Its objective was to analyse changing behaviour, practices, and relationships within beneficiary households and communities. The qualitative research module is the focus of this paper. The authors designed and implemented the qualitative research module in a stratified random sample of 36 communities across six countries in sub-Saharan Africa. We found that ‘a small but predictable flow of cash builds wellbeing, improves strategic livelihood choices and stimulates productive investments, including through positive effects on beneficiary entry into risk-sharing arrangements and economic collaboration’ (Fisher *et al.* 2017). Beneficiaries reported eating more and having more varied and better-quality diets. Beneficiaries explained the positive impact of the transfer on their sense of self-worth and dignity, and they reported a reduction in destructive coping strategies, including distress sale of assets and getting in

debt. We also examined positive impacts on gender roles and relations within and beyond the household. Overall, we found that the impact of CTs varied ‘according to household vulnerability, available economic opportunities and effective programme implementation’ (*ibid.*). The key characteristics and findings across the six countries are summarised in Table 1. The study methodology is summarised in Box 1.

In this paper, we discuss the design of this qualitative module as one response to a methodological challenge faced by designers of mixed methods impact assessments. This challenge centres on the inconsistent or limited coordination of the sequencing of large-scale survey and in-depth qualitative research modules and weak integration of their analytical findings. In our design and implementation of the qualitative module we sought to produce a ‘within-module’ integration of the generation and analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data. We did so through the standardised use of participatory and qualitative research methods across 36 carefully sampled sites in six countries, as described for the Kenya study in Box 2. In designing a self-standing module with integrated

Box 1 The economic and social impacts of CT programmes in sub-Saharan Africa

This cross-country qualitative study utilised participatory tools with beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries in sampled communities to quantify and qualitatively explain the impacts of the CT in different contexts. The research provided a clear picture of impact, reinforced by research conducted in neighbouring comparison communities (including focus group discussions (FGDs) with beneficiary-equivalent heads of household) which had not received the CT.

The study methodology was designed to have utility as a self-standing module with integrated ‘qual-quant data’ generation and analysis. Quantitative data on household income and expenditure were generated through individual estimates using recall in group settings. Data were analysed and the contribution of the CT programme was evaluated in these same participatory group sessions. A fuller description of this methodology is provided in Section 2.

Source: The authors.

'qual-quant data' generation and analysis, we looked to maximise the benefits of closing the 'methodological gap' between traditional quantitative and qualitative research methods.

2 The methodological challenge

The methods employed for mixed methods impact assessments have different strengths. The relative added value of different methods is discussed and ways of combining and sequencing are illustrated elsewhere. When well designed, these differences complement each other in producing better data and insight. However well designed an impact assessment is, the fact remains that these methods tend to have different aims and be guided by often competing priorities. Quantitative research is typically implemented through random sample surveys. It asks 'if' and 'by how much' something has changed, with a focus on one causal claim. It is designed with 'large *n*' populations in mind to achieve breadth in coverage and focus in analysis. It samples populations with well-established protocols to increase 'confidence of inference'. Enumeration teams are often dispatched to sites across wide areas to collect data points as part of a 'table top' sampling approach.

While quantitative research prioritises descriptive analytical breadth of coverage, qualitative research asks 'why' something has changed. Qualitative research is typically implemented through FGDs, interviews, and direct observation. It is noted, above all, for its explanatory power and for the richness and depth of information it generates. Most qualitative researchers accept the limited generalisability of their findings to whole populations, but see the value in the context-specificity of qualitative research and its ability to investigate a case in depth. Seeking out social diversity and social interaction within population groups, including intra-household differences, qualitative research attempts to explore the complexity and 'multiple realities' of societies and communities. It does so by understanding change as part of a system or process rather than as the aggregate of multiple data points (White and Phillips 2012: 5).

In common with qualitative research, participatory research tends to use more contextual methods and elicit more qualitative and interpretive information. It brings with it, however, a commitment to respect local knowledge and facilitate local ownership and control of data generation and analysis (Chambers 2017). This aspect of ownership and control in participatory research is intended to provide space for local people to establish their own analytical framework and to be in a position to challenge 'development from above'. In contrast to the individualised observation and discussions in much qualitative investigation, participatory research focuses on public and collective reflection and action.

Participatory methods are by no means restricted to qualitative data output. People map, count, estimate,

compare and value using numbers during participatory research, often producing empirical insights that are very difficult to capture through conventional methods. Participatory methods are often quick and efficient, producing data in a timely fashion for evidence-based analysis and action. Most importantly, participatory research is effective because it can be empowering for different groups of stakeholders (Holland 2013).

Given these different aims and competing priorities, bridging the gap between broad surveys and in-depth qualitative research modules in an impact assessment can be a challenge. At a very practical level, the timing and phasing of different research methods can make it difficult to get timely answers. 'Long cycle' surveys tend to generate data at a slower pace when compared with rapid qualitative research tools. Added to this, participatory aspects of the research can lose out, falling through the gap between the 'table top' sampling of 'large *n*' surveys and hastily conducted, extractive FGDs. Findings from surveys and qualitative modules can be difficult to reconcile. Qualitative module findings tend to become limited to boxed case study illustrations. At its worst, qualitative research impact findings are used simply to confirm or 'window dress' the findings of non-contextual surveys.

Within research sites, the reliability of qualitative findings can be jeopardised by actual or perceived weaknesses in the analytical rigour of qualitative research, allied to suspicions of 'mining' of qualitative data by researchers. This scenario can be exacerbated by sloppy or less-than-transparent sampling and research protocols in qualitative research. Efforts to more closely integrate quantitative and qualitative data collection can be constrained by the pressure to reduce research site 'contamination'. In some cases, this means that qualitative research modules are deliberately not conducted in sampled survey sites in order to avoid the risk that the presence of interactive qualitative or participatory researchers might introduce bias into longitudinal impact data. Indeed, survey enumerators are trained to minimise the bias their presence can cause. In contrast, qualitative and participatory research purposively involves participant observation and group facilitation.

3 Towards a participatory module for the CT impact assessment

With these challenges in mind, the authors sought to design a participatory methodology for the CT qualitative impact assessment addressing some of the reliability and validity questions alluded to above. In the process, we also aimed to bring quantitative and qualitative data generation and analysis into a more closely sequenced mix that allowed for description and explanation to be better integrated.

Within each community, participatory and qualitative methods were utilised with five FGDs and approximately

Box 2 Sampling protocol for impact assessment of Kenya's CT programme

In each selected CT programme country, fieldwork was conducted over the course of three weeks and followed a standardised research protocol and fieldwork schedule (OPM 2013). Research was conducted with randomly selected beneficiaries within purposively selected communities in which the CT was received. The communities were selected using a simple sampling hierarchy that was applied systematically across all six countries, with some adaptation to different administrative levels and definitions. In each country, a four-stage sampling strategy was applied that identified:

- regions (or equivalent) where the CT programme was in operation, with purposive sampling to capture two distinct and widely prevailing livelihood regions (determined by agro-ecological zones) in each country, and a selection of one district in each region, randomly selected from those districts that were typical of that region's 'average' livelihood and poverty status as determined by reference to district poverty maps;
- wards (or equivalent), randomly sampled, selecting two in each district;
- villages (or equivalent), first grouped according to degree of market integration (with distance to main road as proxy) then listed according to the number of beneficiary households per community, with the community having the median number of beneficiary households in each group selected.
- For each district (or equivalent) one comparison community without programme beneficiaries was selected from a neighbouring area with similar contextual characteristics. Once locations had been selected, the final sampling stage was stratifying and sampling participants for FGDs and individual beneficiary case study in-depth interviews.

For the Kenya study, two districts were purposively selected. One of these was Kangundo District, sampled due to its significant livelihood and vulnerability context. Kangundo has a population of 907,000, with 11 locations covered by a CT programme (targeted by the Government of Kenya using a poverty index). Within Kangundo District, Kathiani location was purposively sampled as a typical CT location in the district, having a population of 24,390 (5,690 households), including 456 beneficiary households, and a total of five sub-locations, all of which were covered by the CT. Two of the sub-locations in Kathiani location were selected for the research study:

- Ngoleni sub-location was randomly sampled from the two sub-locations that were relatively close to the main road, with a population of 5,131 (1,150 households across seven villages), including 116 beneficiary households.
- Mbee sub-location was selected as the median (by beneficiary number) of the three sub-locations that were relatively far from the main road, with a population of 5,286 (1,161 households across six villages), including 76 beneficiary households.

Source: The authors.

Figure 2 Illustrative participatory analysis tools used in group analysis



Community wellbeing analysis

Source: Barca *et al.* (2015); reproduced with permission.

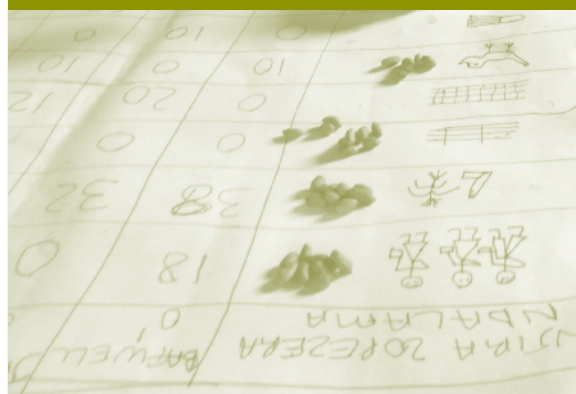


Institutional venn diagramming

Table 2 Methods and tools utilised, and total numbers of FGDs and KIIs

Method	Tool and rationale	Total number of FGD/KII
FGD	<p>Social Mapping and Community Wellbeing Analysis – to understand community perceptions of poverty and vulnerability, plus targeting effectiveness</p> <p>Household Income and Expenditure Analysis – to assess the sources, size, and frequency of household income and to understand the impact of the CT</p> <p>Institutional Mapping – to understand the value informants attached to key institutions and how near or far they are perceived to be from their lives</p> <p>Livelihoods Analysis – to understand the range and value of different activities and the contribution of the CT to the local economy</p>	<p>Beneficiary communities: 125 FGDs</p> <p>Comparison communities: 36 FGDs</p> <p>Household case studies: 24</p>
KII	Semi-structured discussion following thematic areas identified in the field guide	<p>Beneficiary communities: 144 KIIs</p> <p>Comparison communities: 0</p>

Source: The authors.

Figure 3 CT beneficiary individual income and expenditure analysis in a group setting


Income analysis, Salima District, Malawi (male beneficiaries)



Expenditure analysis, Salima District, Malawi (female beneficiaries)

Source: © Clare O'Brien; reproduced with permission.

six key informant interviews (KIIs) conducted. In each comparison community three FGDs were conducted. The menu of tools (not all used in each FGD) and the total number of FGDs and KIIs conducted across the six countries are summarised in Table 2. The sampling methodology specified a minimum of four standardised categories of FGD respondents with whom to hold discussions: these were male and female beneficiaries, and male and female non-beneficiaries. Participants for beneficiary FGDs were randomly chosen from the administrative list of beneficiaries in order to avoid sampling biases. Additional KIIs and FGDs were identified through social and institutional mapping. They were conducted with market traders, farmers, shopkeepers, service providers, local leaders, and programme stakeholders at different administrative levels.

During FGDs participants analysed poverty and livelihoods incidence and trends, and also local institutions. They did this using participatory visual tools such as wellbeing

analysis, livelihood matrices and institutional venn diagramming (see Figure 2). In all cases participants analysed the contribution of the CT programme to changes in the social and economic lives of beneficiaries and to the community as a whole.

As part of the participatory process, research feedback sessions were held with each sampled community at the end of each period of fieldwork. These enabled validation and discussion of the teams' working findings. Additional feedback sessions were held with government officials at district and national levels to consider the operational implications of the research findings.

One key focus of the beneficiary FGDs was to estimate and analyse the contribution of the CT to household income and expenditure. We did this by first eliciting individual participant income and expenditure estimates separately using a categorisation and proportional piling

with 100 seeds (see Figure 3).² This technique generated quantitative data measuring impact-level household income and expenditure with sampled individual beneficiaries. We then shifted to a facilitated group qualitative analysis of causal contribution and impact.

Through this participatory approach, we judged that we had strengthened the reliability of the individual and group data generated. The reliability of income and expenditure data captured by the household survey method is subject to much debate. Inaccuracies are associated with reliability of recall. There are also concerns about ‘response bias’ leading respondents to underreport income. In our judgement, conducting individual income and expenditure analysis publicly within a peer group setting increased reliability by allowing for peer scrutiny. Group facilitators were able to observe participants estimating their income and expenditure, with participants cross-checking each other’s estimates. If one beneficiary allocated seeds for a category of income or expenditure that appeared to the rest of the group to be inaccurate, they might challenge that allocation and, following a brief conversation, the beneficiary would either keep the allocation with justification or concede and adjust. Furthermore, we were then able to confirm and explore these distributions with individual in-depth case study interviews conducted with a sub sample of beneficiaries. A similar process of observable cross-checking strengthened the reliability of subsequent group qualitative analysis of causal contribution and impact.

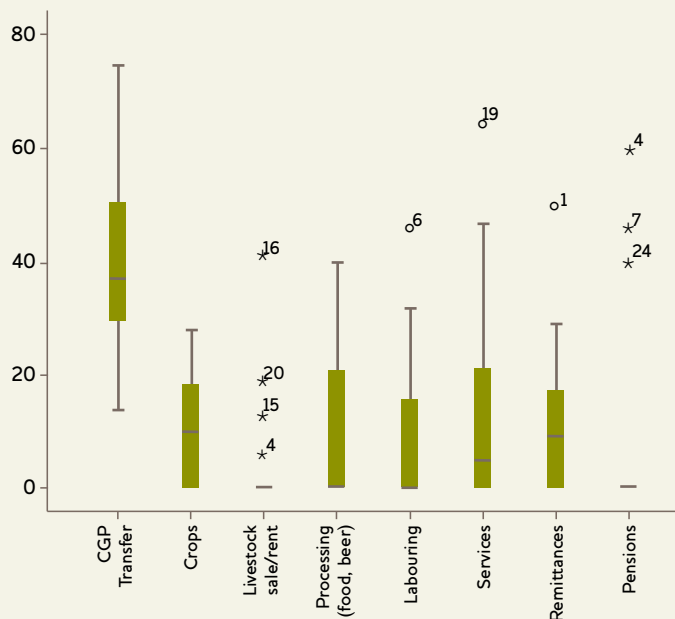
In instances, for example, when participants over-claimed significant contribution of the transfer to their livelihood choices this would be challenged by his or her peers in the group or an explanation might be given to explain why that particular individual was able to use her transfer more strategically. Typically this might be because the beneficiary household had lower basic needs costs (such as health expenditure or care for orphan children), or because they had marginally better access to productive resources, such as more physically-able household members or a slightly larger or more fertile parcel of land. Indeed, this cross-checking in participatory, group-based research can be characterised as a discrete set of ‘trustworthiness protocols’ based on a process of ‘group-visual synergy’:

With visual methods like mapping and diagramming the facilitated process can be described as group-visual synergy. This combines canons of inclusive rigour – triangulation with mutual correction and cumulative representation and successive approximation – in the group-visual process often rich in detail (Chambers 2017: 102).

In addition, we were able to establish the generalisability – or external validity – of the data the participants were generating. The generalisability of the FGD findings was enhanced by a two-step process. First, using the administrative list of beneficiaries as a sampling frame, we were able to bring together a group of ‘probability-based’ sampled beneficiaries, representing

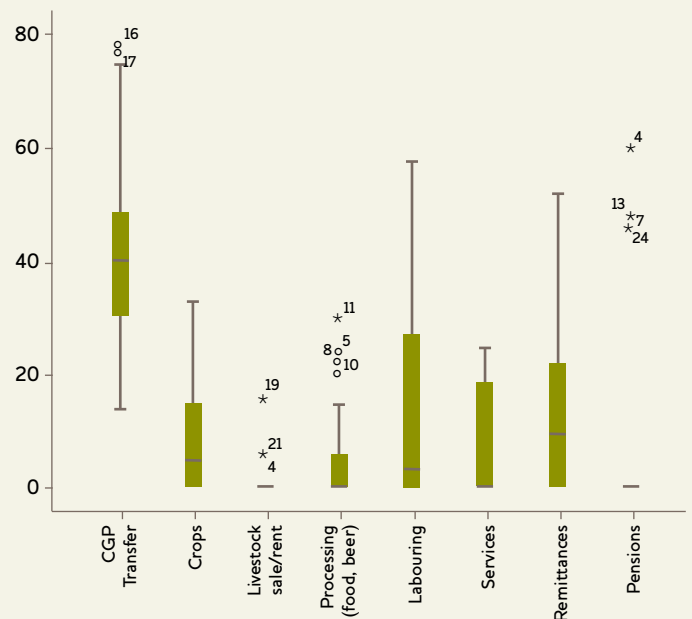
Figure 4 Distribution of beneficiary household income in Mafeteng and Leribe Districts, Lesotho

Beneficiary household income, Mafeteng



Sample size (n)=24 (total beneficiary household number in sampled community councils=700)

Beneficiary household income, Leribe



Sample size (n)=24 (total beneficiary household number in sampled community councils=391)

Source: Barca et al. (2015); reproduced with permission.

between 10 and 20 per cent of the total population of beneficiaries. Second, we were able to profile this sample and ‘capture the variability’ of their social and economic situation. We did this by collecting a background profile on each beneficiary using open questions in a group setting on the following variables: land ownership, household assets, number of productive household members, number of dependants, and so on. This enabled us to assess the range of household situations of beneficiaries and identify the typical, or average, experience or profile of a beneficiary in each sampled location. From this profiling we were then able to identify individual beneficiaries with a typical profile for in-depth case study interviews.

4 The CT qualitative module impact assessment findings illustrated

The rich findings generated by this mixed methods approach are detailed in country study documents and a synthesis report (Barca *et al.* 2015). We provide a few headlines here to illustrate the utility of the methodology. Across the case study countries, the CT represented a major source of income for beneficiary households. Income and expenditure analysis with beneficiaries revealed that beneficiary reliance on the CT income was high. This proportion typically ranged between 40 and 60 per cent of total beneficiary household income across all six countries. This is illustrated in Figure 4, which shows beneficiary household income distribution in Lesotho. The FGD figures suggested that the importance of CTs in household income was far higher than the estimated 20 per cent of total household income elicited by the quantitative studies in the PtoP project. This can be at least partly explained by the different method used to calculate income. The participatory group method used recall data to estimate the proportion (per cent) of all income sources in a typical year, including the CT. The survey method compared the CT amount with the total expenditure on food and non-food items in the seven days prior to the interview.

The qualitative research confirmed that CTs enabled households to cope better with their basic needs. In cases of diversified or increased household productivity, the CT was necessary but not sufficient to support those livelihood strategies. In such cases, beneficiary households were more likely to improve productivity through accompanying access to additional resources, including remittances, risk-sharing networks, household labour, or larger land plots. This meant having more and better food to eat. It also meant reducing destructive coping mechanisms. Hence beneficiaries were less likely to be forced into distress sales of assets or livestock. Children in beneficiary households were less engaged in casual labour and more likely to stay in school, their performance improved with food in their stomachs. Beneficiary households were even able to cope better with health shocks in some cases. The CT also widely conferred self-worth and a sense of hope for people whose life experience had been deprivation.

Significantly, when CTs were delayed, negative coping strategies quickly re-emerged. These in-depth explanations of difference were explored through the group evaluative discussions and follow-up in-depth beneficiary interviews.

For the majority of beneficiaries – the elderly, ill and/or disabled, and targeted as such – welfare improvements were the major impact, and in some cases, beneficiaries across different contexts were even able to improve their livelihoods. Hence economically active beneficiaries were in some instances able to join or rejoin rotating credit savings groups. They were able to withdraw from casual labouring and increase their own livelihoods. This allowed them to make periodic investments in productive inputs or start petty trading with small start-up costs.

Critically, the methodology provided our research teams with a confident and clear perspective on the range and variability of beneficiary experiences. This confidence and clarity was built on the mixed methods group household income and expenditure analysis conducted with randomly sampled groups of male and female beneficiaries. Significantly, this methodology prevented the possibility that researchers might try to mine the data, ‘exaggerating the average’ experience of beneficiaries to fit their world view. The emergence of relatively capital-intensive livelihood diversification in amongst one site in Kenya, for instance, threw up potentially more dramatic and headline-grabbing stories. One concerned a female motorcycle taxi business that emerged through the combined efforts of a small group of CT beneficiaries. Each woman bought a ‘moto’ and hired a young driver – who gave a daily profit minimum to the owner, keeping the rest as earnings. The moto business was reportedly thriving. The participatory household and expenditure data, mapped against beneficiary profiles, confirmed, however, that this beneficiary impact was atypical. This was due to the beneficiary profile of the women involved, who were younger and had more household assets than the typical beneficiary, allowing them to divert this extra income source into a pooled income activity rather than prioritising expenditure on food, school, health, withdrawing from distress sales of labour, or investing in marginal improvements in production. Klls further confirmed that as an early district adopter of the CT programme, there was a standardised way of measuring the poverty level of beneficiaries in this particular district, coupled with weak ‘graduation’ of beneficiaries out of the programme. Indeed, districts that came onstream later in the CT programme’s existence corrected for these weaknesses in procedure. In other words, while the case raised interesting questions about how a small injection of cash could prompt capital investment and livelihood diversification, it was not a likely scenario for the majority of beneficiaries in the Kenya CT programme, who were typically more vulnerable, asset poor, and risk averse.

5 Conclusions and the way forward

While impact assessments commonly combine survey instruments with qualitative methods, there are a number of obstacles to getting the most out of mixed methods impact assessments. At best, an impact assessment is able to integrate reliable and generalisable descriptions of changing impact with in-depth explanations of change and programme contribution to change. It can also include process elements which encourage reflection and action by those with a stake in improving these impacts. A major challenge in getting the most out of mixed methods is how to make a constructive link between quantitative survey data and in-depth qualitative analysis.

This paper has focused on this challenge, reflecting on the experience of designing an integrated 'qual-quant' impact assessment methodology through the use of participatory research methods. While having a nested qualitative research component based on a systematic sampling strategy is not new, the novel element described in this paper is the use of participatory methods to assess income, household expenditure, and the relevance of a CT in this income and its investment. This integration was designed into a modestly budgeted qualitative research module within a larger mixed methods impact evaluation project. The starting point for this reflection was the not-unusual situation that in this project it proved difficult to effectively combine the large-scale survey and in-depth qualitative elements due to methodological and logistical hurdles.

With these hurdles in mind, we have illustrated how the qualitative module design allowed us to use participatory methods with beneficiaries in cluster-sampled communities to generate reliable quantitative and qualitative data that described and explained the economic and social impacts of CTs. We judged that the process of combining the individual and the group analysis increased reliability and enriched the analytical discussion. We have described a research process that built in some moments for group reflection of the analysis and its implications.

Care with sampling protocol increased our confidence in the external validity of this analysis. We captured the variability of beneficiary circumstances in different sampled contexts, increasing our confidence of inference. At the same time, we hoped to head off the type of criticism often levelled at qualitative research – that it can 'exaggerate the average experience' of beneficiaries through 'data mining' of interesting or atypical experiences. White describes data mining in quantitative and qualitative research as a method that caters to the confirmation bias of the researcher:

The data miner knows what he or she is looking for and digs the data until they find it. The data analyst, on the other hand, is looking through the data allowing patterns, expected or unexpected, to emerge (2009: 9).

Headline-grabbing stories of change emerged as interesting examples of what beneficiaries could achieve in certain circumstances but were recognised by the research teams through shared critical analytical reflection as not generalisable. Instead we were able to show that this was not the typical experience and qualitative inferences about the transformational impact of CTs could be kept in check.

We conclude that this approach of cluster sampling and mixed methods makes time and resources available for in-depth exploration of change. It adds significant value to the important but limited questions posed by large-scale experimental survey designs: 'did it change' and if so, 'by how much'? It also acts progressively on an important principle of methodological equity, or 'equality of difference'. It does so by helping to move methodological discussion away from a norm in development research in which qualitative research plays 'second fiddle' to conventional empiricist investigation. Furthermore, for group participants, the process of generating and analysing their own data provides an opportunity for local ownership and action. This is described elsewhere as a 'win-win' outcome 'in which statistics are a part of an empowering process for local people and part of a real-time information flow for those aid agencies and government departments willing to generate statistics in new ways' (Holland 2013: 1).

Looking forward, we recognise clear trade-offs in applying this type of methodology. Using cluster sampling in order to spend more time in a smaller number of sites increases the risk of sampling bias and can limit the extent to which we can infer with confidence that change has happened across larger populations. The case discussed above of the Kenya district without beneficiary poverty status testing and 'graduation' illustrates the biases that can occur with cluster sampling, although significantly this explanation was picked up through contextual qualitative insight.

Other trade-offs include the way time is used in group settings. Treating group participants additionally as individual units of analysis takes away valuable time for group analytical discussion. Spending time within communities supporting reflection and action can contaminate communities that are set up as panels for longitudinal impact assessment.

Additional trade-offs, beyond the scope of this paper, include how to balance time spent on case analysis with the time required to categorise, synthesise and compare large volumes of narrative empirical findings evidence generated through this combined methods approach across sites and countries. In synthesising our findings for this multi-country study we tended to fall back on individual case study narrative presentations. In doing so, we passed over the opportunity to construct and present 'causal process observation' or 'qualitative comparative analysis' matrices that are now widely used to distill qualitative dimensions of change in large studies.

These trade-offs need to be transparently laid out and considered when designing and resourcing impact assessments, but without simply reverting to a 'business as usual' mode. Alternatives can be found. Individual data gathering in a group setting can be replaced by local surveys; for example, to allay concerns over the boundary between public and private data or to free up time for group analysis.

Finally, trade-off discussions must extend to that between extractive and process goals. Research protocols in participatory impact assessments provide strategic opportunities for locally generated analysis to be translated into action at different levels and to maximise the ownership and uptake of the impact assessment. In this case, the research did not prioritise participatory

action elements but did build in a minimum level of local reflection according to ethical considerations attached to participatory research.³ This included building in time during group sessions for participants to consider the implications of their analysis, and including at the end of a week's fieldwork, a community feedback session where results could be discussed and local action considered.

Our overall hope is that the operational utility of this type of integrated approach to impact assessment will increase as the potential rewards to 'bridging the gap' between quantitative surveys and in-depth qualitative investigation in impact assessment – guided by participatory principles and methods – is more widely recognised.

Endnotes

- 1 For more details see www.fao.org/economic/ptop/home/en/.
- 2 We note that ten seeds, rather than 100 seeds, were used for expenditure analysis in Ghana (the pilot country) and subsequently only in Kenya.

- 3 A 'parti-numbers' network established in the early 2000s, for instance, produced *Guidelines and a Code of Conduct* for participatory research that generated numbers. This is available on request from the lead author.

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“ The qualitative module design for this multi-country cash transfer impact study bridged the ‘quant-qual gap’ by utilising participatory methods to generate both quantitative and qualitative data. Through group analysis with participatory tools, beneficiaries in communities across a range of contexts provided in-depth analysis of the economic and social impacts of cash transfers. ”

Centre for Development Impact (CDI)


The Centre is a collaboration between IDS (www.ids.ac.uk), Itad (www.itad.com) and the University of East Anglia (www.uea.ac.uk).

The Centre aims to contribute to innovation and excellence in the areas of impact assessment, evaluation and learning in development. The Centre’s work is presently focused on:

- (1) Exploring a broader range of evaluation designs and methods, and approaches to causal inference.
- (2) Designing appropriate ways to assess the impact of complex interventions in challenging contexts.
- (3) Better understanding the political dynamics and other factors in the evaluation process, including the use of evaluation evidence.

This CDI Practice Paper was written by **Jeremy Holland, Ramlatu Attah, Valentina Barca, Clare O’Brien, Simon Brook, Eleanor Fisher** and **Andrew Kardan**.

The opinions expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of IDS or any of the institutions involved.

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