

How Social Protection Programmes Can Improve Early Childhood Development

For 250 million children under the age of five in low- and middle-income countries, extreme poverty and stunting undermines their developmental potential. This puts children at risk of a lifetime of hardship, and remaining trapped in poverty. Provision of economic support to families, in particular to mothers as the main carers for children, through comprehensive social protection programmes such as ‘graduation programmes’ may offer a ‘double boon’: it can improve early childhood development (ECD) in the short term and reduce poverty in the long run. Evidence from in-depth research in Haiti shows that supporting women to have sustainable livelihoods such as livestock rearing or market trading needs to go hand in hand with promoting a nurturing environment for their children to achieve positive impacts all round.

Poverty, ECD, and graduation programming

Living in poverty presents a major risk for young children that can undermine their biological and cognitive development. Economic strengthening may counteract this and can in turn break the intergenerational cycle of poverty and improve the future for children, their families, and their country as a whole.

Graduation programmes are relatively new and bring a wave of interventions that aim to promote economic strengthening by offering a comprehensive package of support. The *Chemen Lavi Miyò* (CLM) programme in Haiti is implemented by local NGO Fonkoze and focuses on women who are able to work and from extremely poor households with dependants, helping them onto a ‘pathway to a better life’. It supports them over 18 months through a carefully tailored package of cash and asset transfers, skills development, coaching and service provision. It does

so in a context of widespread poverty and very poor public service provision. Over half of Haiti’s population lives in poverty and services such as schools and health clinics are often of low quality, far away, and expensive.

Graduation programmes

Graduation programmes are premised on the understanding that people living in extreme poverty require a big push to move them out of poverty in a sustainable manner, in order to ‘graduate’ from poverty. These programmes provide a carefully sequenced package of support, including a combination of cash and asset transfers, access to savings and credit, and coaching and support. They have spread across the globe in the past decade, and are now being implemented in more than 43 countries.

“Economic strengthening through graduation programming can counteract the risk of living in poverty for young children and improve their future.”

Evaluations of graduation programmes point to positive impacts on consumption, assets and food security. However, evidence about the impact on child development is relatively thin and underlying mechanisms are poorly understood. Effects can go both ways. The availability of more economic resources can improve food security and living conditions as well as access to health and education services. Greater income security can lead to greater mental health and reduced stress among mothers, leading to improved relationships and caregiving practices. Tailored coaching by dedicated case managers can increase knowledge and also positively change caregiving practices.

However, with female caregivers taking on more economic responsibility, there is the risk of an increase in the combined burden of paid and unpaid work, leading to a trade-off between earning more income and providing quality care for children.

Ensuring that graduation programmes underpin children's development

Nurturing Care is a new framework that offers a holistic approach towards ECD. It is focused on creating an enabling environment for children in support of their biological, cognitive, and emotional development during infancy.

Nurturing care

The World Health Organization (WHO) Nurturing Care Framework (2018) was developed in response to the urgency for improving outcomes for young children, and the prioritisation of investment in early childhood among many international partners such as UNICEF, the World Bank, UNESCO, and WHO.

Nurturing care can be seen as a safe and enabling environment that enables young children to develop and thrive. The framework identifies five domains of nurturing care, namely (i) health, (ii) nutrition, (iii) security and safety, (iv) responsive caregiving, and (v) early learning. Caregivers are central to the creation of nurturing care for children.

Although the promotion of ECD is not a core objective of the CLM programme, it helps to support children's development, mostly in the areas of health, nutrition, and security. The programme contributes to children eating more meals and consuming more diverse foods and improving sanitation practices for children, such as bathing them more often, not letting them walk around without clothing and the use of latrines. This helps to avoid illnesses such as diarrhoea. The programme also focuses on the construction of new homes, which ensures that children – and their families – are less exposed to changing weather conditions and at lower risk of getting harmed.

However, the programme plays a modest role in terms of responsive caregiving and early learning. This may not be surprising as these areas of child development are arguably furthest removed from the programme's overall objectives of reducing poverty and improving family wellbeing. Caregivers learn about the importance of communicating with their infants, even from before birth, and they report talking and singing to their babies. However, caregivers' interactions with their children become less positive and more punitive as children grow older. Findings show that caregivers are less patient when children are upset and less tolerant towards children's undesirable behaviour, such as being naughty and disobeying instructions. Corporal punishment is common in the study sites, with children being slapped or made to sit on their knees as a way of disciplining them. The CLM programme does not address such disciplinary practices.

The power of a comprehensive approach

Access to more economic resources, both provided directly by the CLM programme and generated through women's economic activities, is crucial for positive change. Economic resources include the availability of cash, access to community savings and lending groups, or being able to sell assets. These can allow caregivers to provide for their children's basic needs, and so that caregivers have more hope, which has positive effects on their own wellbeing and their relationships with their children. Training, continuous messaging, and tailored advice create awareness about nutrition, sanitation, and caregiving practices, and provide the opportunity to discuss challenges.

“The programme helps to promote children's development but plays a modest role in responsive caregiving and early learning.”

Making the case for combining material support, training, and ongoing advice

The success of supporting children to drink clean water illustrates the importance of combining material support with the provision of training and ongoing advice to families.

All programme participants receive a water filter and are given general training about how to use it. During home visits, case managers check on the use of the water filter and follow up any issues or concerns. The combined effect of being given the water filter and hearing a general explanation around its use, using it in practice, and receiving a follow-up visit affords families the valuable experience and the benefits of drinking clean water.

Darline, mother of five young children, explains: 'I drink treated water, it won't make me sick and I won't get diarrhoea or cholera... Because if you put water in the filter, it will purify it. When the children drink it, they won't get sick [diarrhoea].'

This increases the chances of members replacing old or broken filters in the future and ensuring that their children drink clean water on an ongoing basis, even if economic resources are scarce.

The power of the programme lies in its economic, training, and coaching components combined with its positively reinforcing nature. The availability of cash allows for lessons learned – such as about nutrition and sanitation – being put into practice, with their subsequent experiences providing programme participants with evidence of its effectiveness and confidence in implementation.

Experiences with the programme also highlight the trade-off between undertaking work and providing quality care for children. Programme participants struggle to juggle both responsibilities, particularly in relation to childcare. Economic activities often take place away from home, such as trading at markets and working on farms, and women are unable to bring their children with them. Support networks are often relatively small and women may not find another trusted adult to look after their children, in which case they opt to leave them alone or in the care of other, often young, siblings or elderly relatives. Women also forego economic opportunities as a result of this trade-off, as they do not see a possibility of combining both.

Identity, trust, relationships, and services

The CLM programme emphasises women's capabilities and agency in developing their own economic activities and creating greater financial independence. This creates a sense of purpose and hope, and positively shifts women's views of their own role in their families and communities. Yet they remain seen as being primarily responsible for the provision of childcare, thereby reinforcing the juggling act of paid work and care. The CLM programme plays into this understanding by emphasising its participants' responsibilities across paid work and care, leaving the issue of who provides care unchallenged.

Trust between caregivers and those around them is vital for any mechanisms that can ensure quality care for children while their caregivers are engaging in paid work. High levels of distrust, often grounded in spiritual beliefs and concerns about putting children at risk, limit opportunities for children to be left in the care of others. Social support networks tend to be small, with programme participants relying on a circle of close relatives, extended family members or neighbours for childcare. Balancing paid work and care becomes very difficult to juggle, and opportunities to integrate community childcare options within programmes like CLM are limited.

Strong relationships prove to be the backbone of success within the CLM programme, and for positive impacts on children. Strong spousal relationships are associated with greater economic success, and with better outcomes for children in all aspects of nurturing care. Strong ties with family and community members help to juggle the multitude of tasks related to paid work and care. The relationship with case managers is also key, with positive relationships instilling a sense of confidence and self-worth that makes it easier to absorb messages and change practices that are vital for improved ECD.

Ultimately, caregivers' economic security needs to be accompanied with the availability of quality basic services such as schooling and health services. This combination is crucial for ensuring a positive and supportive environment for children. Basic service provision is greatly lacking in rural Haiti with hardly any ECD services available. This limits the potential for programmes such as CLM to achieve nurturing care, particularly in health and early learning.

“Women remain seen as being primarily responsible for the provision of childcare, thereby reinforcing the juggling act of paid work and care and undermining nurturing care for children.”

Policy recommendations

There are clear lessons from the CLM programme approach in Haiti that should be taken into consideration more broadly for programme design in relation to social protection, graduation programming, and ECD.

Graduation programmes contribute to improved ECD outcomes and nurturing care. Positive effects can be harnessed further by improving impacts in areas of safety and security, responsive caregiving and early learning by:

- Including more messaging on responsive caregiving and early learning within general trainings and follow-up discussions during home visits;
- Discussing and challenging the use of corporal punishment for disciplining children during trainings and follow-up visits;
- Involving spouses and other caregivers in conversations about all aspects of nurturing care; and
- Working with 'nurturing care' champions by ensuring that case managers and project staff lead by example.

Child-sensitive and gender-sensitive social protection are inextricably linked. Childhood development can only be achieved through graduation programming when it recognises, reduces, and redistributes women's care responsibilities through:

- Discussing the juggling act of paid work and care in trainings and during home visits;
- Actively seeking for and supporting solutions for childcare by strengthening existing mechanisms or exploring and trying new, possibly member-led, initiatives;
- Avoiding explicit and implicit messaging that women carry prime responsibility for provision of care; and
- Challenging gender norms regarding responsibility for childcare by discussing these in training and during home visits.

Promoting childhood development for all children requires access to affordable and quality basic services. While provision of services is beyond the remit of graduation programmes, linkages can be strengthened by:

- Discussing with and keeping pressure on government to provide schooling and health services; and
- Closer collaboration with other NGOs in the provision of ECD services.

Further reading

Banerjee, A. *et al.* (2015) 'A Multifaceted Program Causes Lasting Progress for the Very Poor: Evidence from Six Countries', *Science* 348.6236: 1260799

Partnership for Economic Inclusion (2018) *2018 State of the Sector Synthesis Report*, Washington DC: World Bank

Roelen *et al.* (forthcoming) *Pathways to Stronger Futures in Haiti: The Role of Graduation Programming in Promoting Early Childhood Development*, Research Report, Brighton: IDS

WHO (2018) *Nurturing Care for Early Childhood Development. A Framework for Helping Children Survive and Thrive to Transform Health and Human Potential*, Geneva: World Health Organization

Credits

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