

# Two Cheers for CCTs

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## 1 Introduction

In the rush to meet Millennium Development Goal (MDG) commitments to halve extreme poverty by 2015, 'conditional cash transfers' (CCTs) are being widely adopted as one of the most effective means of tackling poverty and social exclusion in developing countries. In recent years, CCT programmes have been established in Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Jamaica, Mexico, South Africa and Turkey, and many more countries are piloting them with the support of the International Financial Institutions (IFIs) and donor governments (de la Brière and Rawlings 2006).

Among the many claims made for CCTs is that, in addition to providing effective relief from hardship, they accomplish a number of social and human development objectives, empowering beneficiary household members through the dynamics built into programme design. CCTs aim to promote subjective and situational changes through which beneficiaries become active, responsible citizens rather than passive recipients of handouts. Women, as receivers of the stipend and as those responsible for fulfilling programme objectives, gain status and visibility within the household and community, while their children benefit from improved access to schooling and health, expanded life chances and higher expectations of what they can achieve. In all these respects, CCTs promise a transformation of the lives of the poor, brought about by the simple device of providing a cash supplement conditional on children's school attendance and health monitoring.

CCTs offer governments a number of advantages over previous poverty relief programmes. Cash transfers boost local consumption without undercutting producers' prices as food programmes often do, and once set up, they are relatively cheap and easy to administer. Targeting is based on centralised data systems, which allow for more accurate identification of beneficiaries, regular monitoring and evaluations. They also prevent multiple claiming by beneficiaries and

their centralised system helps curb local clientelism and corruption; beneficiaries receive their stipends conditional on compliance with programme objectives, not, as is all too often the case, on the favour of political bosses. Overall, their design reflects the broad consensus in the development policy community that poverty and deprivation must be tackled through human development initiatives, and at source, in the family. In order to overcome extreme poverty, programmes must move from the old 'assistentialist' model to one that is at once more dynamic and more comprehensive in its treatment of the poor.

PROGRESA/*Oportunidades*, established in Mexico in 1997 is one of the flagship CCTs that is attracting international acclaim. Similar in many respects to *Bolsa Escola*, pioneered by the Cardoso government in Brazil, PROGRESA/*Oportunidades* has four defining characteristics: (1) it is targeted at populations in extreme poverty; (2) its aim is to promote human development, focusing on the health, education and nutrition of children; (3) support is conditional in order to ensure compliance with programme objectives and to bring about positive changes in beneficiary behaviour; and (4) it delivers a cash transfer directly to women, in the form of grants to pay for the costs associated with their children's schooling.

Evaluations of *Oportunidades*<sup>1</sup> show that it is successful in meeting its principal objectives. It reduces poverty through supporting household and food expenditure, with a corresponding decline in the malnutrition of young children; it achieves higher enrolments for those of school age, reduced dropout rates and a lower incidence of child labour. These results have led to the programme greatly extending its coverage. *Oportunidades* was initially a rural programme but has doubled its beneficiary population to 5 million, to include urban households; Brazil's *Bolsa Família* is set to reach at least 11 million under the second Lula administration.

Such positive outcomes in children's welfare are welcome, especially when poverty, deprivation and exclusion are the reality for up to 40 per cent of the population in regions such as Latin America. Yet there are reasons to be cautious over some of the more overblown claims made on behalf of CCTs. Concerns have been voiced over whether their successes so far can be duplicated in poorer countries. CCTs were developed in, and have been most successful in middle-income countries that have institutional and administrative capacity. Whether poorer states would be able to meet the increased demand for social services generated by these programmes is less certain. Other worries centre on whether the stipend offered to qualifying households is adequate to meet their needs, and in particular whether it is sufficient to protect against shocks such as the unemployment of the main breadwinner, illness and environmental hazards. These programmes also do not generally reach vulnerable groups such as the disabled and the elderly, or those living beyond the reach of school and health centres, who cannot therefore comply with the programme's conditions (de la Brière and Rawlings 2006).

## 2 The gender dimension

CCTs are commonly praised for their gender awareness, in particular for empowering women as recipients of the cash transfer, itself undoubtedly an advance on previous practice. In addition, PROGRESA/*Oportunidades* has, as one of its main aims: 'strengthening the capabilities of beneficiary family members'. As a result of adopting a 'gender perspective', it 'promote(s) the equal access of women to its benefits', recognising that 'poverty acquires different forms according to the inequalities that prevail between the sexes' (SEDESOL 2005). But how far are these aims realised? And what are the outcomes and gender impacts of CCTs?

CCTs are principally designed to enhance children's life chances. They are targeted programmes not only in the usual sense of selecting out beneficiaries from the population at large, but they are targeted at the micro level, within the family or household itself. The social construction of need is therefore selective and child-centred; in this order of priorities, women are positioned to serve the needs of the children through the programme. This places talk of 'empowerment' in question, since such benefits as the women derive from participating in the programme are largely the result of servicing the

needs of others. In this model, fathers/husbands are marginal to the workings of the programme, which in effect equates to being marginalised from the care of children.

There are good reasons for focusing scarce resources on children – this is not at issue here. The question is whether, in depending upon and reinforcing a maternal model of care, these programmes may be responsible for sub-optimal outcomes for some household members, particularly for the stipendiary-holding mothers, in the medium and long term. Anti-poverty policies clearly make more sense if, in targeting one group in need, they take care not to disadvantage another vulnerable group in the process.

If we focus on the situation of women, we find that while there is some discussion of the gender effects of these programmes in some evaluations,<sup>2</sup> this issue has received little critical attention in the public policy debate. CCTs give mothers a central role in their design; as stipendiaries, they are responsible for fulfilling the demands of the programme through a quasi-contractual arrangement. Sometimes defined as co-responsibility, conditionality is understood in terms of cost-sharing, where beneficiaries make a contribution (in time and labour) to the programmes (Yaschine 1999).<sup>3</sup> Receipt of the stipend is in this case conditional on fulfilling the duties laid out by the programme managers: this involves taking children for regular health checks; meeting targets for ensuring their children's attendance at school; attending workshops on health and programme co-ordinators meetings; and contributing a set amount of hours of work to the community, typically for cleaning buildings or clearing rubbish. Failure to comply with these requirements can lead to fines or even being struck off the programme.

*Oportunidades* claims that it has helped to 'empower' the mothers and daughters who are its beneficiaries. But is this really the case? As far as daughters are concerned, the answer is a qualified affirmative: improving the educational opportunities of girls is known to have strong potential to enhance their self-esteem and life chances, while at the same time sending a message to households and to communities that girls are 'worth investing in'. Results from different regions confirm that this is a general and positive outcome. The situation regarding their mothers is less clear: stipends paid directly to women are widely accepted to benefit their households

through more equitable redistribution, and in giving them direct control over cash resources, their standing in their communities as well as their leverage within the household can also be enhanced. Women in these programmes generally confirm that their self-esteem and financial security are enhanced as a result of the stipends; they also feel that they acquire more status in their neighbourhoods, with shopkeepers treating them with more respect as they became creditworthy (Escobar Latapí and González de la Rocha 2004; Adato *et al.* 2000).

However, further evidence on the gender impacts of the programme is needed to establish if it is empowering women through increasing their economic autonomy and is producing any redistribution of power and status within households. Here, some of the assumptions in the literature on CCTs are questionable. For instance, cash handouts paid directly to women may have the positive effects in terms of status that are claimed, but they do not necessarily alter male/female inequities in personal consumption and they can even serve to protect men's personal income and expenditure (Chant 2007). They can also generate tensions between men and women at household and community levels, whether around the implications of women's increased autonomy and presence in the public sphere, men's resentment at being displaced as providers, or their envy of what they see as women's privileged access to project resources.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, as Chant notes, women might acquire more control over household management but they also acquire more responsibility for managing poverty. What are the implications then for gender relations? Some evidence suggests that cash transfers might be encouraging some men to do less income-generating work (Rubio 2002; Escobar Latapí and González de la Rocha 2004).<sup>5</sup> If this is the case, it squares with Chant's (2007) findings that the more women work in the paid economy, the less men are inclined to. The only safe conclusion that can be drawn on the matter of whether stipends empower women or not, is that we do not know, in the absence of reliable data on this question.

Likewise, few evaluations have so far explored, in any depth, if the demands of these programmes have any negative effects on female participants. One evaluation carried out by a network of *promotoras* found that some stipendiaries felt 'discriminated against' by its demands on their time, particularly for work such as

cleaning and sweeping. They believed that they were 'treated badly or ... were asked to do things in ways that offended their dignity' (Rivero 2002: 4).<sup>6</sup>

There was, not surprisingly, resistance among some communities to accepting the notion of 'co-responsibility'. Rather, the requirements of the programme were seen in terms of 'obligations' and participants felt that genuine co-responsibility would also (for instance) oblige teachers to accept their responsibility not to miss classes. This 'inequality of responsibility' made some participants resentful of the way they were expected to meet targets set for monitoring the health and education of their children. Why, they asked, should a teacher's salary not be reduced if they fail to turn up to teach, since mothers were fined for not meeting their targets (Rivero 2002)?<sup>7</sup> This latter point reflected a general criticism that there were few reliable mechanisms of accountability where complaints regarding the behaviour of officials or professionals could be processed. Nor were the participants given an active role in the design, management and evaluation of the programme. It is hard to square these findings with the view that the programme was intended to function 'as a way of exercising civil, political and social rights and as a means to achieve full citizenship' (Rivero 2002).

Some evaluations have also raised the problem that the time and labour demands on beneficiaries conflict with women's other income-generating activities (Escobar Latapí and González de la Rocha 2004; Adato *et al.* 2000; Armas 2005 and Espinosa 2006). This was particularly the case with the unpaid voluntary workers (*promotoras*) who dedicated on average 30 hours a month to administrative, pastoral and medical responsibilities. Adato *et al.* (2000) among others, found that women's workloads increased as children's contribution to domestic tasks decreased in favour of school demands; and where help was available it was still generally daughters who were helping their mothers rather than sons, with the girls still dropping out of school earlier than the boys. Altering girls' expectations does not just depend on schooling but on what role models are available within the family.<sup>8</sup>

### **3 Women are vulnerable too**

As decades of research testify, gender divisions are associated with inequalities of power and resources. They work to women's disadvantage if they

undermine their autonomy and economic security, thereby deepening their vulnerability as they strengthen their dependence on marriage and family for their security. It is important to stress that the 'empowerment' that women are supposed to achieve as stipendiary-holders is not the empowerment of greater autonomy or security, since their participation in the programme in effect binds them ever more closely to the household and undermines their capacity for autonomous action, particularly economic action. Receipt of the transfers in effect reinforces their traditional roles and responsibilities, so that women are empowered only within these structures, which are ones through which disempowering gender asymmetries are reproduced.

Most women in these programmes are extremely disadvantaged; they may suffer from multiple forms of exclusion, most will have low literacy levels, and their skills are poorly rewarded. Many will be involved in some form of income-generating activity and even if their earnings are meagre, they nonetheless represent a significant, possibly increasing proportion of household income. Where male out-migration is occurring, many women manage households with several children, along with responsibility for other kin including elderly dependants, yet no child-care facilities are offered to beneficiaries to help them meet the obligations imposed by the programme.

What do CCT programmes offer to these women beyond their status as stipendiaries and the more certain satisfaction of providing for their children? In most programmes there is little in their design that advances women's economic autonomy or security. Indeed, the costs many bear through juggling their multiple responsibilities in terms of weak labour market links, lack of support for care work and long-term insecurity are not taken into account. Training for the job market is limited or non-existent, and there is scant if any child-care provision for those women who need it because they work, train or study. This is not to deny that many women might not perceive the programme's demands as anything other than helpful in relieving some of the pressure on them to obtain paid work – especially if little is available to them. But given the importance of women's lifelong economic precariousness, the lack of attention to this issue is striking.

The underlying problem with CCTs, then, is that they not only depend on gender divisions for their

functioning but in some ways they actively reinforce them. The transfers bind women to the household as carers, conditional on maternal responsibility for children's care and welfare, that is, on good motherhood. There are naturally no conditionalities imposed on fathers, who by circumstance and design, are marginalised from the programme and from child-care responsibilities. This reinforcement proceeds in striking disregard of the internationally promoted consensus on women's and children's rights and on gender relations within the family. The Children's Rights Convention sums up a widely-held view that children should be cared for by both parents, and child welfare – particularly that of boys – is now understood to be enhanced by fathers' involvement in caring. Is the programme's support for maternalist models of care in 'the best interest of the child' or of women, or indeed, even of fathers?

#### **4 Concluding observations**

The international consensus that children should be prioritised in social programmes implies that child-focused anti-poverty strategies will continue to achieve wide support, and for good reasons. It is therefore urgent and necessary to pose some tough questions about some of the claims that are being made for current programmes. With regard to their selective approach to need, a critical issue is to consider how to rectify the trade-off that is occurring between women's and children's needs, first by tackling rather than reinforcing women's vulnerability, and second, by changing the pattern of intra-household responsibilities for care. As far as the first of these propositions is concerned, children's needs for good care and for access to health and education do not have to prevent their mothers from escaping poverty and deprivation. Women in extreme poverty need to be able to combine their child-care responsibilities with their own exit strategies out of poverty. They need projects that enhance their capabilities through education or training, and provide access to employment and credit for income-generating projects that can enable them to acquire their own assets. Above all, they need sustainable material security rather than depending on a subsidy that is conditional on good motherhood and the number of school-age children they care for.

This implies that when assessing the social impact of these programmes, it is important to consider the household as a whole (and by extension, its gender

order) if they are to maximise their positive impacts. There is no reason why their design could not encourage a more dynamic model of gender and generational cooperation, one which would generate more positive outcomes for all members, including men. This would depend upon attitudes towards men changing so that fathers are considered as having something positive to contribute to the work of care, involving them in ways that break down dysfunctional sex typing and power relations across the generations. Households could be encouraged to adopt more cooperative principles in regard to care rather than relying on the exclusive responsibilities of mothers.

Finally, if such programmes are to offer more to their beneficiaries than they do at present and enhance the life chances of seriously disadvantaged

populations, they need to be linked to efforts to generate sustainable livelihoods within the regions where they are put in place. If poverty is the result of a lack of jobs combined with precarious livelihoods, tackling poverty through a stipend is no substitute for an integrated approach to poverty relief. Indeed, a perverse outcome of the *Oportunidades* programme is that in depressed rural regions, grant-holding school-leavers see no future in remaining in Mexico, and talk of departing for the USA as soon as they can. Without attention to livelihoods, CCTs will be educating young people principally for export – to the lower rungs of the metropolitan labour markets. Meanwhile, the future of their less mobile mothers shifts from dependency on a stipend for motherhood, to dependency on remittances from husbands and children – yet neither is a secure or sustainable prospect.

#### Notes

\* This article draws on research undertaken for Molyneux 2006.

- 1 See, *inter alia*, Adato *et al.* 2000; Skoufias 2005; Skoufias and Di Maro 2006; Escobar Latapí and González de la Rocha 2004. See the SEDESOL website, and for evaluations posted on the *Oportunidades* website: [www.Oportunidades.gob.mx](http://www.Oportunidades.gob.mx)
- 2 There is still a paucity of appropriately detailed evidence to settle the question of gender impacts. For studies which discuss the gender impacts of the *Oportunidades* programme, see *inter alia*, Adato *et al.* 2000; Escobar Latapí and González de la Rocha 2004; and Espinosa 2006. See Armas (2005) for a gender critique of a sister programme in Ecuador, *Bono de Desarrollo Humano*.
- 3 According to Programme Director, Rogelio Hermosillo, the majority of Latin American countries had by Summer 2005, sought advice on how to set up similar programmes.
- 4 Adato *et al.* (2000) state that women did complain that men were left out of the health workshops, and I observed similar attitudes during my 2005 field visits.
- 5 Chant (2007) in her comparative research has arrived at similar conclusions regarding men's

withdrawal of financial responsibility from the family when women's income rises. Armas (2005) has similar findings for Ecuador's CTP. More research on this issue in relation to *Oportunidades* would be necessary to establish whether this was a trend. Skoufias and Di Maro (2006), on pre-2000 data, found that the programme did not have a large impact on adult participation in the labour market. This needs updating with time-series data; the impact on time allocation also needs more research – this study only analysed 1999 data.

- 6 In the PROGRESA programme, such work involved on average 29 hours per month.
- 7 More generally, as an IFPRI evaluation notes, 'If the programme is to have a significant effect on the human development of children, more attention needs to be directed to the quality of education provided by schools' (Skoufias 2005: 2).
- 8 Many poor rural women engage in cultivation and have traditionally relied on help from children in this work. Clearly, this is another area where more research is needed on the socioeconomic impact on children's withdrawal from these activities.

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