

National Social Investments Programme: The potential to achieve the Sustainable Development Goal on poverty eradication through the Conditional Cash Transfer Programme in Nigeria

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Abstract

The Nigerian government in 2016 rolled out a comprehensive National Social Safety Net Programme (NASSP) as part of its Social Investment Programmes. The expectation is that the poorest and most vulnerable Nigerians will get access to social safety nets by 2021 through a US\$500 million International Development Association (IDA) credit approved in June 2016 by the World Bank Group's Board of Executive Directors. The Nigerian government was to further contribute \$1.3 billion of its own budget to NASSP to lay the foundation for the establishment of the country's first national social safety nets system.

To this end, the Federal Government of Nigeria established the National Social Investments Programmes (NSIP) in 2016, to tackle poverty and hunger across the country. The suite of programmes under the NSIP focuses on ensuring a more equitable distribution of resources to vulnerable populations, including children, youth and women. Since 2016, these programmes combined have supported over 4 million beneficiaries across the country. One of the programmes i.e. the Conditional Cash Transfer (CCT) Programme directly supports those within the lowest poverty bracket by improving nutrition, increasing household consumption and supporting the development of human capital through cash benefits to various categories of the poor and vulnerable. The support is conditioned on fulfilling soft and hard co-responsibilities that enable recipients improve their standard of living. This paper examines the potential of the Conditional Cash Transfer programme towards achieving the sustainable development goal on poverty reduction, hunger and related social concerns. Strategies for identification of beneficiaries given that Nigeria is a country of over 180 million people are presented, as well as the challenges and recommendations. This is among the first programmes on the African continent driving the implementation of the sustainable development goal on poverty eradication.

Key words: Conditional cash transfer; Social Safety Net Programme; Poverty eradication; Hunger; Social Investments Programmes; Sustainable Development Goal; SDG.

Introduction

The Nigerian government in 2016 rolled out a comprehensive National Social Safety Net Programme (NASSP) as part of its Social Investment Programmes. The expectation is that the poorest and most vulnerable Nigerians will get access to social safety nets by 2021 through a US\$500 million International Development Assistant credit approved in June 2016 by the World Bank Group's Board of Executive Directors (World Bank, 2016). The Nigerian government's contribution is \$1.3 billion of its own budget to NASSP which laid the foundation for the establishment of the country's first national social safety nets system.

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Poverty and the Sustainable Development Goals

Governments across the world are increasingly realizing that poverty is a major obstacle to human and economic development. It was therefore not a surprise when world leaders gathered at the United Nations headquarters in New York in September 2015 to launch the 17 sustainable development goals (SDG) also known as Agenda 2030, with poverty reduction emerging as a central focus (Asadullah & Savoia 2018). Nigeria Africa's biggest country by population estimated at over 180 million was among the countries that adopted the SDG. With over 60 million Nigerians living below the national poverty line, which leave them highly vulnerable (Department for International Development – DFID n.d), CCT is one of the strategies and a demonstration of Nigeria's determination to meet the sustainable development goal #1. This is important given the fact that Sub-Saharan Africa has remained behind other regions of the world in discussions relating to poverty (World Bank, 2016). The National Bureau of Statistics (2012) reported that poverty in Nigeria has been on the increase over the years such that the three decades between 1980 and 2010 witnessed a rise from 27.2% to 69%.

The United Nations was right in acknowledging that eradicating poverty in all its forms and dimensions, including extreme poverty, remains one of the most fundamental and possibly the most important global challenge that needs to be addressed if we are to attain sustainable development (UNDP, 2015). The first SDG captures the urgency of this issue better: "End poverty in all its forms everywhere" (United Nations 2015a, 13-14).

The seven associated targets highlighted by the United Nations (2015a, 14) speak to the central theme of eradicating extreme poverty for all people everywhere as well:

By 2030, eradicate extreme poverty for all people everywhere, currently measured as people living on less than \$1.25 a day; reduce at least by half the proportion of men, women and children of all ages living in poverty in all its dimensions and implement nationally appropriate social protection systems and measures for all, including floors, and by 2030 achieve substantial coverage of the poor and the vulnerable.

The SDG is not the first attempt of the United Nations at addressing poverty. I really hope it will be the last. Prior to the SDG was the Millennium Development Goal (MDG) from 2000-2015. The overall focus of the MDG was to explore all options to free people from extreme poverty. While acknowledging that the MDGs as the largest global mobilization to address underdevelopment improved the lot of developing countries, the former UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon also noted that the goals were not met, as progress remained uneven across developing countries (United Nations 2015b). The emergence of the SDG was therefore to build upon the achievements of the MDGs and fill the gaps left behind. Prominent among these gaps and unfinished business is poverty eradication (United Nations 2015a). Before the SDG and MDG, the UN as a demonstration of its commitment to eradicating poverty by all means had declared 1997 and 2008 as the first and second UN decades for poverty eradication respectively. As a matter of fact, the UN General Assembly in 1997 decided that poverty

eradication should be an overriding theme of sustainable development for the coming years (United Nations n.d). It is one of the fundamental goals of the international community and of the entire United Nations system. Meeting the goal of SDG 1 on poverty eradication therefore requires that Governments across the world, especially in developing countries need to go the extra-mile. Governments need to change their approach, and that explains the decision of the current administration in Nigeria to establish the National Social Investment Programme, which has CCT as one of its main clusters.

Overview of the Conditional Cash Transfer Programme in Nigeria

The Conditional Cash Transfer Programme directly supports those within the lowest poverty bracket by improving nutrition, increasing household consumption and supporting the development of human capital through cash benefits to various categories of the poor and vulnerable. Since the first implementation of CCT in Brazil and Mexico about two decades ago, the programme has impacted positively on low-income households in developing countries (Bauchet, Undurraga, Reyes-Garcia, Behrman, & Godoy 2018; Perez-Munoz 2017; Berman, Parker & Todd 2011; Handes & Davis 2006). It is a requirement of some CCT programmes that children's school attendance meets a minimum of 80-85% school days for parents or household to benefit (Fiszbein and Schady (2009). Other researchers aver that CCT can be said to have met an important goal of increasing school enrolment and attendance (Ganimian & Murnane 2016; Baird, Ferreira, Ozler & Woolcock 2014; Behrman, Sengupta, & Todd 2005).

Onehi (2017) in an interview with the coordinator of Nigeria's CCT Programme, Dr. Temitope Sinkaiye reported that the programme in Nigeria gives N5, 000 (US\$20) to the vulnerable and poorest in the society every month, payable bi-monthly i.e. N10,000 (US\$40), every two months, which translates to 6 payments per year. The programme through this payment contributes to alleviating poverty and promoting skill development to beneficiaries to become self-reliant. Beneficiaries are trained in life skills as well as savings and business development. The author argued that this is important as the payment is not expected to be for a lifetime.

Strategies for Identification of CCT Beneficiaries in Nigeria

The CCT programme in Nigeria is conditioned on fulfilling soft and hard co-responsibilities that enable recipients improve their standard of living. Given that there is an estimated 60 million poor people in the country (DFID n.d.), the programme upholds transparency in the identification of beneficiaries considered by their communities to be the poorest and most vulnerable households (Onehi, 2017). This community-based targeting strategy ensures that the most vulnerable are not left out.

Given the focus on community participation in the 21st century, the CCT programme in Nigeria adopts a bottom-up approach. After a poverty mapping is conducted, communities are actively involved in the identification of beneficiaries. It is important to point out that while acknowledging the essential role of the poverty lines metrics of the World Bank for different countries, those at the grass-roots of African communities have a better understanding of what poverty means; and an engagement with them on matters of this nature is helpful in establishing a single National Social Register (NSR). It is from this reservoir of data that the National Cash Transfer Office (NCTO)¹ mine beneficiaries, based on required Proxy Mean Test (PMT) criteria and enrol them into the National Beneficiaries Register (NBR). Subsequently, the beneficiaries are exposed to various trainings that will ensure sustained livelihood when they exit the programme. Since

¹ The body that runs the Nigerian CCT Programme

there are no commercial banks in most interior communities where the poor and vulnerable are often found in Nigeria, the programme use Payment Service Providers (PSPs), especially Mobile Money Operators (MMOs) to disburse money to beneficiaries.

Benefits of the CCT Programme and potential for achievement of the SDGs

The benefits and potential inherent in the CCT in Nigeria aligns with the objectives of the programme. As a matter of fact, CCT has the potential to facilitate the achievement of both SDG #1 and 2 in Nigeria. SDG #2 speaks specifically to hunger: “End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture” (United Nations 2015a, 14). Its associated targets highlighted this further:

By 2030, end hunger and ensure access by all people, in particular the poor and people in vulnerable situations, including infants, to safe, nutritious and sufficient food all year round. Also, end all forms of malnutrition, including achieving, by 2025, the internationally agreed targets on stunting and wasting in children under 5 years of age, and address the nutritional needs of adolescent girls, pregnant and lactating women and older persons (p.14).

As earlier pointed out, the objectives of the CCT include improving nutrition, increasing household consumption and supporting the development of human capital through cash benefits to various categories of the poor and vulnerable. As a tool to facilitate the achievement of the SDG on poverty eradication, CCT has the potential to promote human capital development given the fact that poverty is an important inhibitor of such development.

The transfers have been helping to address the problem of malnutrition in Nigeria with over 300, 000 households as beneficiaries so far (Onehi, 2017). As a human capital development driver, the programme has been serving as a means of reducing child and maternal mortality. Pregnant beneficiaries are required to attend ante-natal sessions as well as immunization for their children thereby helping to reduce incidents of diseases and deaths. Households with pregnant women as well as school aged children are to receive a top-up of N5,000 there by doubling the payments for such months to N20, 000 bi-monthly. The important role of CCT in maternal and child health is documented in literature (Okoli, Morris, Oshin, Pate, Aigbe, and Muhammad 2014).

The programme equally addresses human capital challenge in Nigeria by helping beneficiaries to send their children to school. Several studies have highlighted the positive impact of CCT on education of children from poor households (Stampini, Martinez-Cordova, Insfran, and Harris 2018; Bauchet et al. 2018). As children are educated, it changes their orientation towards life with the potential to reduce crime. As knowledge is power, an educated citizenry is crucial to the success of any nation in the 21st century.

Challenges and Recommendations

The CCT programme is not without its own challenges. For instance, lack of awareness is a major challenge, as some communities across Nigeria do not have a solid understanding of what the programme is all about. There is a misconception that it is meant to be payment that will continue forever or as a ploy by the government to keep people quiet for any perceived wrong policies. The actual position is that the programme has a lifespan of 6 years, with the first set of beneficiaries expected to graduate after three years and another fresh set expected to take up the programme from the same community for another three years. Furthermore, the

expectation is that beneficiaries would have developed necessary skills to support themselves after graduation and no longer required to receive the payment.

The CCT programme alone cannot address the problem of poverty in Nigeria. There are other initiatives under the National Social Investment Programme that are also committed to poverty eradication. All these are not enough to bring about zero poverty. Of course they have great potential and can meet the SDG, but require the support of all stakeholders including the private sector through creation of employment opportunities for trained beneficiaries and other forms of empowerment. No society succeeds where everything is left for the government, especially an enormous challenge like poverty.

The poor and vulnerable in communities need to trust the government and by extension the CCT programme. This is important because communities appear to be most comfortable with non-governmental organizations than government driven projects like the CCT. While acknowledging the fact that many would have been victim of failed promises by politicians over the years, seeking to understand what a government programme entails and cooperating to achieve the aim will be helpful.

Lack of policy continuity resulting from changes in governments is a challenge to many good initiatives in Africa. It is my hope that this programme continues in Nigeria as a priority for every government given the enormous challenge posed by poverty.

Conclusion

The CCT programme in Nigeria do not have all the answers to the challenge of poverty in Nigeria but it holds a great potential given cooperation by all stakeholders to achieve the sustainable development goal #1 on poverty eradication. By emphasizing human capital development, the programme's aim is not all about giving daily fish to the poor while they sit down and relax, rather it is about teaching them how to fish for themselves. It is about empowerment and human capital development so that they can support themselves and their families.

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