

## Trust, Legitimacy and Community Perceptions on Randomisation of Cash Transfers

Randomised controlled trials (RCTs) are now increasingly used in social policy and development as methods for identifying causal relationships. The recent win of the Nobel Prize in Economics by three development economists working on RCTs indicates ‘the rise of the evaluations and an acknowledgement for the approach to alleviating poverty’. Growing from the fields of medicine and clinical sciences, RCTs are now considered ‘the gold standard’ for evaluation on matters development. As governments and international organisations seek ways to understand causal questions related to development (Chelwa, Muller and Hoffmann 2019a), so has the popularity of RCTs grown. Developing countries constitute the bulk of where development economists and non-governmental organisations carry out experimental evaluations. In Kenya, international organisations including the Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab (J-PAL), an NGO associated with the Nobelists, have conducted a number of RCTs in rural and poor urban centres. The Busara Center for Behavioral Economics, a research and advisory firm, is another institution with offices in Kenya conducting RCTs in Africa.

With increased enthusiasm for experimental models, questions and criticisms abound. It is unclear for example how RCTs solve the

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problems of poverty, a claim made during the presentation of the 2019 Nobel Prize. Also, it remains unclear how governments adopt or scale-up policy prescriptions arising from RCTs to national level. Other areas of criticisms include levels of informed consent (see Hoffmann, this issue), conflicts of interest (Hoffmann 2018), and on methodological limitations of the experiments (see Muller 2015). Another level of criticism of RCTs involves the perception of participants in the experiments, an area to which little attention has been paid.

Between 2014 and 2016, GiveDirectly, an American NGO, conducted a randomised experiment which involved giving lump-sum amounts of cash in Western Kenya in Homa Bay and Siaya counties. A one-off unconditional cash transfer of up to US\$1000 was paid to households in the counties through mobile money transfer. Unconditional cash transfers do not require households to perform certain specified behaviour to qualify for transfers. Households and individuals receiving the money

and are at liberty to use it as deemed appropriate. Governments and aid organisations are increasingly adopting cash transfers as poverty reduction instruments, and the use of cash in humanitarian situations in on the rise too. This essay derives from anecdotal sentiments expressed by community members in Oyugis in Homa Bay County, Kenya. On one of my visits to Oyugis, discussions were ongoing in the village about the programme. An aspect that struck me in the conversations was that community members were refusing to take cash from the organisation and urging others not to take money. Why would people refuse to take free money from GiveDirectly when as organisations reports ‘cash transfers have been thoroughly and rigorously shown to reduce poverty and improve lives’? GiveDirectly reports the refusal in a blog on their website thus; “As it turns out these challenges have been common for NGOs working in the area. Other development programs.... have also faced community resistance” (<https://www.givedirectly.org/refusals-in-kenya/>) suggesting that resistance is characteristic of that particular county and not to the programme. However, refusal to participate in such programmes is not peculiar to Homa Bay County, as GiveDirectly reports of a similar incidence in Malawi (see <https://www.givedirectly.org/why-one-village-refused-funds/>) where community members refused

to participate in a cash transfer experiment and only did so after the intervention of the local officials. Having previously worked in social protection and cash transfer policy spaces, my interest was to understand the perceptions of the community that had accepted government cash transfers on the one hand but on the other refused to take cash payments from GiveDirectly. Also, why would people reject large cash transfers, when GiveDirectly was claiming it was overwhelmingly beneficial?

At the fore of these discussions are the community's perception on randomisation, and themes of trust and legitimacy. The first section of the essay is a brief discussion of cash transfers and randomisation followed by a section on the community's perception of randomisation. The subsequent section is on perceptions of trust and legitimacy.

### **Cash transfer revolution and randomisation: a match made in heaven**

Randomisation involves allocation of a treatment to some members of a group and comparing the results of the treatment with a control group – those not receiving the treatment – to determine the causal effect. Randomised experiments conducted in Kenya include a wide range of topics including the evaluation of teacher attendance, the allocation of study materials, the provision of mosquito nets, water treatment pills, and deworming, amongst others. With the rise of cash transfers up the global development agenda, a new frontier of experiments has opened up. The idea of giving cash to individuals and households – conditional or unconditional, through a means test or universal – is considered

revolutionary by its proponents. Cash transfers have been described by some as 'the silver bullet out of poverty' prompting their rise up the development discourse in the global South. The Government of Kenya with the United Nations Children Fund (UNICEF) initiated the Cash Transfer for Orphans and Vulnerable Children (CT-OVC) in 2003 as a response to the HIV/AIDS pandemic. Other cash transfer schemes, initiated with financial support and advocacy of international organisations, including the World Bank and the UK Department for International Development (DfID), are the Hunger Safety Net Programme, the Persons with Severe Disability Programme, and the Older Persons Cash Transfer Scheme. Other African countries have equally adopted cash transfers with each country on the continent now implementing a cash transfer scheme of some sort or other. However, most programmes are not homegrown but initiated through powerful advocacy, soft power and dominant structural mechanisms (Ouma and Adésinà 2019).

With the rise of cash transfers a fresh avenue for randomisation has opened up. Both RCTs and cash transfers are now hegemonic in social policy and development discourse in the global South driven by international organisations and national proponents. Randomisation of cash transfers is now used to evaluate a broad range of aspects from health and educational outcomes, girls' sexual debut, happiness and jealousy, to conflict and violence. As Hoffmann (2020) points out policy experiments are rooted in historical backgrounds of colonial experimentations in Africa. Both cash transfer and policy experiment proponents derive from the idea of the 'white saviour'

with international organisations claiming to provide solutions to the development challenges on the continent. With the popularity of randomisation of cash transfers the interaction of the two can only be described as a 'match made in heaven'.

### **Community perceptions on randomisation**

By randomising, each member of a selected sample in the experiment has an equal chance of selection to receive treatment. To the community in Homa Bay County, the selection of beneficiaries seemed 'random' hence they could not understand how beneficiaries of the cash transfer were selected. Similar to findings on community perspectives from Zambia (Kombe et al., 2019) it was unclear to members of the community if the programme was aid or research. Stemming from the association of the provision of items and cash transfers as aid, there was confusion about the 'eligibility' of beneficiaries. The community's understanding is that cash transfer payments are made to poor and vulnerable households meeting certain criteria like orphanhood, disability or old age. In the community's understanding cash transfers are therefore provided to certain categories of people for their instrumental value of poverty alleviation and prevention of destitution. Expectations were that poverty and vulnerability would mark eligibility and not some 'random' criteria that enabled the selection of those considered ineligible according to the community's standards. The exclusion of those considered the poorest, such as street families, from cash transfers also heightened confusion over the objectives of the cash transfer experiment.

With lack of clarity on the eligibility criteria, members of the community attempted to contextualise the experiment. While selection into the government cash transfer schemes is somewhat clear, based on orphanhood, age and visible disability, with little clarity on the experiment by GiveDirectly, community members branded the programme a devil-worshipping enterprise. To the community, none of the considerations for eligibility for cash transfer made sense, as both the well-off and the poor were included and left out, providing room for speculation that beneficiaries were being enrolled into an evil scheme. It was expected that misfortune would befall those who accepted the money. And unlike in other experiments where those receiving provisions may have negative feelings of jealousy and envy, this was not the case with community members seeking to disassociate from those who had been enrolled in the scheme. In settings such as rural Western Kenya, where norms of neighbourliness, solidarity and community resilience remain strong, randomisation may be counteractive to these social norms.

### **On trust and legitimacy: ‘the government we know’**

Besides the objective of the experiment, community members questioned the provision, in this case, money, and the amount paid out to beneficiaries. In some communities such as among the Luo (the people of Siaya and Homa Bay counties) money offered by strangers is treated with suspicion which further emboldened false speculations of devil worshipping and witchcraft. Often, a stranger giving money ‘just like that’ raises suspicions amongst people. Happenings, like houses burnt in

Siaya County, where others had received cash were linked to the cash transfer experiment. With rumours spreading about the ‘devil-worshipping’ outfit, community members sent word around telling others to reject the money. Distribution of goods often raises questions across communities and the distribution of money is bound to be more contentious especially when information is unclear.

Trust, or a lack thereof, was a factor in the experiment. Although native speakers of Dholuo formed part of the identification and registration team for the experiment, community members considered the organisation foreign. Asked why they would take money from government and not from GiveDirectly, a community member stated: ‘the government we know, but this organisation we do not know’. The statement demonstrates the mistrust community members have with ‘strangers’, be it for experiments or service provision. In addition, it points to the acknowledgement by community members of the role of state in social provision despite the roll-back and erosion of state capacity in social policy provision. While not all members of the community receive cash transfers from the state, the government is the agency they interact with in some form of the other – through law enforcement, collection of market tax, provision of educational and health services, or for relief through cash or in-kind transfers.

### **Manufacturing legitimacy – resources and expertise**

With globalisation, policy spaces are now proliferated with more actors – both national and transnational. Along with the multiplicities of actors in the

policy arena are questions of legitimacy. Legitimacy concerns those mandated through law or norms to carry out certain activities and initiatives. National actors like politicians have veto powers mandating them to participate in policy processes while government works hold bureaucratic mandates. While international organisations, unlike domestic actors, may lack veto power or bureaucratic power to carry out some programmes, organisations like GiveDirectly draw their legitimacy from the resources they hold. In the case of the cash transfer experiment, the resources they bring into the policy space are finance and knowledge. Support and financial resources from heavyweight organisations in development like USAID, and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation provided additional legitimacy to GiveDirectly.

In addition, their international orientation from developed countries is perceived by some to be a marker of expertise. The resources they possess allow them to penetrate and bypass government bureaucracies to conduct experiments, engage in policymaking processes and even in some cases implement policies on their own with disregard for existing structures. Like other social policy experiments, GiveDirectly eschewed government structures and institutions and instead set up separate structures. Interaction and recognition of other government cash transfer schemes are minimal in papers or reports of the organisation. The idea of ‘directly giving cash’ is depicted as novel. The ‘creation’ of novel ideas further provides international organisations with the legitimacy of expertise.

Besides disregard for existing institutions, another mechanism

that experimenters use to enhance their legitimacy is a process of depoliticisation (Ouma and Adésinà, 2019). The process involves keeping away political elites from the programmes by portraying the policy experiment as technical. Like organisations that promoted the adoption of cash transfers in Kenya, GiveDirectly limited interaction with political elites and sought to keep them out of the experiments. The guise is that bringing politicians into the programmes will mess up the programmes as they will fall under patronage politics (Mkandawire, 2015). However, such assertions aim at delegitimising the role of politicians in policymaking decisions while providing space for international organisations to conduct experiments with disregard for political economy realities. By avoiding interaction with considerations related to political economy – which matter in policymaking – policy prescriptions arising from the evaluations can sometimes be less meaningful (Das 2020). Also, by depoliticising social policy experiments, policy uptake or scale-up is compromised since it is politicians that allocate budgets to programmes and policies. As Drèze, (2020) notes, while evidence is a scientific matter, policy is a political decision and therefore inherently political. Depoliticisation therefore is counterproductive to experiments aimed at informing policy decisions.

Moreover, even as experiments are conducted to inform policy uptake, it is unclear from RCTs in Kenya how and to what extent the government has adopted recommendations from the policy experiments. NGOs cannot scale-up programmes to the national level, and experiments, while conducted by NGOs, are

expected to be scaled-up or adopted by governments. From the GiveDirectly experiment in Siaya and Homa Bay counties, it remains unclear how the experiment would inform policy considering the government was already providing regular cash payments to various categories of the population. Furthermore, controlled experiments present a skewed interpretation of reality making it difficult for governments to draw policy lessons. Experiments by international organisations and NGOs are conducted in near perfect conditions which are artificial constructed (Ravallion 2020). They may involve the expenditure of large amounts of money, expensive technology, well trained staff and other resources not at the disposal of governments. Scaling-up or adopting policy prescriptions from the experiments present challenges to governments. Considering the amount of transfers made in Homa Bay and Siaya counties, it would be impossible for the Government of Kenya to match the amount in the experiment. And as government agencies in the experiments are limited, policy uptake from the experiments may not interest policymakers. Moreover, policy prescriptions from the experiments may be misaligned to national plans or be inimical to national social policy needs (Hoffmann 2018).

### **Additional thoughts**

For long Africa has been a site of all sorts of experiments. Africa offers an ideal location for experiments due to structural deficiencies in regulation on research protocols which organisations conducting experiments may exploit to conduct experiments that may be harmful or unethical (Hoffmann 2018), and for experiments that cannot be

conducted in countries where the promoters of the RCTs originate. Sometimes the experiments have little to do with the sites where they are conducted but present researchers with opportunities for publication. Experiments testing whether giving cash to the poor makes improvements to their lives, for example, are *a priori*, as improvement in the financial means of a household mostly enhances quality of life. Of course, people are happier when they receive cash (Egger et al. 2019) – and this needs no randomised controlled experiment to demonstrate.

As Kabeer (2020) notes, publications related to RCTs rarely report crucial details about the challenges and what deviates from research design. This brings into the discussion questions about the transparency of the policy prescriptions that arise from the experiments – prescriptions which may be harmful to well-being in Africa (see Muller, this issue). Besides the lack of veto power discussed above, most international organisations engaged in development work on the continent, particularly on RCTs and cash transfers, also lack legitimacy with the people. Their actions may therefore undermine social norms of reciprocity and community resilience (Adésinà 2011), as most of experiments conducted draw from policy prescriptions which seek to strength individual resilience rather than build on existing community support and resilience. Success for the experiments relies on personal testimony of change, and ‘before and after’ narratives (see <https://live.givedirectly.org/>) rather than changes to structural barriers that perpetuate poverty.

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