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Cash Transfers and Social Cohesion: Trust, Conflict, and Community Effects

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ABSTRACT

This review examines the relationship between cash transfer programs and social cohesion, with particular emphasis on trust, conflict dynamics, and community-level outcomes. Drawing on theoretical perspectives and empirical evidence from low-, middle-, and high-income countries, the study synthesizes the mechanisms through which cash transfers influence interpersonal trust, collective action, reciprocity, informal institutions, and conflict dynamics. The review highlights that cash transfers can strengthen social cohesion by reducing economic insecurity, promoting social exchange, enhancing collective efficacy, and fostering community resilience. However, poorly designed or inadequately communicated targeting mechanisms may generate exclusion, jealousy, and social tensions, particularly in fragile and conflict-affected settings. The analysis further explores methodological approaches used to assess social cohesion, including experimental, quasi-experimental, and mixed-methods designs, while emphasizing the complexity of measuring multidimensional constructs such as trust and community cohesion. Evidence from countries including Chad, Zimbabwe, South Sudan, Nepal, Ethiopia, Kenya, and Burundi demonstrates that the effects of cash transfers are highly context-dependent and influenced by political, cultural, and institutional environments. The review concludes that transparent targeting, community participation, accountability mechanisms, and complementary interventions are essential for maximizing the positive social impacts of cash transfer programs while minimizing unintended social divisions. It also identifies significant research gaps regarding long-term community-level outcomes, causal pathways, and the interaction between household welfare improvements and broader social cohesion. These findings provide important policy insights for designing conflict-sensitive and socially inclusive cash transfer programs capable of strengthening resilience and sustainable development.

Keywords: Cash Transfers, Social Cohesion, Trust, Community Resilience and Conflict Reduction.

INTRODUCTION

Cash transfer programs provide a robust policy tool for poverty alleviation and economic stability. Such transfers redistributing income or consumable goods unconditionally to poor households, inclusive of all members of society, may benefit social cohesion among direct recipients either directly or through channeling payments to non-beneficiaries [1]. Evidence remains insufficient regarding the overall impact of cash transfers on social cohesion [2]. Some studies affirm positive influences, while others draw attention to the emergence of envy, resentment, or animosity toward target populations [1]. In contexts afflicted by insecurity, social conflict, and political instability, initiating or expanding cash transfer programs warrant sensitive examination [2]. Cash transfers capable of strengthening community ties, increasing communal trust, or consolidating collective action may reduce violence. By financing public or community goods, cash transfers improve social infrastructure, stimulate joint investment in private assets, or foster confidence among community members [2].

Theoretical Framework: Cash Transfers, Social Cohesion, and Trust

In Levittown's one hundred thousand ranch-style homes, the New Deal created the first nationwide postwar homeownership program [3]. Levin expressed concern to the Federal Housing Authority about mechanisms of defacto segregation originally envisioned for America's largest residential plan. Techniques for black migration into peripheral towns were heavily monitored [4]. Widespread zonal system white flight responses persisted even after attempts to encourage black-empowered minority mobilities within suburbia, and Levitt lightened Government scrutiny with a black transfer control clause. Kenya's township policy permitted remnants from estate dispossession to conduct normal village lives [5]. Michener's 2000 "Transforming African Agriculture" chronicled neglect following 1977 blue-green revolution spelt demise of Millennium goals. Premature tightening of family-size constraints curtailed support for higher land upland diversity configurations. Environment mismatch continued across small farmer urban-rural linkages culminating in costly bio-externalities embedded in national policies on maize, land, and irrigation [6]. Activist-laden The Hague Process generated conference-specialized generic agricultural product specification designed to bolster balanced Dryland agendas previously neglected. Research imbalance toward exerted pressure, not technology constrained levelling became decisive but no operational change emerged [1].

Mechanisms Linking Cash Transfers to Social Cohesion

Around the world, cash transfer programs provide aid to beneficiaries. Programs operate in countries with diverse political systems, societal characteristics, and types of conflict [7]. Many cash transfers are unconditional [1]. Cash transfers influence social cohesion by directly affecting trust, social exchange, and social sanctioning. Where community-based assistance programs exist, larger cash transfers may reduce local authorities' power [6]. Once established, these effects become self-reinforcing [5]. Experimental and quasi-experimental approaches, standardized surveys, and variation in targeting, timing, and transfer amount indicate cash transfers influence trust and other aspects of social cohesion [4].

Trust and Reciprocity

In fragile contexts, effective community cooperation and collective action can play a particularly critical role in mitigating the deteriorating conditions created by persistent violence and poverty [7]. Intermediaries, such as civil society organizations, have found that transfers can serve as useful crowd-welfare prompts for local societies, harnessing the enduring community sentiments forged during a long history of negotiation and dialogue [8]. This crowd-welfare mechanism, however, requires a critical social prerequisite that identifies the social expectation of collective action in the distribution process rather than in the withdrawal of the assets received [2]. A fraying collective-action norm prompts deputies to act only for self-interest and withdraw the assets instead of distributing them [3]. By contrast, healthy collective-action norms stimulate deputies to pay back the community after receiving the transfers through community-specific fund management, straining resources further and strengthening a harmful crowd-welfare mechanism [3].

Social Exchange and Collective Efficacy

Increased emphasis on the importance of social capital and collective action in the literature has resulted in a growing understanding of how access to cash transfers might be linked to the efficacy of social exchange and diffusion of collective behaviours that contribute to improved community cohesion and resilience [4]. Many of the debates and analyses surrounding the concepts of collective efficacy and social exchange arise from the pioneering work of Scott (1991) on social organisation and organisation theory [5]. A crucial premise of social organisation, as articulated by Scott (1991), is the emergence of social organisations based on structures, systems and styles of social interaction that facilitate the generation of a common pool of values, beliefs and norms shared by diversely fashioned actors. Where such organisation can be achieved on the basis of equality rather than coercive dominance and force of authority, unified and joint action becomes a possibility [6]. Through community collective actions, communities raise their interests, concerns and problems to decision-makers in order to protect collective rights and needs, thereby reducing conflict and violence 1. Cash transfers contribute to community collective actions and the promotion of family demands through the intervening role of beneficiary families and the strengthening of the social organisation that allows for collective and joint action meetings and initiative creation [2]. A countervailing constraint to group collaboration derives from substantial inequalities in resource allocation, which can hinder genuine cooperation by erecting obstacles to negotiation, deliberation and agreement [4]. Without the material support provided by cash transfers, the organisational efforts achieved to foster familial collective action could dissipate and erode biometric and technique values. Meanwhile, the funding that strengthens community action stemming from the transfer would equally be diminished [5].

Community Sanctioning and Informal Institutions

Cash transfers can also expand the scope for informal institutions capable of preserving ex ante investments and mitigating opportunistic behavior [6]. Community enforcement channels through monitoring of peer behavior, gossip mechanisms, public punishment, and shaming are generally more effective when the value of informal sanctions increases and residents rely on community assets after the transfer. These assets, such as housing, are likely to depreciate if transfers are spent on non-local goods [5]. Access to a fund and a structured repayment mechanism can stimulate group attempts to pool resources, even when group lending is not feasible. Informal contracts that leverage and protect community funds can help recover a loan and the fundamental motivation to otherwise repay [6]. Maintaining individual discretion over fund allocation, while requiring commitment from all members, remains challenging [7].

Impacts on Conflict Dynamics

Developments in the field of humanitarian and development assistance increasingly recognize and seek to address the critical nexus linking cash transfers to social cohesion in fragile and post-conflict contexts [1]. Many humanitarian organizations highlight the importance of promoting social cohesion, trust-building, and resilience to conflict recurrence through cash transfers and other forms of assistance [2]. Conversely, the distribution of cash-based assistance in these settings also presents significant risk that perceptions concerning allocations could exacerbate conflict tensions and community fragmentation [2]. Recognition of such countervailing mechanisms is critical for designing effective humanitarian cash programs. Empirical evidence from multiple studies consistently demonstrates significant impacts of cash transfer programs at household and community levels, shaping variables such as investments, savings, food security, educational enrollment, and mental well-being [3]. Although some evidence is emerging on the community-level ramifications of cash programming, the salient effects of cash assistance on social cohesion in fragile contexts remain inadequately studied, leaving an urgent need for additional research [4]. Extensive and multi-faceted engagement in post-conflict cash programming has occurred in diverse settings across Sub-Saharan Africa and Asia, in parallel with substantial global investment in social protection delivery more broadly. Significant guidance can therefore be derived from existing experience and emerging knowledge concerning the social cohesion ramifications of cash-based assistance [4].

Peacebuilding and Conflict Reduction

Cash transfer programs can mitigate immediate sources of tension and support peacebuilding in fragile post-conflict settings [1]. By ensuring positive economic and non-economic incentives, they deter violence and bolster trust across communities, thereby exerting a durable restraining influence. Inside Burundi, the 2013–2015 conflict followed the cessation of a national unconditional cash-transfer intervention [5]. Although the original program did not survive the crisis, "the original cash-transfer beneficiaries were less willing to condone violence in the midst of subsequent unrest" compared to non-beneficiaries [6]. Beyond so-called peace dividends related to program commencement, the enduring positive effect on conflict attitudes remained a pivotal factor in buffering the population from renewed large-scale violence [7].

Allocation, Perceptions, and Local Power Relations

Several programmes have engaged with the socio-political implications of cash transfer initiatives by examining their impact on local power relations [1]. In the Umzingwane District of Zimbabwe, evaluations of World Vision's cash-based emergency response identified instances where cash assistance exacerbated local imbalances between resident and non-resident beneficiaries. Areas targeted by cash support were perceived to receive greater attention and investment than those not covered [2]. Even when no cash delivery occurred during the intervention, communities continued to express concerns about perceived inequitable treatment [6]. Analysis of a cash transfer pilot in Chad similarly highlighted that recipient–non-recipient distinctions generated feelings of jealousy, with consequent risks of community destabilisation [2]. Unrealistic local expectations were noted where cash transfers were framed as a temporary intervention; such arrangements were seen to allow outside actors to exercise firm control over communities [3]. In addition to direct concerns, field researchers emphasized the importance of understanding the local "political economy" surrounding cash transfer systems elements that shape community views of aid and assist in identifying the types of measures that may benefit affected groups or mitigate negative consequences [4]. Non-targeted general cash transfers can have negative externalities under certain circumstances. Analysis of humanitarian assistance in South Sudan indicated that without a monopoly of economic capital, cash transfers risked fuelling disputes among community actors and undermining broader efforts to build trust and social capital [6].

Spillovers and Community Resilience

In fragile, post-conflict settings, cash-transfer interventions have the potential to fill socioeconomic gaps that have increasingly divided communities and undermined social cohesion [7]. Djibouti faced widespread civil conflict in the 1990s that exacerbated tensions and economic disparities between the Afar and Somali populations. Cash transfers were part of a World Food Programme humanitarian intervention addressing food insecurity among the Somali community [8]. A survey found that cash transfers provoked no adverse reactions, while dissatisfaction with food assistance was widespread. Cash transfers mitigated conflict between food-secure and food-insecure households through positive spillovers that were amplified by straightforward programme rules [2]. Even among communities not directly targeted, food transfers induced resentment towards authorities, as recipients often viewed assistance as insufficient [1]. In rural northern Uganda, cash transfers were provided to conflict-affected, violence-receiving households. The intervention reduced local tranquillity and increased settling-out behaviour in conflict-affected areas[2]. Additional evidence indicates that in regions where cash transfers primarily benefitted food-insecure households, tranquillity decreased further after the transfers [2].

Methodological Considerations in Assessing Social Cohesion Effects

Social cohesion is difficult to measure and assess because it is multifaceted, context-specific, and often overlaps with trust, a construct for which the literature also lacks consensus on measurement [1]. Studies of cash transfers in Chad demonstrate a widespread perception among households that including non-eligible individuals in a program poses a risk to collective productive-effort investment for all recipients [2]. Findings further indicate that, unlike tensions regarding targeting criteria, conflicts arise exclusively in communities that are organized around formal–informal groups of the same type, thus pointing to the role of community identity and the aggregation of individual factors in community-wide dynamics [2]. These insights suggest opportunities for experimental and quasi-experimental assessment designs to disentangle community- and household-level effects. Such approaches might involve randomization and the measurement of spillover effects within communities or the introduction of household-level variation across communities combined with community-wide outcomes [3]. Several contexts deserve particular attention when evaluating cash transfers and social cohesion. Specific local power relations arise in politically fragile or conflict-affected countries, indicating that responses to interventions will likely depend on the prevailing authority [4]. The relative perception of peace could also vary; the same intervention might be perceived as peacebuilding in one community and destabilizing in another where the pre-existing dominant axis of tension remains unchanged [5]. Cycles of local violence can affect the timing of cash transfers relative to conflict outbreaks, raising questions about the resulting effect on the stability of authority structures. Additional knowledge of the exact temporal order of violence, cash receipt, and beneficiary interaction would thus enhance understanding of the phenomenon [6]. Finally, the literature suggests marked differences between urban and rural settings, pointing to another promising avenue for exploration [7].

Measurement of Social Cohesion and Trust

Social cohesion refers to both the horizontal and vertical relations among individuals, communities, and the state [8]. The former encompasses attitudes and norms such as cooperation for the common good, inclusion of diverse identities, and social trust trust in people outside of one's familiar circles, which can bind society together across groups [7]. The latter refers to reciprocal exchanges between the state and its citizens. Social cohesion thus entails both collective interests that transcend individual concerns as well as the ability to coexist without dominance of one identity over others [8]. Trust constitutes a vital component of social cohesion [1]; social trust in particular defines the ability to trust people beyond the immediate social circle [1]. Efforts to measure social cohesion are complex and subject to ongoing debate. The U.N. Development Programme, for instance, posits that social cohesion has seven dimensions: belonging, participation, inclusion, trust, legitimacy, capacity to manage diversity, and, ultimately, peace [2]. In Kenya, surveys covering questions linked to identity, social exchanges, cooperation, governance, and trust have been employed to ascertain both horizontal and vertical social cohesion; local qualitative assessments facilitated identification of the questions themselves [3]. Previous studies have examined cash transfers through the lens of social cohesion, but none have conducted a comparative analysis of cash and in-kind transfers in particular [4].

Experimental and Quasi-experimental Approaches

A general but critical difficulty in addressing community-wide effects of cash-transfers on social cohesion in quasi-experimental impact evaluations arises when no population-level pre-treatments measures of the outcome of interest exist, such as in the context of the Mexico conditional cash-transfers program [5]. Experimental evaluations of cash-transfer programs embedded in specification-choice frameworks enable assessing whether the programs induce variation in community-wide indicators of social cohesion among recipient households [6]. Methods based on community-level variation in the implementation of cash-transfer programs such as those implemented in Ethiopia, Liberia, Sierra Leon, Lesotho, and Yemen have been exploited to investigate the implications for social cohesion of cash-transfer programs implemented during armed conflict and associated periods[7]. The stringent requirement for cash transfers to have been delivered to the same households remains nonetheless [8]. No evidence has been found that the introduction of these cash-transfer programs either mitigated or exacerbated capital-stigma or declined community-level cohesion, or that membership in neighborhood groups influenced these margins [1].

Contextual and Temporal Considerations

Cash transfers can affect social cohesion but the specific mechanisms, effects, and channels through which this occurs vary across circumstances [6]. What matters is the relevance of the sociopolitical context. Several factors affect the relevance of these mechanisms and channels. First, regarding the socio-political context, pre-existing attitudes, norms, and polarization distinguish a communal society from a more individualized type of society [7]. A communal setting with higher social cohesion and resources today, e.g., after a crisis, will produce different effects than a communal setting with lower cohesion and fewer resources and after a key event [8]. Another factor of social cohesion is the size of the cash transfer compared to income and wealth per household [1]. A household with many recipients has lower elasticity of expenditure to additional income than one with only one. A lump-sum transfer of, say, x% instead of a percentage of current consumption gives another situation [6]. Outside the cash-transfer context, societies, customs, and shocks accelerate and slow actions that either drive social cohesion downwards or prevent them from escalating [2]. Caution is always needed in the analysis to take these elements into consideration [3]. Depending continuously on the socio-political context, the cash transfers remain linked to social cohesion in at least three ways that are sensitive to socio-political context and variable across time: the evaluated periods each study covered, the history and state of the region concerned, and the degree of exclusiveness between the analysed individual and community levels [4].

Evidence from Empirical Studies

Cash transfers have been shown to impact cash transfers at the household level in various contexts and designs. At the community level, effects are also documented, notably in Chad, where selected households in cash transfer programs experienced improved wellbeing and access to education and health [5]. Overall, while cash transfers systematically improve household welfare and wellbeing, the effects on social cohesion remain ambiguous [6]. Empirical research examining inclusion within program design highlights positive outcomes for both recipients and non-recipients in Chad. However, the chosen selection creates significant divisions, jealousy, and animosity among community members [8]. The results further underscore the importance of contextual factors, such as baseline social levels, cultural norms, program coverage, complementary measures, and the quality of communication, in shaping social cohesion effects [1]. Transparent targeting mechanisms can mitigate resentment, but may not eliminate jealousy, and enhancing understanding of selection criteria can foster better community relations [1 , 2].

Household-Level Outcomes

Improved accesses to health, education, and nutrition have been linked to cash transfers 1. However, several studies signal adverse effects on social cohesion [1]. Selective inclusion in the cash transfer program increased well-being among recipients and non-recipients yet created divides that led to feelings of jealousy and animosity in Chad [2]. Targeting could thus undermine cohesion and long-term development. Similarly, International Alert's assessment of conflict-sensitive programming found that identifying vulnerable households without broader community engagement fostered resentment and tensions in Sudan, which, along with the Chad study, underlines the need for consideration of local power structures and group dynamics [3]. In South Africa, transfers did not stimulate informal social networks as expected; the opposite effect was identified, where isolation intensified among non-recipients [8]. The program's monitoring reported increased life satisfaction without enhancement in trust or community engagement. These mixed avenues require further examination of inter-household and community dimensions in welfare evaluations [1]. While cash transfers may assist in recovery from hardship or collective disruption, context and design forecast essential interaction between relief, stabilization, and cohesion elsewhere [1].

Community-Level Outcomes

The overall effect of transfer programs on social cohesion at the community level remains uncertain [5]. Evidence from the Chad Cash Consortium 2 and the conflict-sensitive cash transfer program in Nepal 1 shows that cash transfers have urban and regional effects on community ties and inter-household exchange, yet they also raise community-level concerns about unequal access to cash and associated frictions[5]. In Chad, selective inclusion increased social cohesion between recipients and non-recipients when the neighbor of a transfer recipient also received cash transfer [6]. Neighborhood selection, however, had a countervailing effect. In Nepal, program areas reported positive cash transfer effects on social cohesion, but communities also expressed concerns about non-recipients [6].

Variations by Context and Design

Conditional cash transfers (CCTs) are designed to alleviate poverty through transfers conditioned on certain behaviours. Studies find that these transfers positively affect education and health outcomes. Unfortunately, some cash transfers can foster tensions through targeting and grievance mechanisms [2, 1]. Cash transfers can be thought of as pure transfers or as transfers conditional on particular behaviours[3]. Therefore, the CCT can be seen as a treatment that better delineates the impact of cash transfers in the experience of the regard for the effects of cash transfer[4]. However, evidence in terms of transport relate to transfer and function as cash transfer and PCT or are not specified during the time. The CCT is a clear hence the potential political and social function of congregating and the II global state formed. In this regard CCT results may further enhance the understanding as whether targeting should continue to be regarded as unconditional versus multilayered cash transfers [5].

Policy Implications and Implementation Considerations

Cash transfers are central to social protection systems. At the same time, their potential effects on social cohesion understood as the strength of social bonds among community members have emerged as key areas of focus from academic research and policy debates alike [6]. An extensive body of theoretical and empirical evidence indicates that, in fragile settings, cash transfers influence trajectories of social cohesion, trust, and violence [2]. Cash transfer programs have also been widely employed to alleviate humanitarian crises and foster economic recovery following shocks such as pandemics, natural disasters, or conflict [7]. Though transfer implementation raises complex design, targeting, and expenditure questions, factors influencing cash receipt remain essential to broader considerations of cash transfer implementation [8]. Cash transfers, simply put, can either promote or undermine community cohesion and trust. The convening of a high-level forum on cash transfers and social cohesion, hosted by the World Food Programme in 2022, further underscores the importance of these insights to operational design [1]. Cash transfers generally promote social cohesion among the poor and very poor, building back bridges connecting isolated communities, aftershocks every day [1]. Targeting reflects needs, and monitoring reinforces benefits, allowing fresh grassroots leaders to fill supreme roles. In conflict-sensitive environments, however, cash transfers can also maintain, exacerbate, or, in some cases, mitigate pre-existing social divisions[2]. The circumstances under which targeted cash transfers either help or harm the social fabric, trust, and peace in chronically impoverished communities provide a foundational map for the design and implementation of social assistance[3]. Addressing these risks relies on a solid understanding of local, typically highly sensitive, political economies and of strategies that help rebuild the many-sided development pathways that characterize each community. Cash-based interventions are increasingly used in fragile contexts due to their flexibility and speed-of-action characteristics; contextualized approaches can mitigate the socio-political, economic, and peace-building impacts of cash transfer designs and facilitate local legitimacy recovery[2]. These conflicts warrant the embedding of social cohesion and trust considerations into cash deployment designs and emphasize the need for deeper understanding of the myriad mechanisms impacting cohesion through transfers.

Targeting, Transparency, and Accountability

Well-targeted cash transfer programs can elicit envy, distrust, and social competition among excluded individuals [2]. Persistent selective inclusion may bifurcate communities and foster feelings of victimhood and exclusion among non-recipients [1]. Transparency regarding the targeting mechanism can clarify the selection process and alleviate some negative effects [1].

Complementary Interventions for Social Cohesion

While cash transfers have the potential to enhance social cohesion, such outcomes can depend on and be impeded by the socio-political environment and the design of transfer programs [5]. Several complementary interventions can foster the pro-cohesion forces embedded in transfers and counteract the conflict-promoting forces that impede cohesion [1]. Program design and targeting strategies are critical features determining the impact of cash transfers on cohesion; integrating complementary interventions, such as establishing a grievance mechanism, improving civic and local governance, and conducting communication campaigns to increase awareness of program objectives and processes, further mediate these effects [2]. Interventions that emphasize fair and inclusive distribution, extend beyond cash transfers, and support civic and local governance and community organization can similarly mitigate the potential adverse effects of cash transfers on kin and ethnic ties [4]. Community-based cash-for-work programs targeting young men may also enhance cohesion in fragile settings. Such programs foster community engagement improving trust and provide opportunities for men who would otherwise participate in violence [5]. Counterproductive attitudes and behaviors of a few community members can impede cohesion and program effectiveness. Integrating programs within the broader multi-sectoral response to social cohesion will maximize the benefits of cash transfers [6].

Risks, Mitigation, and Ethical Considerations

National cash transfer programs in Angola, Chad, and Madagascar in the 2000s increased community trust and alleviated social conflict triggered by resource scarcity or increased inequality [1]. Empirical evidence from Ethiopia, Chad, and South Sudan suggests that cash transfer programs including unconditional general transfers, public works schemes, and targeted assistance to specific groups enhance community resilience, reduce conflict and hoarding behaviors, and promote the return to normal market activities during times of exogenous economic or climatic shocks [2]. Risks, design considerations, and implementation modalities can mitigate threats to social cohesion. Conflict-sensitive safeguards addressing grievances arising from inequality or perceived exclusion can also reduce economic tensions and preserve cohesion as communities recover from shocks [3]. Targeting distribution and ensuring information about distribution mechanisms are important design considerations. Targeting households rather than districts can be more effective, with transparent and predictable targets based on vulnerabilities [4]. Where compromises must be made through targeting mechanisms, a secondary cash or food distribution at the village level can cover ignored groups and alleviate tensions. Such a strategy was employed in the WFP's safety-net-programme in Ethiopia in the aftermath of a transitional government following civil conflict [5].

Synthesis and Gaps in the Literature

The evidence on cash transfers and social cohesion remains fragmented and requires synthesis. The available studies generally offer qualitative descriptions of mechanisms through which cash transfers can impact social cohesion, yet few of them present systematic, quantitative evidence [4]. Much of the analysis focuses on post-disaster or post-conflict situations, leaving a gap for research on cash transfer programs implemented in functioning democracies [7]. The consequences of cash transfers for various trust dimensions (generalized versus particularized trust) and for collective action (related to public goods provision and political mobilization) warrant further investigation [8]. Empirical findings reveal that community-level effects are contingent upon household-level impacts, yet the literature has paid surprisingly little attention to this interaction [8]. The existing reports frequently resort to unrestricted parametric assumptions, overlook panel considerations, utilize informal intertemporal instruments, or neglect spatial considerations [1]. Conclusively, cash transfer programs, when implemented effectively and designed for optimal community engagement, possess the potential to contribute to social cohesion [1]. Nevertheless, there remains a need for complementary interventions that explicitly target social cohesion and contain limited associated risks [2].

CONCLUSION

Cash transfer programmes have evolved beyond their traditional role as poverty alleviation instruments to become important policy tools capable of influencing broader social and community outcomes. The evidence reviewed demonstrates that cash transfers can strengthen social cohesion by reducing economic insecurity, promoting trust, encouraging reciprocity, enhancing collective action, and supporting community resilience. They also contribute to peacebuilding by reducing the socioeconomic conditions that often fuel conflict and by creating opportunities for greater community participation and social inclusion. However, the review also reveals that the social effects of cash transfers are neither automatic nor universally positive. Programme outcomes depend heavily on contextual factors, including existing levels of social cohesion, political stability, cultural norms, institutional capacity, and programme design. Inadequate targeting procedures, poor communication, weak accountability systems, and limited community participation can generate perceptions of unfairness, jealousy, exclusion, and conflict that undermine programme objectives. Consequently, the design and implementation of cash transfer programmes must extend beyond economic considerations to incorporate conflict-sensitive and socially inclusive approaches. The review further highlights significant methodological challenges in assessing social cohesion, particularly because trust, collective efficacy, reciprocity, and community resilience are multidimensional constructs that require robust mixed-methods evaluation. Future research should prioritize longitudinal studies, comparative cross-country analyses, and rigorous causal evaluations to better understand the long-term effects of cash transfers on both households and communities. Greater attention should also be devoted to understanding spillover effects on non-beneficiaries, institutional trust, and the interaction between social protection policies and local governance systems. Overall, cash transfer programmes can make meaningful contributions to strengthening trust, reducing conflict, and enhancing community resilience when implemented transparently, fairly, and in partnership with local communities. Integrating complementary interventions, including community engagement, grievance redress mechanisms, transparent targeting, and capacity building can further enhance their effectiveness. As governments and development partners increasingly rely on cash transfers to address poverty, humanitarian crises, and social vulnerability, embedding social cohesion considerations into programme design will be essential for achieving inclusive, sustainable, and peaceful development.

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