Statement on Evaluation Synthesis Report

(see also powerpoint presentation)

Cash Transfer as a Social Protection Intervention: Evidence from UNICEF Evaluations 2010-2014

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Mr/Mme President, distinguished delegates

I welcome the opportunity to make a short presentation of the results of this evaluation synthesis report which is drawn from over 40 UNICEF evaluations of cash transfer programmes. In August, the report was discussed in depth at a well-attended informal briefing for Board members. We appreciated the interest of Board members in the findings of the report and in the plans outlined by management for following up on the lessons and recommendations outlined in the report. Today we have the opportunity for the full Board to consider the report and the management response.

The topic is an important one. Cash transfer programmes are a key component of UNICEF’s work in social protection which, more generally, constitutes the main area of work to achieve results relating to social inclusion. Social inclusion is, of course, one of the key outcome areas in the UNICEF Strategic Plan. Cash transfers interventions should therefore not be seen in isolation but as a component of wider social protection systems.

We know from experience in high income countries, notably in Latin America, that cash transfers can be a very effective strategy for assisting poor and disadvantaged households. For example, evaluations have demonstrated very good results in Brazil, Mexico, Colombia and elsewhere. The policy question has been whether cash transfer interventions could work in low and middle income countries, and in fragile or emergency situations. The emerging evaluation evidence summarized in the report shows that cash transfers can be very effective in such settings.

UNICEF has increasingly been engaged in supporting cash transfer programmes around the globe. Usually these are government-led programmes, making regular direct transfers of cash assistance to individuals or households who are vulnerable or disadvantaged. UNICEF’s role has been to advise on social protection policies and provide technical assistance for the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of cash transfer programmes. Country leadership remains the key to sustainable improvements.

The report draws together the emerging evidence on whether these programmes are working in low and middle income countries, notably in Africa and South Asia, and how far they are achieving results...
for children with respect to various outcome areas including health, education, nutrition and food security as well as child protection.

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The purpose of the evaluation synthesis report is to summarize robust evaluation evidence for consideration by UNICEF management, partners and stakeholders on the results of cash transfer interventions. It is intended to support the implementation and review of UNICEF’s Strategic Plan and inform future policies and programming aiming to achieve positive outcomes in the area of social inclusion.

The synthesis reviewed only evaluations managed by UNICEF and so does not take account of the wider literature on cash transfers and social protection. As many of the evaluations assessed the impact of cash transfers on recipient households and children, there was less attention to design and implementation or of UNICEF’s specific contribution and performance.

The synthesis exercise aimed:

- To review the quality and coverage of UNICEF evaluation evidence in the field of social protection;
- to summarise sectoral and crosscutting findings, especially on programme impact; and
- to generate recommendations to strengthen UNICEF’s approach in this area.

We don’t have time to present all the details on quality and coverage. But it is important to note that the quality of many of the evaluations was exceptionally high. Many of these were rigorous impact evaluations commissioned and managed by UNICEF’s regional office for Eastern and Southern Africa. However, while the evaluations generated valuable data on programme impact, very few assessed the quality of UNICEF assistance to these programmes. This is an area for further work.

Nor do we have time to itemize the results under the 7 sectoral themes presented in the report. It is worth noting that many evaluations reported results relating to perceptions of increased well-being, happiness, and personal dignity. This is significant in view of the Secretary General’s report “A life of dignity for all”, which set out his vision of the post-2015 development agenda.

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The report draws together a set of general conclusion for consideration.

- Cash transfers in the hands of poor people will generate a range of positive results.
- Households exhibit highly rational decision-making. If correctly targeted, cash will be wisely and productively used by households - even without any conditionality - on food, education, household requisites, and farm inputs. These are areas which, overall, benefit children. There is little evidence of recipients engaging in waste or reckless spending.
- Unconditional cash grants were found generate the broadest range of benefits and offer maximum flexibility and respect for beneficiary views. This is in line with a rights-based approach to programming.
- Cash transfers can generate impressive “multiplier effects” which increase impact: for example by stimulating local markets. This can be enhanced by linking cash transfer programmes with

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other social protection interventions and integrating them into initiatives in other sectors. The report refers to such arrangements as “cash plus” interventions, which provide important opportunities for creating synergies and amplifying results.

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- Cash transfers can work well across all contexts, with appropriate modifications. In other words, it is a modality which is well-suited not only to high income, high capacity countries, but also to other settings. Of course, cash transfers cannot solve all problems and the role of basic public services remains fundamental.
- However, the devil is in the detail. Context is important. Appropriate design and implementation are required: for example, in relation to targeting and setting conditionalities. In any context, sound management and implementation is needed to manage risks, deliver assistance in a regular and timely way and achieve desired impacts.
- While the emerging evidence base has considerable strengths, many issues require further research and evaluation: for example, on combining cash transfers with other social protection interventions and actions engaging linked to other sectors; and on using cash transfers in fragile or humanitarian contexts. At the informal briefing of Board members, it was helpfully suggested that more attention could be given to clarifying gender outcomes in terms of gender equality; on the role of the private sector; on the use of innovative new technologies in cash transfer programmes.
- Finally, it can be seen that cash transfer programmes fit well into UNICEF’s forward-looking vision. While cash transfers support social protection and social inclusion, they can also provide foundations for other areas of UNICEF’s work – for example, improved access to health and education, better nutrition and improvements in child protection: not only in regular development settings but also in emergency situations and in the context of fragility.

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The report provides a set of six recommendations. Two are focused on opportunities for expanded use of the cash transfer modality; two on the need to strengthen the technical assistance and guidance provided by UNICEF; and while the remaining two call for action to broaden the evidence base on the effectiveness of cash transfer programmes to examine other outcome areas and humanitarian settings.

Colleagues on the management side will expand more on the recommendations and UNICEF’s response to them.

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In conclusion, I recommend this report for your close attention. Although we need further evidence on related areas, UNICEF’s evidence base in this area is exceptionally strong and provides a firm foundation for further expansion of cash transfer programming within the context of appropriate social protection systems and programming across sectors – always keeping in view the needs of vulnerable and disadvantaged children while seizing opportunities to help them to survive and thrive.

Thank you for your attention.
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