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How evidence helped address ultra poverty in Malawi

Evaluations of cash transfer programmes have shown a positive impact on reducing poverty, improving human capital and promoting recipients' dignity and autonomy. Yet policymakers across several low- and middle-income countries, including in Sub-Saharan Africa, continue to be sceptical of these transfers as a poverty reduction strategy. They are sensitive to concerns that the cash will be wasted on alcohol and tobacco, increase dependency on the state and disrupt local economies.

The Malawi Social Cash Transfer Programme aims to address the needs of the most vulnerable populations, which are constrained from participating in the labour force because of age (too old or young), chronic illnesses or

disabilities. However, like many unconditional cash transfer programmes, this too faced its own share of scepticism.

An impact evaluation of the programme's pilot in 2006 showed the value of the approach, however those results were not sufficient to support a scale-up over time. In 2012, 3ie funded a second impact evaluation, which assessed the impact of the unconditional transfers on the welfare of children and their caregivers, behaviour change within the household, access to and linkages with other social services, and impact on the familial environment for children. The evidence generated from the 3ie-supported impact evaluation informed four changes in the programme design, including its eventual scale-up across all districts in Malawi.

Highlights

Evidence use from the 3ie-funded impact evaluation

- Baseline findings informed the government's decision to **increase the cash transfer size** to improve its impact on key outcomes.
- The programme's impact on a wide range of outcomes, including food security and consumption, informed the World Bank's decision to increase funding, **resulting in its scale-up** across all 28 districts, reaching 1,134,000 vulnerable individuals.
- Negative findings on child labour outcomes prompted key stakeholders to **commission a mixed-methods evaluation** to explain these impacts and improve programming.
- The evaluation **informed discussions on improving linkages and referrals to other social services**, such as health, education and livelihood opportunities.

Factors contributing to evidence use

- Amongst advocates and sceptics alike, there was a **growing demand for evidence and different types of evaluation** on the impact of the cash transfer programme on a range of key outcomes to improve food security and well-being.
- **Evidence champions in the government and UNICEF** played important roles in brokering relationships with and increasing the relevance and usefulness of the impact evaluation findings to key decision makers.
- The research team was experienced in the region and had **trust relationships** with government, which they continued to nurture; this helped strengthen the partnership amongst all actors.
- The researchers were **effective knowledge translators**, especially in how they used briefs, meetings and workshops as part of ongoing engagement with key actors throughout the study.

Introduction

Evaluations of cash transfer programmes have shown a positive impact on reducing poverty, improving human capital and promoting recipients' dignity and autonomy. Yet policymakers across several low- and middle-income countries continue to be sceptical of these transfers as a poverty reduction strategy. They are sensitive to concerns that the cash will be wasted on alcohol and tobacco, increase dependency on the state and disrupt local economies.

Such hesitation has been pronounced in the case of unconditional cash transfers not tied to any requirements, for example, in reaching people living in ultra poverty,ⁱ which is an inability to meet the most basic needs for subsistence, including food. In Malawi, the Social Cash Transfer Programme (SCTP) faced its own share of scepticism. Critics, including top government officials and some donors, doubted the programme's ability to empower families and help them overcome ultra poverty.

Calls for using unconditional cash transfers to reduce poverty have been accompanied by the need for evidence on their impact on the welfare of vulnerable people and the local economy, as well as an assessment of their feasibility as an affordable policy option.

When the government piloted the SCTP in one district in 2006, they ran an impact evaluationⁱⁱ that showed the value of this approach. However, those results were not sufficient to support scale-up. In 2012, the International Initiative for Impact Evaluation (3ie) funded a second impact evaluation,ⁱ which assessed the impact of the unconditional transfers on children's welfare and that of their caregivers, behaviour change within the household, access to and linkages with other social services, and impact on the familial environment for children. For proponents of the programme, the hope was that this larger study would provide further evidence that would allay scepticism and help win needed support.

High-quality evidence exists in a dynamic configuration of political, economic, social and cultural factors that may contribute to, limit or prevent evidence informing positive policy or programme change. The timing of the evidence in this case was critical, particularly because unconditional cash transfers were viewed with scepticism. Limited context-specific, rigorous evidence to dispel deep-rooted myths, growing concerns about the ultra-poverty gap and regional consensus on the value of integrating social protection programmes in poverty reduction strategies paved the way for a conducive enabling environment. A range of stakeholders often play important roles at different times, such as UNICEF acting as an advocate for the programme and intermediary amongst key actors, and evidence champions within the government that improved the relevance and usefulness of the impact evaluation. All of these factors contribute towards its use in decision-making.

The brief highlights the importance of fully considering the political economy context in evaluation design. It also examines a range of contributory factors for evidence use. Evaluation champions who can influence change are important. Researchers, their networks, their credibility with decision makers, their ability to translate evidence for different audiences and their commitment to engage in organised ways were also important.

Malawi's Social Cash Transfer Programme

Mtukula Pakhomo, which means 'to empower the household' in Chichewa language, is the name of the unconditional social cash transfer programme. Its primary objectives are to alleviate poverty, hunger and starvation and improve health, education and nutrition conditions in poor households, particularly ones that have a qualifying ratio of members who cannot work. The Ministry of Gender, Children, Disability and Social Welfare (MoGCDSW) implements the programme, with policy oversight by the Ministry of Finance, Economic Planning and Development (MoFEPD).



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The SCTP is a key component within the larger social protection portfolio that enables the government to address the needs of the most vulnerable people, who are constrained from participating in the labour force because of age (too old or young), chronic illnesses or disabilities. The programme started as a pilot intervention in 2006 in Mchinji District. After the first year, the government expanded it to six additional districts. Transfer amounts for the SCTP vary by household size and by number of school-aged children present in the household. By 2018, the programme had reached 1,134,000 beneficiaries across 28 districts in Malawi.

A central challenge with any large-scale government-run programme is managing the expectations and needs of the donor partners. Several donors have supported the SCTP since its inception, including the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria; the German government; the European Union; Irish Aid; and the World Bank. The Malawi government has financed implementation in one district.

Each donor supporting the programme came on board with different requirements or targeting criteria. UNICEF has helped manage these expectations and acted as the neutral broker amongst the government, the donors and the researchers. (See p.9 to understand the role intermediaries played.)

Impact evaluation findings

Findings from the mixed-methods, 3ie-supported impact evaluation showed that the SCTP achieved its primary objective of ensuring food security and improving consumption amongst ultra poor, labour-constrained households. It had significant impacts on the ownership of both agricultural and non-agricultural assets. For every Malawian kwacha transferred, beneficiary households generated an additional 0.69 kwacha through productive activity. These results counter arguments that such programmes foster dependency, that cash transfers are not used wisely by the poor or that they must be provided with conditions to guard against alleged risk of misuse.

The cash transfers improved adult health and increased use of health services, significantly improved caregivers' outlook on their own future well-being, and generated strong positive impacts on the material well-being of children. Strong effects were noticed on children's school participation, enrolment and regular attendance across all age ranges. However, the impacts on young child health and nutrition were less pronounced.

Sometimes when you talk based on anecdotal evidence, it's easier for people to criticise you, but when you have results that come from a scientifically proven methodology, yeah, it is much easier for somebody to get convinced.

Chipo Msowoya
programme manager
Economics and Public
Affairs Section
Delegation of the
European Union to Malawi

Four changes informed by the 3ie impact evaluation evidence

The size of the cash transfer increased. The baseline findings in 2014 showed that the transfer levels accounted for only 17 per cent of beneficiary households' consumption, compared to other countries in the region. It was lower than the standard 20 per cent of consumption share, the level at which substantive impacts of the programme would be observed. The government set up a task force to look at feasible transfer size scenarios. UNICEF continued working with the government to carry out an independent assessment. To aid discussions, the study team produced additional transfer simulations and their expected impact on key indicators. The findings informed the decision to increase the transfer size in May 2015.

The programme was scaled up. In November 2016, the World Bank, which was funding the programme in two districts, provided additional funding to scale it up to nine other districts. The World Bank cited findings from the impact evaluation in its project proposalⁱⁱⁱ for additional funding for Malawi to improve social safety net programming.

Children's case management improved. Findings prompted the implementing partners to improve case management of children enrolled in the programme. After negative impacts on child labour outcomes were reported at a workshop, key stakeholders agreed to commission a complementary mixed-methods evaluation^{vi} on child labour, using the same households included in the impact evaluation.

Linkages to other programmes improved. Key implementing partners are using the findings to advance the dialogue around improving linkages and referrals to social services that they had been previously piloting in two districts. Although the SCTP has shown positive impacts on food security and household resilience, impacts on nutrition and morbidity remain limited. The 3ie-funded impact evaluation findings have reinforced the need to improve access to essential services, such as health, education and livelihood opportunities, by building on the work being carried out by the donors and UNICEF.

Factors contributing to evidence use

External context

- Donor evidence needs converge
- Growing evidence base on effectiveness of unconditional cash transfers in other countries

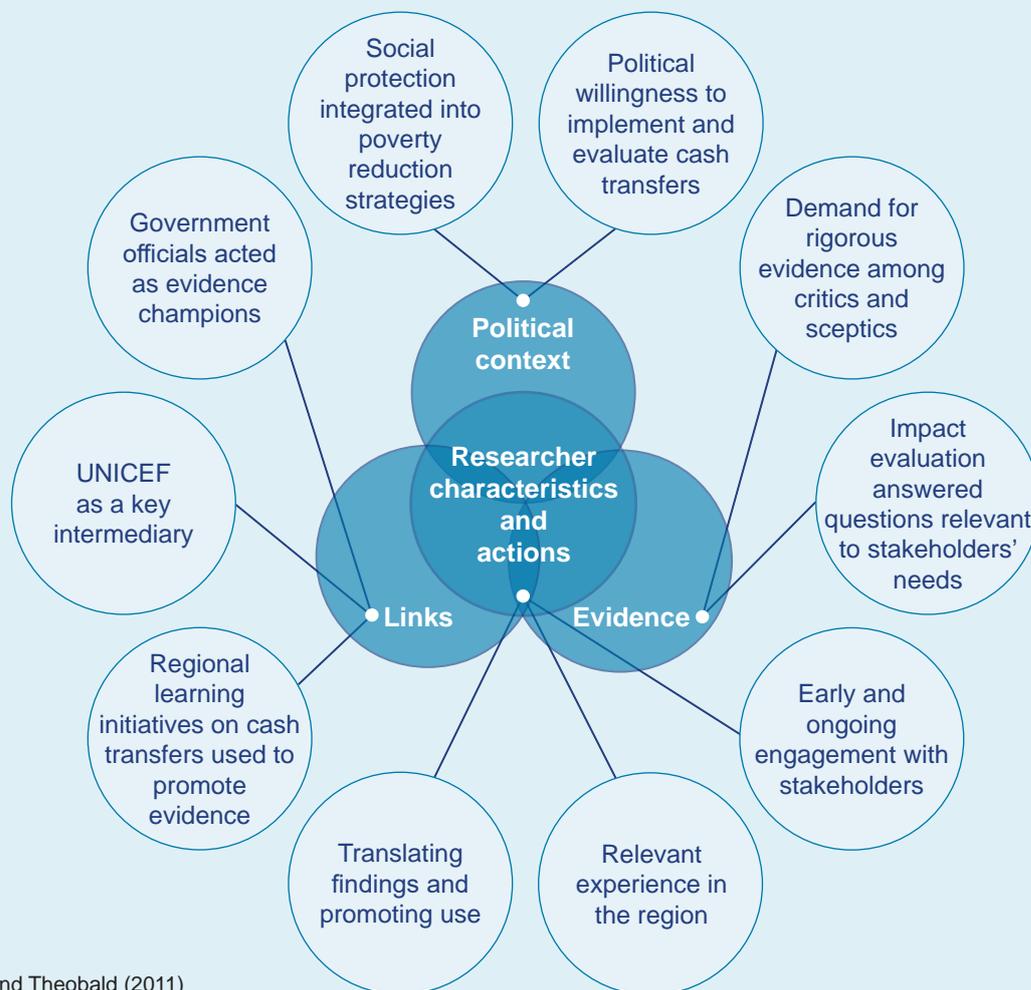


Figure adapted from Crichton and Theobald (2011)



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What mattered most for evidence to inform policy change

Growing alignment between poverty reduction policies and social protection

Malawi's 2007 poverty and vulnerability assessment^{iv} found that 52% of the population lived below the poverty line and of those, 22% lived in ultra poverty and were unable to meet their daily food needs. In the early 2000s, 15 per cent of the population aged 15–49 were affected by HIV and AIDS, resulting in low productive capacity due to high mortality. The number of orphans also increased in elderly- or child-headed households, often comprising a significant number of dependent children.^{vi} The 2007 assessment highlighted the role of risk mitigation strategies, particularly the importance of social protection reforms, as a prerequisite for economic growth.

The government launched the Malawi Poverty Reduction Strategy^{vii} in 2002, a donor-led initiative towards medium-term poverty reduction. The strategy aimed to improve the quality of life of the most vulnerable populations by providing sustainable safety nets, but there were shortfalls in its implementation. In 2006, the government launched the Malawi Growth and Development Strategy 2006–2011,^{viii} aiming to reduce poverty through economic growth, with greater commitment by and collaboration between the government and the private sector. The new strategy emphasised social protection and disaster risk management.

It was against this backdrop that evidence from rigorous evaluations of social protection programmes in Africa and Latin America began to emerge, pointing to the positive impact that social protection programmes using cash transfers have had on vulnerable populations. UNICEF and other partners used this evidence to inform their approach towards integrating safety net programmes for orphans and vulnerable children in the National Plan of Action for Orphans and Vulnerable Children,^{ix} which was later integrated with the Malawi Growth and Development Strategy 2006–2011 framework.

Political willingness and regional experiences pave the way

Harry Mwamlima, director of the Poverty Reduction and Social Protection Division in the MoFEPD, cited the role that a 2006 conference in Livingstone, Zambia, had played in designing a cash transfer programme for Malawi. Malawian officials attended the Intergovernmental Regional Conference on Social Protection and heard about the evidence emerging from cash transfer programmes and their impact on poverty reduction and related outcomes. The conference produced the Livingstone Call for Action^x to implement social cash transfer programmes to address the needs of ultra poor and vulnerable populations and integrate cash transfer programmes in national development plans.

Malawi government officials visited the Zambian intervention site. Lessons from that visit eventually informed the design, eligibility criteria and targeting mechanism used for the SCTP. According to Mwamlima, UNICEF invited the consultant working on the Zambia pilot cash transfer programme to visit Malawi to discuss the situation: 'He came up with ideas that were more relevant to our situation'.

Concurrently, efforts were underway to integrate an unconditional cash transfer programme in Malawi's national development plans and in the national budget. The Malawi government's participation at the Livingstone conference and its decision to be a signatory to the Livingstone Call for Action further strengthened the need and demand for strong social protection reforms and programmes. To coordinate these efforts, the government created the Social Protection Steering Committee and an associated Social Protection Technical Committee, which were charged with designing the National Social Protection Policy and Programme and overseeing social protection interventions.



Countering scepticism with evidence

The need for rigorous evaluations and credible evidence was at the core of the expansion and implementation of the SCTP. Triggered in most cases by demand from donors, UNICEF – in consultation with government actors – commissioned several other independent evaluations of the programme. These included an operational evaluation of electronic payments, evaluations of linkages and referrals to other programmes, and a process evaluation.

In 2006, UNICEF commissioned operational research to test the feasibility of the SCTP pilot intervention in Mchinji District. Frequent visits by officials from the MoFEPD to the pilot site, particularly by Mwamlima, indicated strong political support, as well as a real need to understand the impact such a programme would have if implemented more widely. The results convinced officials that the pilot intervention was feasible and could be adapted to the Malawian context.

This operational research was not sufficient, however. The Cabinet requested that an impact evaluation be embedded in the pilot intervention. They also wanted other types of independent evaluations that looked at targeting and operational and implementation effectiveness. Their demand for rigorous evidence showed a desire to have clear evidence to guide their actions.

Of course there were fears at our end. In Malawi there is a lot of talk about dependence. [The cash transfer] may foster dependence. I think this opinion is global.

Harry Mwamlima
director
Poverty Reduction and Social
Protection Division
Department of Economic Planning and
Development
MoFEPD

Despite initial positive findings, scepticism about the impact of the programme continued. Supporters of the pilot intervention had to act strategically by flagging the need for rigorous evidence to quash the persistent claims about promoting dependency.

This is when the first impact evaluation, led by Miller and colleagues,¹¹ was designed and implemented in Mchinji District in 2006. Findings from the impact evaluation of the pilot intervention showed several positive impacts on food security, health, schooling, child labour and the economy. The Social Protection Steering Committee shared the findings widely amongst donor partners, key stakeholders and policymakers to advocate for continued expansion of the programme and raise additional funding from external and national actors.

This mixed-methods impact evaluation was also amongst the first few such evaluations to assess the impact of an unconditional cash transfer programme on a range of outcomes. Positive economic impacts of the transfers prompted an increase in funding from donors. The German government, which traditionally has not invested in social protection programmes but was convinced by the positive findings, provided financial support for the SCTP. The European Union and Irish Aid followed suit, leading to further expansion in 2012.

In Malawi, we really understand the value of impact evaluation. Because we've been also working on different pilots and on the point of scaling up, we want to know whether what we want to scale up is worth spending the money.

Esmie Kainja
principal secretary
MoGCDSW

Responding to evidence needs

After the gradual expansion of the SCTP, informed by the findings of the Mchinji pilot impact evaluation in 2008, there was a growing need and interest – within the Malawi government and amongst local development partners – to measure the programme’s economic impact on outcomes such as livestock, agriculture input use, entrepreneurial activity and income.

George Juwawo, a UNICEF social protection consultant, emphasised the need for another impact evaluation, saying, ‘When we were writing our proposals and convincing donors, we kept referring to an evaluation that happened 10 years ago. And people were like, how can you be quoting results from a 2008 impact evaluation?’ As more donors came on board, there was increasing interest and demand for new evidence on the impact of the programme.

Buy-in for an evaluation depends on its relevance for those who can use its findings. A critical component for this early buy-in is an inception and proposal development phase. The 3ie-supported research team garnered support for all aspects of the study by involving key stakeholders at an inception workshop before the second evaluation commenced in 2012. Recalling the discussions, Sudhanshu Handa, the lead researcher, said:

The donors were very interested in the strongest design possible. We had a very intense discussion with ministry officials and donors to go through and see if the evaluation is feasible. I mean, everyone was interested in a rigorous evaluation. Nobody wants to invest, you know, a million and a half dollars in a study that was not going to be credible.

Programme implementers needed evidence to support their efforts to increase the transfer size. As a result of this dialogue, the baseline findings from the 3ie impact evaluation and UNICEF’s independent assessment of the transfer levels, the cash transfer size was formally increased in May 2015. According to Mwamlima:

This helps building up momentum on political, technical and financial support mobilisation. In a way we could say that for next year’s transfer increase, especially if there is substantial increase that demonstrates an incremental contribution of the (above a statistical threshold) social cash transfer, then the recent study would have helped build up a case for the increase.

The donors and the government were interested in the local economy spillover effects and the implications that a scaled-up programme would have on boosting the overall economy. The MoFEPD also felt that such an analysis would be useful to get political buy-in and bring in financial support. The University of North Carolina collaborated with the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations to conduct an evaluation that looked at the local economy-wide impacts of the SCTP.^{xi} Findings from this evaluation showed that beneficiary households had been able to translate each kwacha received as a cash transfer into an additional 0.69 kwacha of spending.

According to Esmie Kainja, principal secretary for the MoGCDSW and one of the key evaluation champions, findings on the impact of transfers on the local economy were important to highlight to the MoFEPD. These results spoke to sceptics’ concerns that unconditional cash transfers or programmes were not productive and fostered dependency, or that households did not use cash transfers appropriately. According to her, ‘At a macro level, the multiplier effects were very strong to convince politicians and the other senior officials that for every kwacha, they are able to make 0.69 [kwacha] additional money’.

The 3ie impact evaluation findings were presented in a way that helped counter some common myths associated with unconditional cash grants. There were concerns that people might spend the cash on harmful activities or products, such as alcohol or tobacco. The sample of the youth who ever reported this activity was small, and the study findings showed that there were no meaningful impacts on alcohol consumption and that the programme significantly decreased cigarette smoking.

Another key area addressed by the 3ie-funded impact evaluation was the issue of linkages and referrals to other social service programmes, such as school feeding, fertiliser input subsidies, credit and loans. The study showed that there was demand for other services amongst beneficiaries. According to Kainja, ‘It’s not just a matter of taking them out of the programme and helping them graduate, but we are actually designing what package we should give them so that by the time they graduate, they have something’.

The finding on linkages with other programmes was taken up by the European Union. Its local representatives convinced not only the government, but also key partners involved in local humanitarian responses, to ensure that beneficiaries receiving humanitarian assistance would include those who were also receiving cash transfers, since the SCTP was targeting ultra poor households.

Some of us, during our discussions globally, have raised the issue that if only we can have an evaluation that completely talks about the actual impacts that are out there clearly, stipulating them step by step, we may be able to get the support that is required to scale the programme up beyond the seven districts where we are working.

Harry Mwamlima
director
Poverty Reduction and Social
Protection Division
Department of Economic Planning
and Development
MoFEPD

Policy influence of evaluation champions and intermediaries

In our interviews with the researchers for this impact evaluation, two spheres of policy influence emerged. One was within the government at the MoFEPD and MoGCDSW – specifically, the roles of evidence champions, played by Mwamlima and Kainja. The other was the role of programme advocate and influential intermediary, as well as evidence champion, played by UNICEF.

Champions within the government

As described on p.7, getting buy-in for both impact evaluations from all quarters, particularly from district-level staff, was crucial for the successful and timely implementation of the evaluations. Getting donors to support the pilot intervention was equally challenging.

Mwamlima spearheaded these efforts, and it mattered that he was from the MoFEPD, which allocated programme budgets. He and his colleagues played important early roles in both evaluations by visiting frequently and ensuring district officials and traditional leaders understood the rationale behind the pilot and why it was important to get randomised results.

Similarly, Kainja at the MoGCDSW, which was responsible for implementing the programme, had to work hard to get buy-in from government officials, particularly ministers. According to her, 'We had to do an internal cabinet paper to write... on the importance of the research and how we will use the findings. So, in the end, with discussions and lobbying, it worked. They accepted it'.

Kainja and Mwamlima both ensured that the second impact evaluation design answered questions that were important to decision makers and donors. Being a researcher herself, Kainja emphasised the need to include a strong qualitative component. The final impact evaluation report includes short case studies to explain each result, along with the quantitative analysis.

The inclusion of a local economy impact analysis was a similarly critical component. According to Mwamlima, 'We pushed for it. For me, for my minister of finance to understand the discussions of the programme, we needed a morale booster. We wanted to be able to say the cash transfer provides positive multiplier effect'.

Since publication of the second evaluation in 2017, Kainja and Mwamlima have been proactively sharing the study results at different forums to garner additional funding for the programme and to showcase the lessons and findings from the impact evaluation. At a side event at the 59th session of the Commission on the Status of Women at the United Nations headquarters in 2015, government officials and donor representatives presented the positive results on delayed sexual debut and significant reductions in first pregnancies amongst young women in the poorest households.

UNICEF: programme advocate and influential intermediary

UNICEF was the other sphere of influence, playing and continuing to play a multifaceted role. UNICEF has a formal role in coordinating meetings with donors and other development partners who have a broader mandate to look at the National Social Support Programme framework and coordinates the social protection programming in Malawi. During the impact evaluation phase, UNICEF played a critical role in mediating discussions between government officials and donors, and made recommendations for strengthening the impact evaluation after consulting all partners.

Although UNICEF initially came on board as a funder, over time it became a technical partner, championing evidence use and promoting key findings to the government. In this multifaceted role, it has commissioned and coordinated the various evaluations of the programme; prepared advocacy and communication materials about the programme; acted as an intermediary between donors and the government; developed the capacity of national and district-level government officials on financial management, communication and information technology; monitored progress on implementation of the programme; and overseen the various working groups set up for the programme and various evaluations.

UNICEF used the findings from the 3ie-funded midline evaluation to develop briefs and discuss the positive preliminary impacts of the programme, which were seen as a crucial element in advocating for the programme at the national and international levels.

At the same time, donors realised the need to collaborate and coordinated these efforts through the steering committee set up for the impact evaluation. Chipso Msowoya from the European Union and Patience Masi from Kreditanstalt für Wiederaufbau (KfW) both spoke of 'UNICEF's leadership' in making sure donors agreed on the scope of the evaluation as an opportunity to assess the impact of the programme and inform future decision-making and strategic work.

UNICEF is very much viewed as a partner.... We often say that UNICEF is – it is the kind of broker, the honest broker, which is the agency that intermediates between the donors who are giving the money and the government.

Sudhanshu Handa
principal investigator on the
3ie-supported impact evaluation



Donors' evidence needs converged

The close coordination amongst the donors, managed by UNICEF, meant there was an organised effort to demand rigorous evidence on a range of outcomes, some of which were crucial in informing donor priorities and strategic programming in the context of Malawi.

Bilateral and multilateral donors played an important role in embedding a strong evidence-informed agenda in the SCTP. KfW and the European Union wanted impact evaluation findings that would inform future investments in the country. According to Masi, KfW's senior project coordinator, 'The impact evaluation results helped lobby the government... We were able to say that the transfers needed to be maintained at that level'.

The infamous Capital Hill financial and corruption scandal in Malawi in September 2013, in which several ministerial officials and bureaucrats were caught with large sums of money, led to KfW's support to strengthen the SCTP's financial and implementation management. KfW embedded Ayala Consulting Group in the MoGCDSW. According to Francisco Ayala, director of Ayala Consulting, 'Because of the impact evaluation findings related to children, we are doing more in terms of better case management in order to keep updated information on children coming into the programme'.

The World Bank's decision to scale up in nine additional districts came at a time when it was also planning to provide additional assistance to help Malawi respond to drought. It proposed integrating existing social safety net programmes, particularly income-generating activities and social cash transfers to address ultra poverty. The World Bankⁱⁱⁱ cited the positive findings from the 3ie-supported impact evaluation on a range of outcomes and the value of cash transfers as an important social protection measure.

The key objective of the programme was that our support would contribute towards reducing ultra poverty, and then that also fits in the overall objective of the EU delegation in Malawi... When [the findings] came out positive, you should have seen how the head of the delegation's eyes lit up because, yeah, a lot of people were questioning whether they [cash transfer beneficiaries] need it. You see, people were coming from this misconception that it's a handout.

Chipo Msowoya
programme manager
Economics and Public Affairs Section
Delegation of the European Union to Malawi



Importance of researchers' engagement and knowledge translation

The literature on the role that researchers play in promoting evidence-informed policy change has been growing since the 1990s.^{xii} However, the literature looking deeply at the interface between researchers and policymakers is more limited^{xiii}, particularly the impact of their communication and engagement skills as a contributory factor for evidence uptake and use.^{xiv}

There is a wide spectrum of researchers' perceptions about their role in promoting awareness or involvement in their research.^{xv} For example, some researchers may not have the interest, others may have interest but no aptitude and some may not operate in a context that supports such engagement. What we do know is that context (opportunities), incentives, attitudes and capabilities all matter.^{xvi} When researchers have the motivation, capacity and incentives to engage with stakeholders from the beginning of a study, these actions can promote evidence use.^{xvii}

In the 3ie-funded impact evaluation, 3ie required the research team to develop a plan to engage with key stakeholders and communicate findings and other details throughout the study. UNICEF also partnered with the researchers to organise workshops to present the baseline, midline and final results. The workshops built ownership of the evaluation and study findings not only amongst senior national officials, but also amongst district-level staff implementing the programme.

To ensure that key audiences understood the study findings, the researchers distilled key messages from the findings on health, household resilience, child labour, education, adolescent well-being and the programme's operational performance. The research team responded to evidence demands by producing several study briefs for the MoFEPD, MoGCDSW and UNICEF. The research team wrote briefs tailored to decision makers' evidence needs – for example, on the multiplier effects and the impacts of the cash transfers on the local economy – that would help garner financial support from the government. The team has also produced briefs on the transfers' impact on adolescents, as well as on household resilience, to inform the European Union's work in Malawi.

Using wider networks to promote study findings

Researchers in the 3ie-funded evaluation were linked to a wider research and learning initiative, the Transfer Project, that lent credibility to the local evaluation and positively raised the profile of the Malawi government's commitment to evaluation and social cash transfers. This multi-country research and learning initiative and network includes a number of Sub-Saharan African governments, and numerous national and international researchers.

Sudhanshu Handa, lead researcher on the 3ie-funded study, plays an important role in the Transfer Project. This connection helped highlight the importance of the research and learning agenda underlying each of these evaluations, which involve national-level actors. It has been an additional channel for engaging key audiences, and sharing lessons and findings from Malawi.

Researchers' experience and networks matter

Researchers' experience in similar contexts and existing relationships enhance a study's relevance and increase pathways to use. Before joining the University of North Carolina, Handa was the chief of social and economic policy at UNICEF'S Office of Research-Innocenti in the eastern and southern African region. He had led five large-scale evaluations of national cash transfer programmes in Sub-Saharan Africa under the Transfer Project.

Researchers from the University of Malawi's Centre for Social Research had previously collaborated with the government and other stakeholders on evaluations of the SCTP. Maxton Tsoka, one of the researchers in the 3ie-supported impact evaluation, was involved in the first impact evaluation of the pilot SCTP in Mchinji District in 2006.

Peter Mvula, also from the Centre for Social Research, represented the university in the Malawi Social Protection Working Group. That involvement provided a direct channel between the researchers and policymakers. In his interview with 3ie, he highlighted the importance of local researchers engaging with the government and other local stakeholders throughout an impact evaluation.

Conclusions: the will and the way

This example of evidence-informed decision-making reinforces the importance of building an evidence base that is relevant and timely and addresses decision makers' priorities. The story of evidence use unfolded over almost 10 years. Uptake and changes in policies and programmes were incremental, often supported by varied pieces of evidence.

Key actors with complementary and intersecting roles were committed to the programme approach from the beginning, and evidence supported scaling it up. Evaluation champions, researchers and networks, as well as the evidence itself, contributed to promoting evidence-informed decision-making.

High-quality evidence exists in a dynamic configuration of political, economic, social and cultural factors that may contribute to, limit or prevent evidence informing positive policy or programme change. The demand for effective poverty reduction strategies amongst policymakers and donors created an enabling environment for the generation of credible evidence. Credible evidence also came at a time when there was a gradual shift in redesigning programmes to address ultra poverty by integrating social protection programming.

Myths and scepticism associated with the unconditional nature of the cash transfers were addressed by designing the impact evaluation to answer these critical questions. Knowledge intermediaries such as UNICEF and evidence champions within the government improved the relevance and usefulness of the impact evaluation that contributed towards its use in decision-making. Researchers, their networks, their credibility with decision makers, their ability to translate evidence for different audiences and their commitment to engage in organised ways were also important.

Amidst self-reinforcing and reproducing myths associated with the risks in using cash transfer schemes, the 3ie-supported impact evaluation, along with a growing body of evidence on the SCTP, showed that the transfers had a significant and positive impact on the lives of ultra poor populations in Malawi.

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3ie's approach to promoting engagement and evidence use

3ie uses an evidence-informed theory of change for promoting evidence use, adapted to reflect our being a funder. We rely on our grantee researchers to be the primary actors in terms of engagement and promoting evidence use during the life of a study. We require early and ongoing engagement between researchers and decision makers, programme implementers and programme participants using an engagement and uptake plan that has a dedicated budget. We stress the importance of politically aware context analysis, stakeholder mapping and tailoring communication for given audiences. In parallel, we monitor for evidence use instances and impact, using specialized reporting that we augment with interviews. We use theory-based contribution tracing to measure and report them to wider audiences.

Since 2017, 3ie has been publishing examples of evidence uptake and use in the [3ie evidence use brief series](#). Each brief showcases a 3ie-funded evaluation or systematic review and analyses how context, actors and other mechanisms contributed to or limited the use of evidence in policies and programmes.

About the impact evaluation

The 3ie-supported second impact evaluation by [Abdoulayi and colleagues \(2017\)](#) used a mixed-methods, longitudinal, cluster randomised experimental design, combining quantitative surveys, qualitative interviews, group discussions and simulation models to demonstrate wider community economic impacts.

About this brief

This brief examines the factors that have contributed to the uptake and use of evidence from the 3ie-supported impact evaluation. The authors of the brief relied on extensive monitoring data generated from study inception through completion using 3ie's engagement and evidence uptake and use tools and processes. They were supplemented with semi-structured interviews with 13 key government, programme, donor and intermediary stakeholders during a field visit to Malawi in November 2016.

The authors of this brief used the research and policy in development (RAPID) conceptual framework^{xviii} to determine whether research-based and other forms of evidence were likely to be adopted by policymakers and programme managers, and what other factors contribute to this use. Using the RAPID+ framework,^{xv} we also looked at the role of researchers in the research and policy interface; that is, the characteristics and actions of research actors and their institutions. We coded all relevant documents using NVivo and then used framework analysis to identify and analyse thematic patterns.^{xix}

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The International Initiative for Impact Evaluation (3ie) is an international grant-making NGO promoting evidence-informed development policies and programmes. We are the global leader in funding, producing and synthesising high-quality evidence of what works, for whom, how, why and at what cost. We believe that using better and policy-relevant evidence helps to make development more effective and improve people's lives.

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