

Value of Structured Group Sessions to Unconditional Cash Transfer: Evidence from a Field Experiment in Baidoa, Somalia*

Background

Approximately a third of the Somali population are affected by some kind of mental illness; common among them is depression. Widespread violence, displacement, unemployment, and drug abuse among others explains this high prevalence of mental illness. The country's mental health services are not sufficient enough to meet this demand. In other parts of the world, psychosocial support (PSS) groups and cash transfer programs have demonstrated effectiveness in psychosocial well-being. Cash transfer alleviates financial strain of daily living while PSS strengthens the individuals own ability to cope with adversity. Combining the two approaches presents an opportunity to achieve greater impacts within the same resources (cash transfers). This study assesses marginal effects of adding structured groups sessions to cash transfer program in Baidoa, Somalia.

Data and methodology

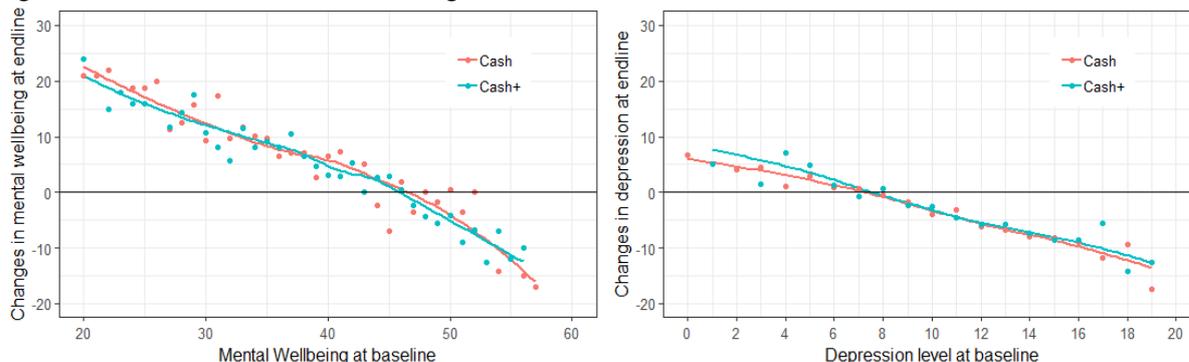
A randomized controlled trial was used in the study. Cash transfer beneficiaries were randomly allocated one of the two groups: Cash Transfer + Group Sessions (Cash+) arm and Cash Transfer only arm. In total, this study involved 573 cash transfer beneficiaries selected from neighbouring five IDP camps based purposively on household vulnerability. Out of the beneficiaries, 283 received the Cash+ while the remainder received only the cash transfers. A Cash+ beneficiary was allocated to one of the eight to ten-member single-sex groups. The ten weekly group sessions facilitated by one of the beneficiaries under the supervision of SCI staff featured discussion topics such as stress management, how to discipline children, water shortage and hygiene among others. In most cases, groups discussed one issue per session; however, there were few sessions where group members discussed two or more issues in one session. Data collection was conducted in two phases just before the onset of project activities and an endline survey about two-and-half months after the end of the group sessions.

Findings

Effect on Mental Wellbeing

Group sessions provides an avenue for group members to interact with others thus increasing the likelihood of better mental well-being, especially for marginalized groups. In this study, we used the 14-item Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-being scale (WEMWBS) to assess the beneficiaries' mental wellbeing. Between baseline and endline, results show beneficiaries gained an equivalent of a 12-percentage point increase on the mental wellbeing scale. Beneficiaries with poorer mental well-being registered large improvements. The gains among Cash+ arm were however similar to those of the Cash only arm; implying no mental wellbeing improvements because of group sessions. While depression was not used as an eligibility criteria to participate in-group sessions, we assessed whether participating in structured group sessions helps alleviate depressive symptoms. Using the Patient Health Questionnaire (PHQ-9), beneficiaries' depressive levels declined by 36 percentage-points at endline. However, as shown in Fig 1b, decline in depression levels among group session participants was not any different from those not participating in group sessions. Therefore **improvement in mental wellbeing and decline in depression levels was more because of cash transfers and not the group sessions participation.**

Figure 1: Effect of Cash+ on Mental Wellbeing

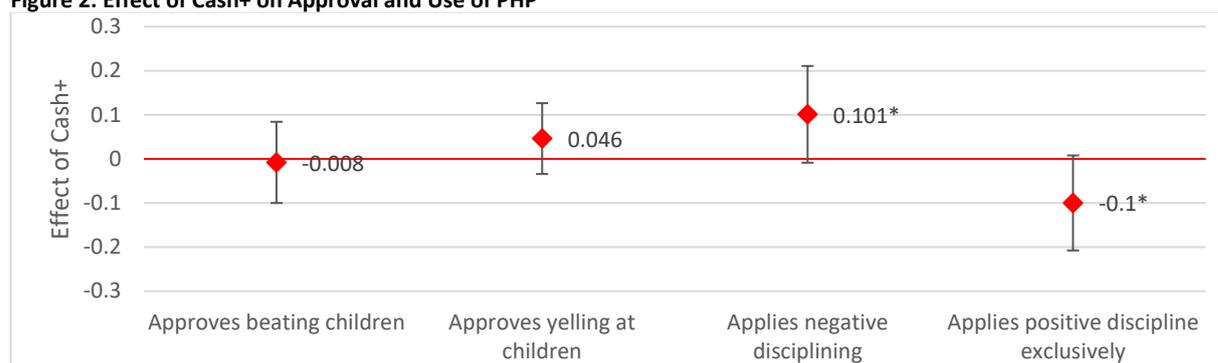


* This Fact Sheet, prepared by Judy Korir and Elijah Kipchumba, is based on an impact evaluation report. The full report is available [here](#).

Parental Approval and Use of PHP

How to discipline children featured dominantly during the group sessions. This was a discussion topic chosen by SCI beforehand, and was discussed during one session per group. To establish if parents approved of physical and humiliating punishment (PHP), we presented caregivers with scenarios that described a PHP situation and asked if the scenario was acceptable in their opinion. While we see general reduction in parental approval for PHP between baseline and endline, there was no marginal benefits of adding group sessions to cash transfer programs concerning parental acceptance of PHP. Having a one-session group talk on how to discipline children did not change caregiver's views on PHP. On a self-report, caregivers mostly used both positive and negative disciplinary measures concurrently, such as beating the child and talking a child how to behave well after a mistake. Results show while there were no discernible changes in caregivers' approval of PHP, we find that **caregivers who participated in group sessions were 10 percentage points more likely to report using negative disciplinary measures** on their children and 10 percentage points less likely to report exclusive use of positive disciplinary measures.

Figure 2: Effect of Cash+ on Approval and Use of PHP

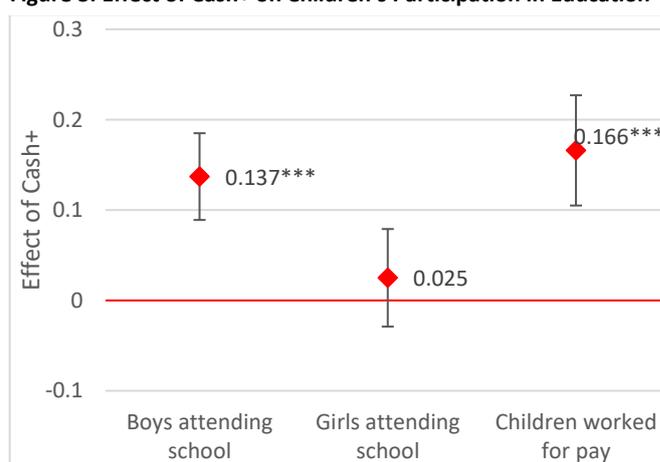


Frustrations with day-to-day life, cultural pressures and unawareness of alternatives to negative discipline among others seen as the main drivers towards the use of negative discipline. The beneficiaries involved in this study were poor; inability of caregivers to meet their families' needs often leads to adoption of dominating strategies by caregivers including approval and use of harsh parenting. It is unlikely that these drivers could change over a single discussion session; neither did a 62 USD transfer help reduce vulnerability. It is also plausible that caregivers in the treatment arm became more aware of types of disciplining and thus admitted to less positive discipline and more negative disciplining.

Children's Participation in Education

Compared to cash transfer only beneficiaries, children of the Cash+ arm of the study were more likely to attend school. This positive effect was largely driven by male children, as there were no effects among female children. As shown in Fig 3, while boys at the onset had higher school attendance, their school attendance increased by 14 percentage points because of the group sessions while girls' school attendance did not change. With the increased school participation, intuitively households would experience strain in ability to cover all school needs for their children. This drives the need to have children work for pay. On average children from **Cash+ households were more likely to report that their children working for pay**, and in addition to increased time spent doing household chores.

Figure 3: Effect of Cash+ on Children's Participation in Education



In conclusion, there were no clear mental wellbeing effects of participating in group sessions. The one session discussion on disciplining children did not change parent's perception on PHP but made parents more likely to report using negative disciplinary measures. Cash+ increased the likelihood of children attending school but increased their participation in work for pay to cater for additional resources for schooling.