

# Elite Attitudes Towards Cash Transfers and the Poor in Malawi

Chipiliro Kalebe-Nyamongo and Heather Marquette

This paper argues that the planning of cash transfer (CT) programmes needs to involve more consideration of the country-specific attitudes of elites. It is members of a country's elites who are often expected to implement – and in the long term, allocate domestic funding to – such programmes. The paper presents findings from primary research in Malawi that examined elites' attitudes towards poverty and how to reduce it. It shows that their attitudes – about the risk of dependency among the poor and about direct redistribution being unfair, for example – affect which policies they are willing to support and implement. The findings question the sustainability of Malawi's CTs beyond donor funding. They suggest there would be more support among Malawi's elites for other forms of social protection such as public works and strategies that help the poor become economically active.

Cash transfers can be defined as direct and regular non-contributory cash payments that raise or smooth the incomes of poor and vulnerable households. Donors and NGOs have proposed cash transfers as part of social protection programming in many developing countries, particularly in Africa. However, the crucial role that politics plays in decisions about the allocation of resources has often been overlooked. The political economy issues that have received little attention include attitudes to the poor and to welfare.

## Methodology

Fifty-two members of Malawi's elites took part in semi-structured interviews and 86 completed a questionnaire. The research also involved non-participant observation, and documentary analysis (of policy and budget documents, government publications and statistics, political speeches, official records and media reports).

Members of Malawi's elites were defined not by wealth but as people holding strategic positions in political, governmental, economic, communication, cultural and donor organisations, and social movements. Research participants were chosen through purposive sampling. They included government ministers and MPs from the main political parties; and senior figures in the civil service, the private sector; civil society, academia, the media, INGOs and donor organisations.

## Key findings

Evidence of positive impacts of cash transfers in Malawi is not changing elites' views of what causes poverty, or producing support for cash transfers. Previous studies have found that Malawi's cash transfers have led to increased nutrition and food security, local trading, school enrolments and attendance, and household disposable incomes, while substantially lowering teenage marriage and pregnancy rates.

Yet our findings show that Malawi's elites prefer policies that support those among the poor who can work to help themselves. Many respondents' ideas about the poor – that they are passive, dependent, and fatalistic – seemed to contribute to a lack of support for social assistance schemes like cash transfers. These were seen as likely to encourage laziness or dependency.

## Elites' perceptions of the causes of poverty

Discussing the causes of poverty, respondents identified the main factors as:

- lack of national economic growth
- low levels of education
- lack of access to productive assets such as land
- behavioural causes, such as a lack of political will to fight poverty and the response of the poor to their own poverty.

Respondents spoke of a **'culture of poverty'** that explained how the poor might be responsible for their own problems. This culture among the poor was said by respondents to have a number of components.

- **A fatalistic mindset** that discourages efforts to escape poverty:  
*'...[the poor] are busy living day-to-day arguing that "my parents were poor so I will also end up poor no matter what I try".'* (Principal Secretary)
- **Unwise use of resources**, leading to wasted opportunities:  
*'Some people even make money from growing of tobacco but they will decide to marry another wife rather than building a house with the proper roofing...'* (Principal Secretary)
- **A culture of dependency** involving over-reliance on handouts:  
*'They know that if they do not work someone will come to help them.'* (National Coordinator, CSO)

## Elites' policy preferences

Most respondents favoured policies that would have wide benefits, or support the 'active' poor: micro finance programmes (selected as viable and desirable by 77% of survey respondents), public works programmes (71%) and fertiliser subsidies (59%). Free and universal education (70%) and healthcare (59%) were seen as likely to support people to contribute to national economic growth.

Social protection strategies were far less popular: cash transfers (31%), child benefits (29%) and unemployment insurance (15%) were all rejected by a majority of respondents. Only an old age pension (48%) came close to majority approval. Participants believed recipients 'consume' rather than invest cash transfers, and that CTs support the 'inactive' poor:

Policies that appeal to respondents across all categories – with the exception of INGOs/donors – appear to be those that address broader development challenges and thus benefit the entire nation, rather than those that target poor individuals. Elites argue that poverty is so widespread that most Malawians can be considered poor. They view assistance targeted at the 'ultra poor' – perceived as the 'inactive' poor – as unfair.

Most research participants viewed poverty not as an urgent policy priority, but as a chronic problem that would be solved in the medium to long term by economic development and growth. Many respondents supported this view with the assertion that previous exclusively pro-poor policies had failed.

## Policy considerations

Discussion about the sustainability of cash transfers in Malawi and other sub-Saharan African countries has asked whether host governments can afford them, but not whether they have the political will to fund them. Little effort has been made to understand deeply entrenched disapproval of social assistance.

Our research highlights the importance of elites' attitudes in domestic decisions about the allocation of scarce resources. It suggests that:

- Malawi's elites would be unwilling to prioritise the extra funding needed to extend the cash transfer scheme beyond its pilot phase to make it a sustainable national programme. If CTs were to be domestically funded, respondents would not be willing to increase taxes to pay for them.
- Elites may use their attitudes towards poverty to justify policies that favour particular groups of poor people, such as those considered 'active'.

The findings reaffirm the importance of using political analysis to ensure the sustainability of cash transfer programmes, and of domestic ownership for politically viable programming. Lessons from Latin America, where CTs originated, may not be directly applicable to the different contexts in sub-Saharan Africa, such as that of Malawi.

- There is a greater level of vulnerability in many sub-Saharan Africa countries, made worse by HIV/AIDS. Official poverty statistics overlook the vulnerability of many 'elite' households, and how close to poverty the 'non-poor' are. This has implications for the scope of CT programmes and their potential to be divisive where the margin between recipients and non-recipients is particularly narrow.
- Government capacity to design and implement CTs is weaker in many countries in sub-Saharan Africa. In Malawi, implementation is hindered by poor provision of health and education services that might complement CTs.
- While Latin American CT programmes do not depend on external funding, programmes in sub-Saharan Africa almost always do. Donor-driven CTs in Africa may not reflect domestic priorities, and they appear to be short-term compared to the domestically-funded CTs in Latin America.

The full paper is available at: <http://publications.dlprog.org/EliteAttitudesCTs.pdf>

The Developmental Leadership Program (DLP) is an international research initiative based at the University of Birmingham, and working in partnership with University College London (UCL) and La Trobe University in Melbourne. DLP's independent program of research is supported by the Australian aid program.

The views expressed in this publication are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent those of the DLP, its partner organisations or the Australian Government.

The Developmental Leadership Program  
International Development Department  
School of Government and Society  
College of Social Sciences  
University of Birmingham  
Birmingham B15 2TT, UK  
[info@dlprog.org](mailto:info@dlprog.org)

[www.dlprog.org](http://www.dlprog.org)