

Cash transfers can support Karamoja's transition from aid dependency to productivity

By Stephen Kasaija

Over the past few weeks, news from Karamoja has not been good, again. Recent reports show that the number of children dropping out of school is on the increase. Some reports link this to a decline in food aid as the region moves away from blanket food distributions, towards more sustainable livelihoods solutions. Of special interest to the Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development (MGLSD) are the reports that as a result of all of these, the number of children being sent by desperate parents to survive by begging in Kampalais growing by the day.

Children aside, poverty generally in Karamoja is pervasive. All evidence to date shows that Karamoja has the worst human development indicators in the country; be it education, life expectancy, food security & nutrition, access to safe water, name it.

The new development plan for Karamoja increasingly focuses on reducing aid-dependency and developing productive livelihoods as the only sustainable way for the region to transform.

In line with this strategy, the MGLSD, with support from development partners is rolling out a cashtransfer programme. The Expanding Social Protection Programmewill implement the Social Assistance Grants for Empowerment-SAGE, whichwill transfer 22,000 UGX per month to support,first, senior citizens aged 65 and above, and later, vulnerable and labour constrained household inselected districts in Karamoja (Amudat, Moroto, Nakapiripirit and Napak)-among other 14 districts.

Cash transfers provide a perfect opportunity for Karamoja'stransition. Cashtransfers, when implemented as part of a social protection strategy, have three basic characteristics: they are regular(come frequently, not just a one off humanitarian contribution), predictable (recipients know that they will come at a particular time of the month) and they are non-contributory (recipients are not obliged to pay, refund or contribute to benefit).

Cash transfers, in situations of chronic poverty where blanket food aid is being scaled down, allow a strategic shift to take place by ensuring that the poorest and most vulnerable are protected from the worst forms of deprivation, governments and aid agencies are able to effectively scale down blanket food assistance whilst scaling up activities to support the growth of productive livelihoods for those individuals and households who are able to work.

Aside from proving immediate survival support for the poorest and labour constrained households, evidence shows that cash transfers also provide a platform on which even these households are able to start building small scale productive activities. Evidence shows that traditionally -dependent households can use the smallest amounts of money creatively to develop their own productive livelihoods strategies, appropriate to their needs and capacities.

Whatsmore, the money put into the local economy through these transfers can also benefit the wider community through creating demand for locally sold goods and services - stimulating local markets and igniting the productivity fire from within the community.

With such small, reliable and predictable income, the poorest and most vulnerable people in Karamoja will not need to pull their children out of school to go to beg. With these grants, parents will be able to invest in the health, welfare and development of their children ó

including not only sending them to school but ensuring adequate nutrition and health care ó with long term benefits not only for the children of Karamoja, but for the future of the region.

There are many examples that I could give to demonstrate impact of cashtransfers around the world. But in all, evidence is that cash transfers alleviate poverty and address vulnerability, they promote productivity and empower populations. In the long term they break the transmission of poverty from one generation to the next, therefore contributing to long term social and economic transformation.

The author is the Head, Expanding Social Protection Programme (ESP) Ministry of Gender, Labour & Social Development. ESP isimplementing the Social Assistance Grants for Empowerment (SAGE). esp@socialprotection.go.ug