

Does cash assistance help during acute food insecurity?

Findings on food security and household economy outcomes drawn from a wider study that assessed the effect of cash assistance on intimate partner violence within the context of a food security project in South Sudan.

Cash may not be a ‘silver bullet’.

Design of cash transfers programs within the context of acute food insecurity is a critical factor for maintaining and improving household food security. Seasonal cash for work may not have substantial lasting benefits on food security within the context of crisis level food insecurity.

This study found that additional food access from community gardens and modest size short-term cash transfers did not have longer-term benefits for household food security in South Sudan. Findings suggest that the broader context and trends in food availability, access, and prices may be more important drivers of household food security than participation in the studied intervention. Findings on cash and intimate partner violence are also available in a separate Snapshot (see over).



Women in the BRACE-II project processing ground nuts. (Christopher Lete, Eugene Combo, WV South Sudan)

Background

Cash-based assistance in humanitarian contexts has grown substantially in recent years, yet how to optimize the impacts of cash in diverse settings remains a challenge. In the context of increasing food insecurity and famine in South Sudan, this study focused on the Building Resilience Through Asset Creation and Enhancement II (BRACE-II) project. It examined food security and household economy outcomes to better understand the impact of cash assistance and characteristics associated with worsened household food security and coping strategies.

How the research was conducted

In 2019-2021, a prospective cohort study was conducted among communities affected by conflict and drought in Warrap State leveraging a program providing cash for work in community gardens. 1,213 households receiving cash prior to the start of the study (Cohort A/B), 582 non-intervention households (Control), and 300 households that received cash after the start of the study (Cohort C) completed two interviews spaced one year apart to measure household food insecurity and coping mechanism adoption.

Key findings

- There were no significant differences in change over time in household hunger score, livelihoods coping strategy index score or meal frequency between program participants and the comparison group.
- The comparison group had a significantly larger increase in dietary diversity over time; however, at endline this difference was no longer present.
- Analysis of worsened status for hunger and adoption of coping strategies saw no differences between Cohort A/B and the control group. However, Cohort C, enrolled later, had better outcomes with fewer households transitioning to worsened hunger and coping categories.
- Larger households were slightly more likely to adopt worse coping strategies. Households with any amount of formal schooling were less likely to experience worsened hunger. More affluent households tended to experience worsened hunger but didn't tend to adopt extreme coping strategies. Recent livestock purchase was associated with the greatest odds of both worsened hunger and the adoption of more negative coping strategies.

Implications for humanitarian practitioners and policymakers

The results highlight that cash may not be a 'silver bullet' for addressing food insecurity in humanitarian crisis settings. In future food assistance and resilience programming, larger transfer sizes may need to be considered to support households to significantly improve food security though within the context of a worsening food crises, maintaining household food security as opposed to improving it may be sufficient.

The association of the recent purchase of livestock with increased likelihood of worsened food security and coping strategies suggests that it is a poor household asset strategy within the context of crisis level food insecurity. The findings related to worsening hunger and coping may support previous evidence of the detrimental impact of stopping cash assistance even after receiving it for extended periods.

The broader context and trends in food availability, access, and prices may be more important drivers of household food security than participation in the intervention. Thus, these are critical considerations for designing future programs. Implications may be that organisations may need to advocate for flexible cash amounts with donors, while at the same time understand that in certain contexts targeted outcomes may need to be adjusted downwards.

Recommendations for future research

More evidence is needed to understand the relationship between transfer value, duration, and household vulnerability to inform future cash programming. Future research should continue to examine risk factors for poor outcomes in acute food crisis to improve targeting, beneficiary selection, and the effectiveness of food assistance in future crises.

About the study team

This research was a collaboration between World Vision UK, World Vision South Sudan, World Vision International, and the Johns Hopkins University Bloomberg School of Public Health.

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Keywords

South Sudan, humanitarian emergency, humanitarian assistance, cash transfer, food insecurity, food crisis

Articles and further reading

The Elrha project page, with wider findings from the study including on cash and IPV, is here <https://www.elrha.org/project/effects-of-cash-transfers-on-intimate-partner-violence-in-humanitarian-settings-a-prospective-cohort-study-in-south-sudan/>



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<http://www.elrha.org/programme/research-for-health-in-humanitarian-crises/>