What are the effects of direct public transfers on social solidarity? A systematic review

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BACKGROUND AND OBJECTIVES

Background

The aim of this review is to assess whether direct government transfers provided to households or individuals damage or foster social solidarity or some of its manifestations. There is an ongoing debate on this issue with conflicting evidence and important implications that justify a review and synthesis of the evidence. If social transfers erode social ties and increase social stigma, they might undermine solidarity and social cohesion.

In Durkheim’s classical work (Durkheim, 1893), organic solidarity was understood as a natural outcome resulting from social interactions generated by the division of labor in modern societies. Social cohesion was, then, the result of these interactions that created interdependence among individuals. Solidarity is rooted in the feeling of belonging as a member of a group or society (Thome, 1999). Of course, this concept is problematic. For example, solidarity as defined above can emerge as a reaction to confrontation with other groups, it can be at the service of unfair causes, or in the defense of interest groups.

In response to this criticism, in the contemporary debate, more complex definitions of solidarity entail cooperative behavior with other individuals and collectives, a sense of value-based commitment (Wilde, 2007; Thome, 1999) and mutual esteem (Honneth, 2007; Wilde, 2007). The idea of solidarity is closely related to recognition. For Honneth (2007), solidarity is achieved when individuals understand that they are “esteemed” by all citizens to the same degree and that different ways of life are tolerated and respected.

From an empirical point of view, social solidarity and the closely related concepts of social cohesion and social capital have been operationalized as, for example, feelings of trust, social bonds, social participation and collective action (King et al, 2010). The usefulness and interchangability of these concepts will be addressed in our review.

Operationalizations of the concepts of solidarity and social cohesion distinguish three spheres (Whelan and Maitre, 2005; Vergolini, 2011): micro (group level), meso (relation with other groups) and macro (sense of belonging to and trust in society). The relevance of promoting social cohesion as a constitutive aspect of well-being and, hence as a key dimension of the development process has been advocated not only by academics such as Sen (1999) but also by multilateral actors such as the World Bank, the European Union, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) or the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC).

The discussion in the context of developed countries is centered on whether the welfare state creates incentives for solidarity or replaces/destroys individual initiatives and social bonds. Two different views on this point can be seen in Cohen and Arato (2000) and Kumlin and Rothstein (2009). In the context of developing countries this question has an enormous political relevance, as direct transfer programs are an expanding intervention, following the positive evaluations of
Progresa-Oportunidades in Mexico. Systematic reviews of rigorous impact evaluations of conditional cash transfer programs have shown that, in general, these programs have been successful in fostering school attendance among participants, while results in terms of health checks, nutrition and child labor have varied (see, for example, Boullion and Tejerina, 2007).

But what are the impacts beyond these more conventional outcomes? To what extent do these interventions foster interpersonal trust, social bonds, esteem for different lifestyles and other forms of social solidarity? What if these programs are strengthening human capital accumulation but are undermining other collective assets?

Many cash transfer programs explicitly aim to contribute to the increase in social ties, in terms of informal networks and connections with the state that can strengthen program take-up, empower beneficiaries to voice demands and encourage social participation. Sometimes these interventions have specific designs or components crafted to foster these outcomes. We are interested both in the particular effects of these components and in the intended or unintended effects of cash and in-kind direct transfers. At the same time, we will be addressing the micro, meso and macro spheres of solidarity, as effects can vary among these.

We will also try to understand the potential causal channels related to being selected as a beneficiary of a certain cash transfer program, or receiving related interventions. In regard to the first aspect, being selected to receive a monthly transfer can make a certain individual or household feel more confident about the future and can strengthen their links with the state and other community members. Meanwhile, among those who do not receive the transfer the opposite feeling can develop, and may be connected to stigmatization of program beneficiaries and widening of social gaps. Kumlin and Rothstein (2009) argue that targeted benefits create stigmatization and destroy solidarity whereas universal transfers generate the opposite effect, promoting social engagement and participation. Connected interventions, such as information and educational meetings, are, in turn, expected to promote bonds among beneficiaries, social participation and voice actions.

To our knowledge, there are no systematic reviews that address the proposed question. Bouillon and Tejerina (2007) conducted a systematic review of impact evaluations of conditional cash transfers in Latin America, addressing a range of outcomes. However, they did not analyze the effect of these programs on social solidarity and related concepts. They found that conditionalities change the behavior of beneficiaries. They did not consider unconditional direct transfers.

Coming closer to the focus of our proposal, King et al (2010) carried out a systematic review assessing the impact of community driven development (CDD) interventions and curriculum interventions promoting social cohesion in sub-Saharan Africa. In the case of CDD they found a positive effect on trust in community members and a negative effect on inter-group relations. These results highlight the complexities of within- and between-group solidarity.

Existing impact evaluation studies provide contradictory results. For instance, Attanasio et al. (2008) report positive effects of CCTs on social capital, measured as willingness to invest in collective projects and social participation. Meanwhile, Chong et al. (2009) report that welfare destroys social ties through stigmatization. Vera Soares et al. (2010) find no effects on social participation in the Paraguayan transfer program Tekoporá. Kardan et al. (2010) evaluate an emergency transfer plan in rural Zimbabwe and find that the program negatively influenced social relations, as a result of the targeting process. However, the sense of confidence among beneficiaries increased.
Studies on attitudes and opinions carried out in developing countries find that targeting methods are a key problem with regard to social cohesion (Miller et al., 2008). In the context of developed countries, Vergolini (2011) argues that “individuals who live in a system that guarantees protection against risks connected with market economy will show positive attitudes and a high level of trust toward the society’s institutions” (pp. 7). Based on data from the European Quality of Life Survey the author tests the macro level of social cohesion by assessing confidence in the social benefit system, perceived intergroup tensions, quality of public services and alienation. Vergolini finds that vulnerable households tend to show lower levels of social cohesion than people who do not experience economic difficulties. At the same time, the author shows that social cohesion is significantly affected by welfare regimes. Specifically, vulnerable groups in countries with social democratic welfare regimes show higher social cohesion than both non-vulnerable groups and vulnerable individuals living under other welfare regimes.

Objectives

- What are the effects of direct transfers on social solidarity, according to the evidence in the quantitative evaluation literature? (effectiveness)
- Do these effects vary with context, program design and across demographic categories?
- How does social solidarity respond to the existence and characteristics of direct transfers? (opinions, attitudes and behaviour)

EXISTING REVIEWS

To our knowledge there are no systematic reviews addressing the question we are proposing, although partial aspects of the problem have been considered in previous work. For example, Bouillon and Tejerina (2007) conducted a systematic review including impact evaluations of conditional cash transfers of social programs in Latin America. They addressed a wide range of outcomes such as education, health, nutrition, employment, youth, work, access to sanitation and sewage, and income, but did not analyze specifically the effect of these programs on social solidarity and related concepts.

Based on a framework similar to the one presented here, King et al (2010) carried out a systematic review assessing the impact of community driven development interventions and curriculum interventions promoting social cohesion in sub-Saharan Africa.

DEFINE THE POPULATION

Urban and rural households and individuals. Developing and developed countries.

Aggregative strand: target population of transfer programs
Configurative strand: the whole population of countries having public transfer programs.
Program time span covered by this study: 1970 to present

DEFINE THE INTERVENTION

Cash and in-kind transfers, including transfers that are conditional on beneficiary behaviour, those which are not conditional on behaviour but subject to means
testing, and transfers which are provided universally, directly provided by public institutions to individuals or households, periodically and for at least six months.

Comparison conditions: similar populations not receiving cash transfers

### OUTCOMES

Our main outcome of interest is social solidarity. In empirical studies, the concept has been referred to as social cohesion. In turn, it has been operationalized as trust, social bonds, social participation and collective action (King et al., 2010). The usefulness and interchangeability of these concepts will be addressed in our review. At the same time, we will be including stigma, understood as a possible way in which social solidarity can be eroded. As mentioned above, many studies find that direct transfers create stigma among beneficiaries.

### STUDY DESIGNS

In order to meet our objectives, this review will include both configurative and an aggregative components (Gough et al, 2012).

a) Configurative component of the review: empirical quantitative and qualitative studies, assessing the links between welfare transfers and solidarity, views studies. Qualitative program evaluations.

b) Aggregative component of the review: quantitative experimental and quasi-experimental impact evaluation studies.

To date, we identified eight evaluation studies addressing our topic of interest. For example, Chong et al. (2009) report that welfare destroys social ties via stigmatization, whereas Attanasio et al (2008) find positive effect of transfers on social cooperation. Kardan et al. (2010) evaluate an emergency transfer plan in rural Zimbabwe and find that the program had negative impact on social relations.

Languages: English, Spanish, French, Portuguese
Publication time span covered by this study: 1990-2012

### References:


Cohen J. and Arato A. (2000). Sociedad civil y teoría política, Mexico DF, FCE


**AUTHOR(S) REVIEW TEAM**

List names of those who will be cited as authors on the final publication.

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ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

Our team combines previous experience in systematic reviews with experience in impact evaluation, and a strong empirical and theoretical background on the core topic of our question. We are planning to include in our team specialist in information retrieval.

The distribution of roles and responsibilities within our team will be as follows:

- Content: Martín Leites, Gustavo Pereira, Gonzalo Salas, Andrea Vigorito
- Systematic review methods: Andrés Rius, Andrea Vigorito
- Statistical analysis: Martín Leites, Gonzalo Salas, Andrés Rius, Andrea Vigorito
- Information retrieval: Martín Leites, Gonzalo Salas and one specialist to be determined

POTENTIAL CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

Andrea Vigorito co-authored a paper on an impact evaluation of PANES, a cash transfer program focused on social capital carried out in Uruguay during 2005-2007.

SUPPORT

We will benefit from support in systematic searching and statistical analysis

FUNDING

We received funding from a competitive fund in Universidad de la Republica, CSIC-groupos (www.csic.edu.uy). The total amount of the grant allocated to carry out this systematic review is US $20,000. The deadline for completing this review is February 2014.

PRELIMINARY TIMEFRAME

Note, if the protocol or review are not submitted within 6 months and 18 months of title registration, respectively, the review area is opened up for other reviewers.
• Date you plan to submit a draft protocol: within 2 months
• Date you plan to submit a draft review: 7 months since protocol

DECLARATION

Authors’ responsibilities
By completing this form, you accept responsibility for preparing, maintaining and updating the review in accordance with Campbell Collaboration policy. The Campbell International Development Group will provide as much support as possible to assist with the preparation of the review.

A draft protocol must be submitted to the Group within six months. If drafts are not submitted before the agreed deadlines, or if we are unable to contact you for an extended period, the Group has the right to de-register the title or transfer the title to alternative authors. The Group also has the right to de-register or transfer the title if it does not meet the standards of the Group and/or the Campbell Collaboration.

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