DELIVERING EFFICIENT CASH TRANSFER PROGRAMS IN AN EMERGENCY CONTEXT

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Commited to people

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Once upon a time, in-kind programs or food aid dominated emergency response. However, according to the Center for Global Development,[i] "in recent years, cash transfer programming has emerged as one of the most significant innovations in international humanitarian assistance". In fact, the Cash for Learning Partnership (CALP) has estimated that $2.8 billion was spent on cash and voucher programming in 2016, up 40% from 2015, and 100% from 2014. [ii]

Cash transfer programming is also recognized by other international agencies and governments as a powerful instrument to help vulnerable people living in poverty increase, not just household income, but also school enrollment, health and nutrition indicators, in addition to supporting choice and dignity among affected populations.

Now that the case has been built, support for the use of cash transfers being a more efficient and effective modality in an emergency context has increased. In fact, the debate for the use of cash has now shifted from "whether they may be an appropriate tool to how organizations, donors and governments can best use cash transfers"[iii] (*multisector or sector specific cash grants*) and have a more transformative effect. Jan Egeland Secretary General of the Norwegian Refugee Council goes further and states that this shift is because "we are learning about how best to use cash in different contexts and because it challenges established ways of operating in the humanitarian sector".[iv]

In spite of this, regular cash transfer programming still experiences implementation challenges and even more so in emergency contexts. While a regular cash transfer project is implemented in one to two years, an emergency cash transfer project needs to be implemented in a matter of weeks, but no more than three months to really ensure that cash is transferred to beneficiaries in a very short period of time. Operational process designs, software applications supporting the process and service providers need to be ready to go in a matter of weeks.

In the last few years, different strategies have been developed to overcome and resolve challenges in very short periods of time, but not all having the required success (i.*e. fast response time and the program is transparent, efficient as well as effective*). One such example looks at emergencies in Africa, mainly the Somalia drought response whereby UNICEF managed the emergency and utilized Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) to distribute the cash. However, the process was conducted manually and suffered important setbacks[v] including the following:

- Lack of timely response or action from national authorities and the international humanitarian system.
- Compromised quality of targeting the most vulnerable due to inadequate time to negotiate with the local actors who manage both access to minority populations, the distribution of aid, methodological flaws and ease or difficulty of implementation given the context.
- Access constraints to areas and populations in need imposed by Al Shabaab.

- Rapid decisions regarding the appropriateness of cash or vouchers, the amount to be transferred and the duration or planned number of transfers were made under considerable pressure, based on imperfect information, and complicated by the conflicting opinions of experts.
- Lack of constructive engagement between various cash actors.
- Subject to diversion, corruption and fraud including misuse of funds and fraud by NGO employees through the creation of ghost beneficiaries and villages and local authorities taxing beneficiaries.
- Weak complaints and feedback mechanisms (*capturing only symptoms of problems rather than causes*).
- Inefficient monitoring systems with limited data and collected only at the end of the project.

Another example is the UNHCR Jordan's biometric cash transfer program which provides cash to the most vulnerable Syrian refugees living outside of camps. However, the process was also not without its challenges. These challenges include the following:

- Gaps in financing whereby refugee needs have exceeded UNHCR Jordan's funds. [vi]
- Challenges associated with hosting a large urban refugee population. [vii]
- Limited beneficiary awareness of program targeting.[viii]
- No appropriate case management and grievance redressal processes were implemented and beneficiaries felt as if their complaints were being ignored or did not know whether the complaint had been addressed due to no feedback from project staff.[ix]
- Insufficient cash amount according to beneficiary feedback.[x]
- Inefficient communication strategy.[xi]

On the other hand, a different strategy, used by our company to tackle and manage emergency programs, includes the development of a **master operational process design** and a **master software application platform** for emergency projects. This was developed based on our 20 year experience in designing and implementing cash transfer programs in different contexts. The operational design process includes detailed standard processes, forms, and training as well as communication instruments needed to be applied in an emergency context. These instruments cover all phases of the project cycle, supply capacity, targeting, enrolment, payments, case management, monitoring, and linkages and referrals.

The software application platform reflects the master operational design and has a capacity to accommodate millions of beneficiaries within a transactional database. Offline and online work versions are developed and synchronized through web services. Communication methods are established between different service providers' systems[xii] through transferring encrypted lists or secure web services. There is

also a tool that allows for the execution of business intelligence and obtaining indicators as well as the ability to monitor the implementation of the project in real time.

Both the operational and design process as well as the software application platform are flexible and could be adjusted and modified upon the specific needs of the emergency in a matter of days and/or weeks. In fact, our company can complete the design and begin implementation of emergency cash transfer projects in a very short period of time as required by donors and governments.

Because of prior research, innovation and work developed by our company, it is possible for us to implement efficient operations and overcome the difficulties and challenges being faced by donors, multilateral agencies, NGOs and other agencies in the field. Our most recent experience was in Yemen, a country under dire circumstances, facing a civil war and going through extreme difficulties. Not to mention about two thirds of the population is unemployed. UNICEF, with US funding, hired our firm as a third party consultant to provide technical assistance in the design and implementation of the Emergency Cash Transfer Project (ECTP) to assist 1.5 million families or the equivalent of over 9 million persons. In fact, the objective of this project was to support one third of the population of Yemen with cash assistance.

The project used the Yemen Social Welfare Fund (SWF) database or list of beneficiaries to identify the eligible families. Our company took that information, reviewed and cleaned it by analyzing the database, verifying if the information therein was consistent (*i.e. contains the minimum information required to carry out paymen*ts), and checking if there were any duplicates. Once completed, the ECTP started with the migration of the SWF database to the ECT-MIS.[xiii] The list of beneficiaries was generated with the payment amounts, and the first payment cycle began. Beneficiary Lists were produced and sent to the payment agencies, followed by actual payments to ECTP beneficiaries.

The primary Payments process is accompanied by the supporting processes of: Facilitation, Verification, Grievance Redressal, Community Validation of Identity (CVI) and Monitoring. Facilitation describes the relationship that the ECTP establishes with local actors to gather their acceptance and support to implement the Project. The purpose of Verification is to confirm the entitlement of the beneficiary, inform him/her about the rights and obligations of the different parties, issue Authorization Forms for payments, update beneficiary information, and when necessary, fill out PMT Confirmation forms. The first time that the beneficiary intends to receive his/her benefit requires him/her to go through the Verification Section at the ECTP Center.[xiv] For all subsequent payments, the beneficiary can proceed directly to the payment site/agent.

Beneficiaries can also file Grievances either at the ECTP Center or through a call center and get support through the CVI process when needed. CVI provides support to beneficiaries who do not have one of the accepted IDs (*or any form of ID*) by the project; have problems with the name on their ID and the name that is on the beneficiary list; as well as identify or assist beneficiaries with physical or socio-cultural impediments to facilitate preparedness for outreach.

The Project processes are monitored throughout the project cycle to quickly identify challenges and trigger corrective and preventive measures.

During the execution of the above-mentioned processes, the Messaging and Information Guidelines provides guidance to all staff involved in the different processes on how to inform beneficiaries and other stakeholders about the ECTP processes, eligibility criteria, rules and protocols to be followed to receive the benefit.

Our company, which is a specialized firm implementing cash transfer programs has demonstrated that these programs can be implemented in a very short period of time, using the highest standards of quality and efficiency, no matter the situation of the target population. For this to work, programs/projects need to have a **capacity of reaction, adaptable technology**, and **reliable data collection and verification**, adaptable to the country's specific needs. Fortunately, we can provide these services especially when time, budget, and resources are limited.

Our consulting firm prides itself on its commitment to working with integrity, putting the client first, collaborating with people all over the world, and achieving excellence above and beyond client expectations. We take into account our client's specific needs and work rapidly to address any country's emerging needs constantly reviewing and checking our methodology in close contact with our clients in order to provide the best results in the least amount of time.

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[ix] Ibid.

[x] Ibid.

[xi] Ibid.

[xii] Such as banks, monitoring companies and/or companies executing processes in the field.

[xiii] This ECT-MIS refers to a specialized tailor-made platform developed for emergency projects and adapted for this ECTP.

[xiv] ECTP Centers serve as a one-stop center where beneficiaries can access verification, CVI and grievance services.