IMPROVING EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES AMONG CHILDREN IN MALAWI'S SOCIAL CASH TRANSFER PROGRAMME: A SUMMARY OF RESEARCH FINDINGS AND POLICY OPTIONS

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BACKGROUND

Recognizing the critical importance of human capital development to the prospect of breaking intergenerational poverty traps, the Malawi Social Cash Transfer Programme (SCTP) includes an educational bonus and incentive aimed at improving primary and secondary education among children living in the SCTP households. The impact evaluation of the SCTP in 2013-2015 found large positive effects on school enrolment (10 percentage point impact among children age 6-17 years), but no effects on grade progression or attainment. Even so, a review by the Ministry of Gender, Community Development and Social Welfare (MoGCDSW) in 2018 reported that school enrolment by children in SCTP households was still not universal, raising questions on the effectiveness of the SCTP schooling bonus in overcoming the existing barriers to school enrolment and attendance.

This situation motivated a **new study to critically examine the patterns of school enrolment and attendance among children in SCTP households, identify barriers to attendance (monetary and non-monetary), and propose policy options and programme design tweaks to help improve the programme's educational impact.** A mixed methods study was commissioned in 2019 covering three districts: Salima, Mulanje and Nkhata Bay. Quantitative data were collected from randomly selected one-thousand five hundred households in six randomly selected village clusters (two from each district). Qualitative data were collected through focus group discussions with both in and out-of-school youth (15 to 24 years) and in-depth interviewers with caregivers in Salima and Mulanje. The full study results are available in a separate report (https://www.unicef.org/malawi/reports/policy-options-improve-educational-impact-malawi-social-cash-transfer).

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

School availability and accessibility

According to Ministry of Education data, the majority of youth participants had a primary school within approximately 1.7 kilometres of their homes. Secondary schools are few and less easily accessible with the average distance to the nearest secondary school at 6.4 kilometres. Given that the majority of learners are day students, even at the secondary school level, these distances are both time and energy draining, particularly girls who face insecurities in their commute.

At the primary level, the average number of students per class is about 150 which poses significant challenges to the quality of instruction. Schools also typically lack libraries and hygiene facilities, and physical punishment at school was raised as a concern by some learners. The learner/teacher ratio of about 148:1 is much higher than the average of 60:1 for Malawi, and 40:1 for sub-Saharan

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Africa. Analysis using an index of school efficiency shows that more efficient schools have higher retention and progression rates for learners.

School enrolment and attendance among SCTP children

Among SCTP households, 94 per cent of children of primary school going age (6 – 13 years) were reported to be enrolled in school in the current school year, but only 60 per cent of those enrolled attended school regularly (defined as more than 75 per cent of the school year). Combining these two figures, just over half (56 percent) of the children aged 6 – 13 years in SCTP households were *effectively* in school (enrolled and regularly attending). A possible explanation of this phenomenon is that SCTP households are responding to the need to have children enrolled in school because it is easily verifiable, and they fear potential repercussions of not enrolling the children. Effective enrolment (adjusting overall enrolment by regular attendance) was about 50 per cent among children age 14 – 17 years and only 24 per cent among children/youth age 18-23. In general, there was little difference in the effective enrolment rates between males and females except for the age group 18-23 (See Figure 1).

One observation with the school attendance was the fact that most of the children were much older for their class due to late entry to school and repetitions. For example, more than half of learners in Standard 1 were aged 8 years in contrast to the expected age of 6 years in Standard 1. The mixed-age classes are the result of a combination of late entry to school and frequent repetitions. Learners who are much older for their class are often derided by their younger colleagues, which then leads to dropouts. Girls in their teens who are still in primary school are more likely to drop out of school, according to education statistics. Also, more than 30 per cent of the children who were enrolled in school in the 2017-2018 academic year did not progress to the next grade in the 2018-2019 school year.

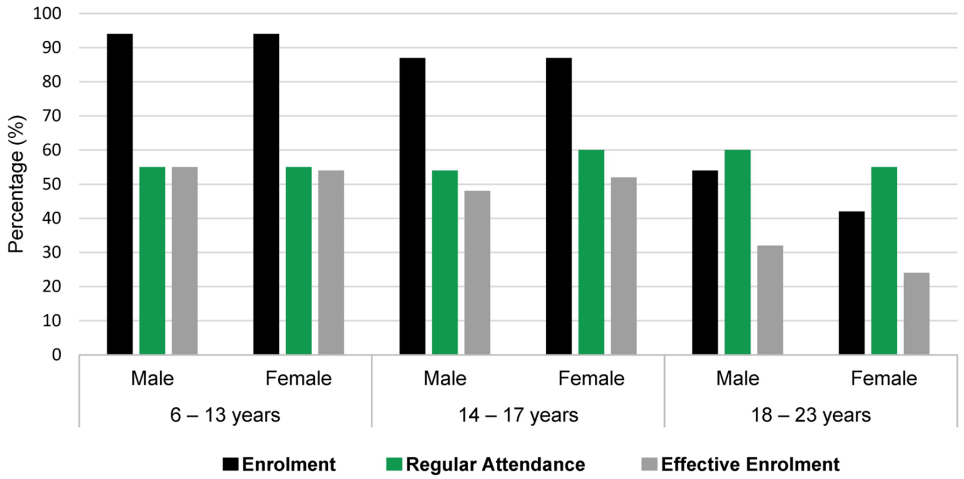
School expenditure and adequacy of SCTP bonus/incentive

Although tuition fee waivers for primary school enrolment are in effect in Malawi, there are several costs including uniforms, school supplies and examination fees, among others. For the 2018-2019 school year, the total out-of-pocket costs were estimated at MK106,627 and MK152,125 per learner per year at the primary and secondary levels respectively (e.g. books, supplies, canteen and examination fees). The total SCTP bonus per child per year at the primary level is MK9,600 which represents only 9 per cent of the total estimated out-of-pocket cost to keep a child in primary school for the school year. Similarly, the SCTP incentive for attendance at the secondary level represents just about 12 per cent of the estimated cost of MK152,125 per learner per year.

The survey data shows that the share of total household spending on education is 4 percent, compared to 81 percent for food. The average reported amount spent on schooling per child (also from the household survey) is MK9,972, which is very close to the expected school top-up of MK9,600 per child received by the household. **Thus, SCTP households seem to spend all the top-up on school related expenses. However, since the top-up is a very small proportion of the per learner cost of schooling, the top-up cannot finance the schooling of <u>all</u> children in the household.**

These findings are confirmed by the econometric analysis showing that the SCTP school top-up is associated with a large (100+) percent increase in the amount of money spent on educational expenses, and a 27-percentage point increase in effective school enrolment. The most important spending items are tuition (for secondary school children), examination fees, school supplies and uniforms. These results are consistent with the 2013-15 evaluation, and provide additional, more detailed evidence on the strong link between the education top-up specifically and household school spending and effective enrolment.

Figure 1:
School Participation of Children in SCTP Households by Age Group and Sex in 2018/2019 School Year

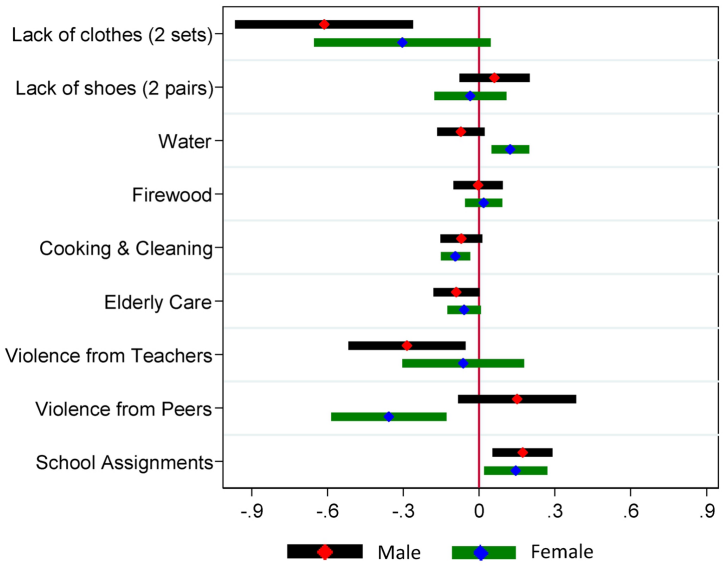


Non-monetary barriers to education among children in SCT households

Apart from direct school expenditure serving as a barrier, the study identified several other circumstantial non-monetary barriers to education (Figure 2)[1] . Material wellbeing such as lack of two sets of clothes is associated with less school participation for boys than girls, while the lack of shoes has no association with school participation. The number of hours dedicated to household chores such as cleaning, cooking, and care giving is also associated with less school participation most significantly for girls. Additionally, boys who report to have experienced physical or emotional violence from teachers are less likely to participate actively in schooling. On the other hand, girls who experience violence from peers are less likely to participate in school. Encouragingly, pupils who are given school assignments at least once a week are more likely to participate actively in school. This suggests learner may be able to assess their learning engagements through immediate feedback of school assignments and thus keep them engaged in school activities.

Both the qualitative and quantitative data show that girls face a disproportionate number of barriers to education compared to their male counterparts. Young people also cited violence and harassment from both teachers and peers as additional barriers to their education. Violence from teachers reduces effective enrolment for boys and grade progression for girls. This violence includes being called names that makes the child feel bad about him(her)self; being shouted, yelled or screamed at; being hit, kicked, beat or other forms of physical harm. Girls are also at risk of sexual harassment from their teachers as well. Both youth and caregivers reported instances of sexual advances and harassment by teachers towards female learners. These experiences create an unsafe learning environment for girls who may drop out to avoid continued abuse. Youth participants also indicated that other youth were also sometimes the perpetrators of violence at school. Violence by peers reduces effective enrolment for girls and grade progression for boys. Youth recalled experiences of bullying and physical altercations both at and on the way to school. Girls reported unwanted sexual advances from peers and schoolmates, some going so far as to block girls' paths to school until they agreed to date them.

Figure 2: Non-monetary Barriers and Effective Enrollment by Gender



In addition to the issue of safety mentioned above, girls must navigate menstruation and pregnancy in order to stay in school. Girls who cited menstruation as a barrier in focus groups reported lacking hygiene products and feeling embarrassed about the possibility of staining their clothes, which could lead to their peers finding out. Others cited physical symptoms related to menstruation as the cause of their absence. Beyond menstruation, many out-of-school female youth cited pregnancy as their reason for dropping out of school. Once out of school, it was extremely difficult for these girls to re-enrol as their new responsibilities coupled with lack of support and resources feel like insurmountable obstacles to education.

Other barriers, such as lack of parental support and household chores affect both girls and boys—though there are still gender-specific differences. Regarding parental support, youth whose caregivers were indifferent or unsupportive of education were less likely to stay in school. Beyond the financial and material barriers, without consistent parental guidance and encouragement, youth described losing the focus and motivation necessary to complete their schooling. Both male and female youth felt that girls are less likely to receive parental support than boys. In some households, girls' education is considered a waste of money and time and girls were pressured to drop out of school and get married or to take on more household chores. Some household chores have more of a negative impact on education than others. For example, the number of hours dedicated to cooking, cleaning, and caring for younger children statistically reduces effective enrolment but not grade progression. Cooking responsibilities have a greater impact on girls than boys; and elder care only reduces enrollment for girls. Anecdotally, young people reported that morning chores often cause tardiness for which the punishment is often being sent home.

[1]Figure 2 plots confidence intervals and estimates of non-monetary indicators on effective enrolment. For each indicator, we test the hypothesis that the association between the indicator and effective enrolment is statistically significant. Whenever the confidence interval crosses the vertical line at $x = 0$, it means the association between the indicator and effective enrolment is not statistically significant. In other words, the indicator is not a determinant of our objective outcome variable.

PROPOSED POLICY AND PROGRAMME DESIGN OPTIONS TO IMPROVE ON THE SITUATION

Given the complex, multi-dimensional factors associated with successful schooling outcomes, the policy and programmatic options for the SCTP are not straightforward. This is because the SCTP is primarily a social protection programme rather than an educational programme, and many of the barriers to schooling described previously (such as school quality, teacher attitude, and safety) are beyond the responsibility of the MoGCDSW.

The following policy options based on the findings of the study, in consultation with the study reference group comprising the MoGCDSW, Ministry of Economic Planning and Development and Public Sector Reforms, and development partners. The ultimate decision to pursue these options will need to consider the objectives of the SCTP as a broad-based social protection programme that serves households in structural poverty and as a human capital development programme, vis a vis the relative cost and benefit of each individual option.

- **Increase the overall value of the transfer and school bonus:** The bonus represents just about 10 per cent of the estimated direct cost of school enrolment, and when the opportunity cost is accounted for, this figure is even lower. **The low value of the bonus is the most important financial reason for irregular school attendance.** And the erosion of the real value of the family transfer itself is the reason why households cannot cope with shocks and thus pull children out of school.
- **Early enrolment bonus:** the current SCTP bonus is for children aged 6-23 but many children aged 6 or 7 years are still not enrolled. A special bonus for early enrolment could help solve the issue of delayed entry and ultimately improve retention.
- **Automatic secondary school fee waivers for SCTP children:** Very few current SCTP children actually reach secondary school because the out of pocket costs of attending secondary school is much steeper relative to primary school. This combination means this is a relatively low-cost option that would potentially provide a strong incentive for grade progression.
- **Direct incentives for school progression:** There are several creative ways to structure the school bonus to promote schooling performance, which is a key educational challenge among SCTP children. The bonus could be increased if a child progresses from one grade to the next each year, and an additional one-time bonus provided for writing the Primary School Leaving Certificate Examination. Special publicity could be provided for SCTP secondary school scholars, including a privately endowed bursary scheme, and a one-time bonus could be provided for sitting for the Malawi School Certificate Examination. Giving the top-up directly to the learner could incentivize learners in school progression.
- **Incentives for girls' education:** Access to education for girls remains a major challenge among SCTP beneficiaries and provides the basis for dedicated policies to support girls. A higher school bonus for girls is commonly used in other cash transfer programmes and would be a straightforward option. Links with community mother's groups, by providing them with a list of SCTP girl beneficiaries, would also help support girls' education within the SCTP.
- **Labelled child bonus in lieu of educational bonus:** Renaming to a child bonus rather than an educational bonus would solve some internal conflicts within the SCTP, such as the pressure to monitor school enrolment and attendance, and the relatively low value of the bonus. Education can still be promoted by explicitly 'labelling' the bonus as a way to support children's schooling and material well-being (e.g. clothing, food). This is already being done with the current schooling bonus. The additional benefit is that children under age 5 would also qualify for the bonus—currently this group is totally ignored in the SCTP although nutrition and food security is an explicit programme objective and young children clearly have unique nutritional requirements that justify a top-up.
- **Condition the school bonus on minimum school attendance:** Moving to a conditional programme would entail significant administrative and financial costs for the MoGCDSW. Administrative costs include a transparent system of monitoring and appeals. Financial costs include a significant increase (at least doubling) in the bonus to offset the actual direct costs of school attendance. The main benefit would be potential improvements in regular attendance, which may translate into progression. This decision would significantly change the fundamental scope and nature of the SCTP, from a social protection programme with broad objectives to a human capital programme with somewhat narrower objectives.
- **Strengthen linkages with Ministry of Education:** Specific activities, proposed by the Ministry of Education, have been described in the report. Of these activities, inviting the District Education Manager (DEM) and head teachers to the pay parade prior to the beginning of the academic year, and providing schools with lists of SCTP children enrolled in school, seem to be very low cost/high benefit options. The possibility of waiving repetitions, especially for girls who fall behind their right grade for age can also be discussed to reduce the risk of dropouts.
- **Linkages for young adult dropouts:** The qualitative narratives suggest there is demand for schooling from this group, but they do not feel comfortable within the traditional school system due to their age. Linking this group to adult education initiatives and ensuring the school bonus is available to them, would encourage their school re-enrolment.

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