

Cash Transfers and Social Protection



Interview with Foday Conteh, Senior Monitoring and Evaluation Officer of the Social Safety Net programme from the Ministry of Employment and Social Security, Sierra Leone.

IPC: Mr Conteh, could you please tell us about the cash transfer programme you are currently running in Sierra Leone?

Foday Conteh (F.C.): Thank you very much. The cash transfer that we are currently running in Sierra Leone is quite a new phenomenon and the initiative itself does not actually come from the officers of the ministry. The Safety Net programme is purely community-based and the individual committees in the various chiefdoms that we are working with are actually the owners, because they determine exactly what is fit and befitting for the beneficiaries. They requested the social cash transfer initiative, which we decided to implement, because according to our own principles, according to the concept, we shall find ways and means through which we can provide food to the most vulnerable people, particularly the aged. They considered the fact that the cash transfer is the fastest means and the easiest way through which we can actually provide assistance and reach them within the shortest possible time, since they are in dire need.

IPC: What is the main target group?

F.C.: The main target group is the aged, those aged 60 years and above, with no regular source of income, no support; they are unable to work. And it even transcends that, in other words, we are not only looking out for the aged, because the competition in terms of age was so keen, so we moved beyond that to include the chronically ill: we are actually looking out for the chronically ill, the disabled, particularly for the blind and the crippled. These are the very people who are left out in the streets, who are running helter-skelter for food, for whom even getting a square meal a day is very, very difficult. So in fact that was why even the 60 years age criterion was not actually the determinant; it was much more the degree of vulnerability of the persons that we are actually targeting.

IPC: You mentioned the significant role of the community in the programme. What is the targeting process like? How do you actually reach these people?

F.C.: The process of targeting, using the community Social Safety Net Committee is very, very important here. This was the initiative of the parliament in the designing of the concept paper. The people within the community have the right to determine what they want for their elderly, the reason being that they fully understand the suffering of these people. Therefore, we formed what are known as the Social Safety Net Chiefdom Committees. These comprise the traditional leaders within the particular chiefdom or community we are targeting, namely, a civil society representative, a ministry of health representative, a ministry of employment representative, a youth leader, and a women's leader. We also have the pastor or the imam - you know these people [the vulnerable] are in the mosques, they are in the churches, begging, so they [the pastors and imams] can tell you. They are in the top position to actually identify them for us, so that is why we formed the Social Safety Net Chiefdom Committees to help us pick out the genuinely vulnerable people. These people and organisations can actually tell you this person is suffering and this person is in dire need and therefore he deserves assistance. So we know they are not lies. They cannot simply take people who are not qualified. Above all, even though they provide us with the necessary lists, they build their identification, but we as safety net officers carry out the verification and the screening process. The process takes two forms, either by visual inspection or the administration of a questionnaire. You cannot see a blind man and ask him: are you blind? So we use visual means to identify those people and we also use a questionnaire

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with about 15 questions to identify the level of vulnerability of the particular individual. We use the two approaches - the visual means as well as the use of the questionnaire - in order for us to be able to include exactly the people that we really want to target within the scheme.

IPC: How many people are you currently supporting?

F.C.: When you look at the applications for 2007, we have about 38,000 people who actually applied. But having gone through the necessary screening processes - we verified, we photo-identified then we verified again - the actual figure of the vulnerable people ended up at 16,890 people.

IPC: How much is the benefit?

F.C.: The benefit is 200,000 leones (US 68 dollars) for a period of six months. We expect them to utilise that money to buy only food because the programme is catering for food, shelter and medical facilities for the aged, but since we cannot afford to provide them with the medical aspect, we decided to use that cash purely for them to be able to buy their basic food for the day. Because, when you see you are ill, it means perhaps that something is lacking and in the absence of food it just continues. Whereas, at least if you are fed three times a day, you know that there is some form of hope that tomorrow you will be able to get some form of health. Indeed, the government is working very hard to ensure that they begin paying a sort of health pension to these people.

IPC: How do you ensure that they actually spend the money on food?

F.C.: 55 percent have not done so, because the money is in a lump sum of 200,000 leones. Some decided to invest their money. There are caretakers who look after them. When this 200,000 or 68 dollars is given to them they give it to the caretakers, who invest the money and gradually use it to feed them on a daily basis, because if they decide to keep it by themselves, perhaps some other person will just come along and decide to take this money away and they will continue to wallow in poverty. From our recent evaluation, about 55 percent of them invested the cash through their caretaker. 35 percent of them buy food with their money upon receipt of cash. 2 percent of them spent their money to actually cure themselves, you see, because some, especially males, have (*not audible*). The majority of the males verified and accepted into this scheme have this (*not audible*). They do not have money to get this thing opened. So at the end of day they use this money to get themselves well.

IPC: How do they receive the benefit?

F.C.: Direct cash transfer. No one receives it on behalf of another person, regardless of whether one has a caretaker or not. No one receives it for you. The payment team together with the special safety net officers summon all qualified beneficiaries to an open place, because the payment is done in an open place. All potential beneficiaries are summoned in the presence of the entire committee and some committees constitute more than 10-15 individuals. All of them are there; the security forces and the chiefdom police are there to guide these people to their houses and villages so that no one can tamper with their funds. Because we provide individual vouchers for each and every one of them and they have pictures and on the back of the pictures are your finger prints so that no one else will come and sign for you, to ensure that it is indeed your own. No one else owns it. In fact, that demonstrates the level of commitment people might have towards older people. For example, people might think "this time around, since he is collecting the money, I shall follow behind him". So gradually we begin to see some form of family reconnection. We begin to see

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them actually encouraging these people that were once regarded as downcasts in society. So that is the manner in which we distribute cash. If a particular beneficiary fails to turn up during the payment day, what we do is we find time, together with the committee, to go and visit his or her home, with the picture, we look and see, we identify the individual, then we give the hand-out, then he or she signs for it. But in cases where a person has died before the time of payment but after the money has been released, as we often have such cases, the scheme still maintains the right to pay the money to the family as a kind of death pension. But since the programme is not hereditary, we only pay once so that they can take care of the funeral. After that, we find another person to take their place, because we have waiting lists and several people waiting who need similar assistance.

IPC: Is it a lump sum or is it a monthly benefit you give?

F.C.: It is a lump sum. This is determined by the community. We say, ok, we give 11 dollars, which is 33,000 leones per month, they decide that with this 11 dollars perhaps they will just get something and forget about it. So if you give them lump sum, some will be able to invest or to buy bulk sums of food that can be stored and eaten gradually and if you buy bulk you buy at a cheaper rate. So that is why we suggested that we disperse the money in lump sum, so we decided to give it for a period of six months. That is his or her own decision. We don't take initiatives. They have to take the initiative and decide exactly what to do with the cash being distributed to them.

IPC: What is the source of the funding?

F.C.: It is purely government and trading. The initial funding was the food aid that was given to Sierra Leonean government from China and Italy. The food was sold and then the money was given to the government and this was what was used to set up the Social Safety Net. Because only food was sent, the government decided that they would give each and every one a single bag of rice, and will even achieve the result for which they intended, so this is the manner in which the government then thought it necessary to utilise the food aid that was being provided by foreign countries. But, now it is purely government and trading.

IPC: What are the results of the programme you have achieved so far?

F.C.: The results are very, very positive in the sense that, I mean, that there is a sense of belonging, and respect for the older people is growing, and the demand for an extension of the programme to the other regions, is quite high. In fact that is what is now posing a serious problem and if we don't take action maybe in the next one to two years, we shall surely run out of cash. So we are determined to gradually replace this cash transfer with agricultural projects, because the youth is currently raising the question, "why are you giving the old people so much money?" So we are saying, you have to work for these people, but if you say otherwise, then we are going to design a programme where you take responsibility for these people indirectly, meaning that we are going to establish these community farms, they will work in there, we will give them incentives, and the proceeds will be used to provide food for the aged. We are also considering constructing shelters for these people [the aged], because when they are scattered all over it is very, very difficult, so we have to find ways through which we can contain them, such as in old age homes, where we will find it very easy to provide them with food from the farm proceeds on a constant basis instead of cash on an intermittent basis. Some misuse their money, especially those who do not trust their caretakers. They will tell you they are capable of taking care of their money. Those are just isolated cases. Some will just

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collect their cash, drink, get drunk and die the following day. We had two instances where that happened. The greater majority actually utilise the money. Most of them get at least two meals per day. But the greater number that we actually keep the cash for are the widows. Women were the worst affected during the war. So whenever we go to a particular community, in the process of verification, we always start with women, because they have grand-children to take care of. We ask for them, we ask for the blind males, amputees, male and female, and so on and so forth. The long and short of it is the women seem to dominate and for the regional cash transfer initiative about 70 percent of women benefitted from the scheme.

IPC: When did your programme start and what are the prospects for the programme?

F.C.: The prospects for the programme are that, if we are going to have sufficient funding, both from the government and donor organisations, to take up that community farming and the housing scheme, we are sure of making remarkable prospects. So that it will not only be for the aged: the employment capacity for the youth will increase considerably, because each of these chiefdoms have youths, and these youths are volatile, they have gone through war and they are still very aggressive. They say they cannot imagine not having something to eat while "you go there and give money to the old people". That was why they started grumbling. They say these are some of the reasons why they decided to go to the bush. So we are talking to them gradually, telling them we are taking care of their grand-parents, so why not support us so that we can all move together. Now we have a youth leader as a member of the committee. These people are used to talking to their compatriots, so that at the end of it all we will have a very peaceful community, caring for these people. But we are sure that if we actually implement that community farming programme, we are sure of making very good headway.

IPC: Would you like to add anything?

F.C.: The only thing I would like to add is that my concern here is that since the inception of the programme and until today, it has been purely government-driven. The government is very new. The current government is too new and there is competition for scarce resources. Therefore, if our programme's prospects are to be achieved, then we need support. We need donor support.

IPC: Ok, thank you very much.

F.C.: Thank you very much.

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