



Conditional cash transfers and improved education quality: A political search for the policy link



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ABSTRACT

Conditional Cash Transfer programs (CCTs) provide cash to poor families upon the fulfillment of conditions related to the education of their children. Even though CCTs have been increasingly expected to improve educational attainment – besides their proven impact on greater enrollment and attendance, it is not clear whether they have had any impact on education policies. In order to explore that, this article builds upon a comparative study of three programs: Opportunity NYC, *Subsidios Condicionados a la Asistencia Escolar* (Colombia), and *Bolsa Familia* (Brazil). The article concludes that, when it comes to policy-making, the link between CCTs and education policies has been weak, contrary to high international expectations.

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1. Introduction

One of the basic attractions of CCT programs is the potential synergy of getting health, education, and social assistance to the same families. Realizing such synergy at the operational level has been a basic challenge in all countries (Fiszbein and Schady, 2009, p. 100).

Since 1995 developing countries have witnessed the dissemination of poverty reduction programs that are based on the direct transfer of cash to families when they fulfill certain activities, mostly of an educational and health-related nature. Those programs came to be internationally known as conditional cash transfers (CCTs). The first CCTs, such as *Progresá* in Mexico and *Bolsa Escola* in Brazil, made transfers conditional upon school enrollment and attendance, besides requiring families to take their children to public health facilities for medical checkups and immunizations. From an education perspective, that was an attempt to reduce the number of out-of-school children and student absenteeism by providing a cash incentive that would counterbalance the direct costs and opportunity costs of going to school.

However, as much as education may look intertwined with CCTs through their education conditionalities, it is not clear to what extent the education and CCT policy subsystems are really related. Even in the cases where the education sector is in charge of

the program, it is not clear what the ‘adoption’ of a CCT has meant for education policies and for how the program itself has been conceived and implemented.

One could reasonably ask: why does this matter? The answer is twofold. First, CCTs have been designed and evaluated on the basis of their impact both on reducing poverty and inequality and on improving education and health indicators. Second, when it comes to education, that impact has been assessed not only in terms of basic measures such as enrollment, attendance and dropout, but also in terms of CCTs’ contribution to improving education attainment. According to Fiszbein and Schady (2009), impact evaluations for most programs indicate a positive effect on enrollment and attendance,¹ but mixed and inconclusive results

¹ Much debate and research have been devoted to contrasting conditional and unconditional cash transfers and whether CCT impacts could be achieved anyways even without the education and health-related conditions. Those who question the idea of conditionalities state that “CCTs transform the transfer into a price effect on the desired action” (Sadoulet and de Janvry, 2004, p. 19). On the one hand, the price effect of conditionalities can have distorting consequences for how a beneficiary family allocates their resources. On the other hand, if the family faces paramount difficulties to send their children to school and the “price” attached to the transfer is not great enough, that family may still not maintain their children’s school enrollment or attendance. Amidst that debate, Baird et al. (2013) conducted a review on existing studies and concluded that, broadly put, both conditional and unconditional transfers have a positive impact on school enrollment and attendance. However, if one further differentiates among the various kinds of conditional programs, they find that “programs that are explicitly conditional, monitor compliance and penalize non-compliance have substantively larger effects (60 per cent improvement in odds of enrollment)” (Baird et al., 2013, p. 47).

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for CCTs' impact on learning outcomes. Thus, understanding how immersed the education sector has been in the policy design and implementation of CCTs is a crucial step for a better understanding of results. It is also fundamental for the formulation of a clear idea of what CCTs' limits and possibilities are when it comes to building human capital.

Bearing those issues in mind, the article will be dedicated to exploring the following research questions: Have CCTs had an impact on education policies? Are education policymakers adopting and taking ownership over conditional cash transfer programs? Conversely, have CCTs helped create new political conditions for education reform?

As CCTs have been implemented in over 40 countries (Morais de Sa e Silva, 2012), a growing body of specialized literature has been dedicated to analyzing them. It is a professional literature that is mostly available through the websites of international organizations and think tanks. It involves evaluation reports, comparative studies, and case analyses that aim at assessing the performance of individual programs and generating lessons to inform policy-making. Throughout those papers a common theme is the assumption that CCTs and education are intrinsically intertwined, and that, therefore, those programs ought to contribute to improving educational outcomes. For instance, it is common practice to evaluate CCTs' performance on the basis of their contribution to improving school enrollment and attendance (as a consequence of built-in conditionalities), and the assessment of outcomes such as learning indicators and school completion has also become increasingly common (Fiszbein and Schady, 2009). Examples of the latter include Behrman et al. (2000), Behrman et al. (2005), Ponce and Bedi (2008), and Filmer and Schady (2009). However, most of those efforts have been channeled toward evaluating CCT impacts on quantitative indicators. There has been no research looking at CCTs from a political policy perspective, which might be relevant if the idea is to have CCTs have a positive influence on education outcomes.

Hence, in order to fill that gap, this research will explore how these programs relate to education policymaking. By attempting to get more children to enroll in school, to attend classes more often, to graduate or to raise their performance, CCTs act upon the demand-side of education. But how do they interact with those reforms geared toward improving education supply or the "core of educational practice"² (Elmore, 1996)? Have they triggered new policies toward improved quality? At a more basic level, has the education policymaking arena even let them in?

Unfortunately, the CCT literature does not provide an adequate theoretical framework through which the above issues could be discussed and analyzed. Most existing studies are rather geared toward the use of econometric methods to assess impact. As the questions here are of a different nature, a framework based on political science and the theories of the policy process – specially those that explain policy change – will be adopted.

2. Theoretical framework

Scholarly work on public policies or what some have called the "policy sciences" (Stone, 2002) have departed from a range of different assumptions in striving to better understand policy-related matters. Different positions as per the role of politics, institutions, rationality and other variables in the world of policies have culminated in different theoretical streams. Many attempts have been made at arriving at a typology of theoretical perspectives on public policies. For instance, Kraft and Furlong (2007) differentiate between elite theory, group theory, institutional theory, rational

choice theory, and political systems theory. Others see the main cleavage lying between the works of pluralists and those who conceptualize policymaking as being first and foremost conflict-laden (Baumgartner and Jones, 1993). In his most recent work, Henig (2008) makes a typology of the different views regarding the use of scientific evidence in policymaking. He sees the most contrasting difference between those who adopt a political perspective according to which research is a political tool and those with a more administrative perspective, which preaches that it is possible to "speak truth to power" (p. 18).

'Best practices' like CCTs are favored by the 'administrative perspective' of public policy, which promotes the notion of policymaking as an objective and technical process in which expertise is put at the service of finding remedies for societal malfunctions. That perspective has become mainstream in the current era of the "post-bureaucratic state" (Pons and van Zanten, 2007; Steiner-Khamsi, 2009), which emphasizes scientifically-based research and the search for the "killer study" (Hess and Henig, 2008). The prevailing expectations are that research findings will define what policies work best, those being called best practices.

However, this research is not informed by mainstream administrative lenses. It rather adopts a 'political perspective' of public policies, one that is interested in the embedded politics of policymaking processes and their "policy paradoxes" (Stone, 2002). This political look at a cherished policy solution can provide greater understanding of what that policy means.

Within policy studies, this research belongs to the theories of the policy process, specifically those that have dedicated efforts to studying policy change and continuity. Among the various theories of the policy process, the "advocacy coalition framework" (Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith, 1993, 1999; Sabatier, 1999) stands out as most useful for this research, as it explicitly assigns importance to the relationship between different policy subsystems – like education and poverty reduction.

2.1. Advocacy coalition framework

The advocacy coalition framework (ACF) is an explanatory model according to which policy change is a function of three processes: (1) competing coalitions who seek to gain control over policies in a given subsystem; (2) external changes in "socioeconomic conditions, system-wide governing coalitions and output from other subsystems that provide opportunities and obstacles to the competing coalitions" (Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith, 1993, p. 5); and (3) changes in the social structure or in constitutional rules. Some of these processes, when combined, can then lead to policy change.

Specifically, the framework predicts that "changes in core elements of public policies require the replacement of one dominant coalition by another, and this transition is hypothesized to result primarily from changes external to the subsystem" (pp. 5–6). Of central relevance for this work is the importance that the ACF assigns to external change, especially in terms of change in other subsystems. In this regard, considering that CCTs are novel poverty-reduction programs that have altered the subsystem of "social welfare"/"poverty reduction" policies in various countries, of interest here is whether they have induced change in the education subsystem. In order to accomplish that it would be necessary to "affect the constraints and opportunities of subsystem actors" (Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith, 1999, p. 120) and allow for the replacement of the coalition that dominates education policies either at the federal, state or city level. The importance of external factors for policy change in a given subsystem is attributed to the fact that external change may favor the policy arguments and beliefs of the 'opposition' coalition to the detriment of those of the 'dominant' coalition.

² (Elmore (1996) defines "the core of educational practice" as the triangular relationship between teachers, students and knowledge.

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