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Data Article

Non-contributory social transfer programs in developing countries: A new dataset and research agenda



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ABSTRACT

Social transfer programs in developing countries are designed to contribute to poverty reduction by increasing the income of the poor in order to ensure minimal living standards. In addition, social transfers provide a safety net for the vulnerable, who are typically not covered by contributory social security. The question of how effective such programs are in achieving these aims has been the subject of numerous impact evaluations. However, the optimal design of such programs is still unclear. Even less is known about whether the adoption and implementation of transfer programs is really driven by poverty and neediness or whether other factors also have an influence. To investigate these and other research questions, we have developed a new dataset entitled Non-Contributory Social Transfer Programs (NSTP) in Developing Countries. One advantage of this dataset is that it traces 186 non-contributory programs from 101 countries back in time and presents them in panel form for the period up until 2015. The second advantage is that it contains all the details regarding the various programs' designs as well as information on costs and coverage in a coded format and thus facilitates both comparative quantitative and in-depth qualitative analyses. While describing the data we discuss a number of examples of how the dataset can be used to explore different issues related to social policies in developing

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countries. We present suggestive evidence that the adoption of social transfer programs is not based only on pro-poor motives, but rather that social policy choices differ between political regimes.

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1. Introduction

Social protection programs can be an important instrument in fighting poverty and protecting the vulnerable. Since the beginning of the 1990s, the number of anti-poverty transfer programs in developing countries has increased significantly. At the same time, the design and efficiency of such programs remains subject to debate. The major areas of dispute involve the trade-off between current and future poverty alleviation; the selection and social exclusion problems involved in designing social protection programs; and these programs' regularity, duration, and budget size. Numerous studies have explored the efficiency and effectiveness of such programs in different country contexts. However, to the best of our knowledge, there is little work that takes a global perspective on social transfer programs in the developing world. This paper introduces a new dataset that provides such a comprehensive overview of social transfer programs in developing countries.

Many scholars stress the gap in comparable data on social assistance for non-OECD countries [1–3]. The existing sources usually comprise data on one type of social policy or are focused mostly on one region or only on developed countries. Typically, the time span is not large and the information is available only for the most recent 10 to 15 years. One exception is the database by Barrientos et al. [4], which combines the data on social assistance for developing countries; however, it presents only the descriptive profiles of social assistance programs, which cannot be easily used in a comparative analysis and only provide coverage up until 2010. Our Non-Contributory Social Transfer Programs (NSTP) Dataset¹ significantly extends the work by Barrientos et al. [4] in terms of both time and space. We have checked the existing information on social transfer programs and included 102 additional programs. In total, our database comprises 186 program profiles in 101 countries. What is more important is that we encode all the details and characteristics of social transfer programs in panel form so that the data can be used for any type of quantitative and qualitative analysis. We list elements of the design such as the type of transfer, type of conditions, targeting mechanism, delivery mode, donor involvement, and pilot status, as well as cost and coverage numbers where this information is available. This type of table format for the data allows for a closer look at social policies in the developing countries from a global perspective. It thus facilitates comparative analyses according to numerous characteristics of the programs. Our database is intended to be an innovative tool to study worldwide trends in social assistance, evaluate the performance of individual schemes, and identify effective and efficient features of social transfer programs.

On the one hand, the NSTP dataset can be used to examine all transfer programs in panel form in a cross-country quantitative study. On the other hand, it allows for a focus on specific program characteristics such as different types of transfers, conditions, or targeting mechanisms. Such characteristics can easily be compared across regions or countries. The dataset provides information on every program profile, which can be used for a quick search of the details of any program in operation. Thus, it can be used by qualitative scholars to identify those programs with specific characteristics for further in-depth study.

After describing the data, we briefly review the main strands of the literature on the effectiveness/efficiency of social policy and suggest how the NSTP dataset may be used to explore open questions. To provide a more specific example that demonstrates the possible applications of the data, we focus on a particular research question: To what extent is the expansion of social transfer programs in the developing world driven by factors that are not related to pro-poor motives? We consider the political

¹ Data is freely available in the GESIS Data Archive. <http://dx.doi.org/10.7802/1530>

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