



CTPD'S MONDAY OPINION

This is a weekly column aimed at sharing CTPD's perspective and steering public debate on various issues pertaining to Trade & Investments Law, Public Finance Management, Extractives and Human Development.

TODAYS TOPIC

Enhancing the efficacy of Social Protection amidst economic reforms.



IN LAST week's edition of our Monday Opinion, I relied on a study conducted by the Centre for Trade Policy and Development (CTPD) with support from Save the Children in 2020 to highlight some inherent challenges facing the social cash transfer program and made an attempt to prescribe plausible solutions. I motivated the discussion by an argument which exemplified the perpetual pervasiveness and intractability of poverty in Zambia, while placing social protection as a competent alleviation mechanism that government should exploit amid reforms to rebuild the economy. Poverty levels in Zambia remain high, approximately around 64% with an asymmetric distribution over rural and urban areas, skewed towards rural areas (National Budget, 2021). Research has also shown that human capital accumulation is lower in rural areas relative to urban areas. As a result, women and adolescent girls are particularly vulnerable (MCDSS, 2022).

This week, I extend the conversation to another social protection program, the Girls' Education and Women's Empowerment and Livelihoods (GEWEL) which was equally a subject of analysis in the CTPD study which focused on Kitwe and Lufwanyama districts of the Copperbelt province.

The GEWEL program is a flagship social protection project of the Government of the Republic of Zambia. GEWEL seeks to promote adolescent girls' access to secondary education, through the Keeping Girls in School (KGS) component and increase access to livelihood support for women through the Supporting Women's Livelihoods (SWL) component. This is a World Bank (IDA)-funded project which has been in implementation since 2016 under the primary mandate of the Gender Division, Ministry of Community Development and Social Services, and

Ministry of Education (MCDSS, 2022).

Unlike social cash transfer which has been hampered by limited funding, the GEWEL program has been fairly well funded since its inception. Expectedly, both the SWL and KGS performed much better than the social cash transfer program in the two districts. Beneficiaries from SWL registered some improvements in their living standards since their inclusion on the program. Some of the benefits that they indicated to have derived from the program include supporting children in school, starting small businesses such as selling charcoal and/or rearing chickens and enhanced household consumption.

Nonetheless, women benefiting from SWL bemoaned the lack of sustainability in the small business projects they engaged in upon receiving the financial support. While disbursements under the program benefited from volatility in the exchange rate as the Kwacha amount increased following a depreciation, this increase remained nominal. Overtime, we advance the need to revise the US Dollar amount upwards as this would increase the disbursements in real terms, commensurate with the rising cost of living.

Under KGS, we learnt that, despite the financial support rendered to the girls, retention in school remained hindered. For instance, the number of girls benefiting from KGS in Lufwanyama dropped to 1,202 in 2019 from 1,382 in 2018 (Kamara and Wakumelo, 2020). We established that beyond financial support, keeping the girl child in school requires a holistic approach that provides a solution to the inherent causes of high school-dropout rates among girls. Key among the causes cited were early marriages, long distances to school (for Lufwanyama) and a general lack of interest in school.

Further, we learnt that most girls had little or no access to sanitary towels which made their stay in school uncomfortable.

In view of our findings, we argued for the need to enhance sensitization programs aimed at strengthening campaigns against early marriages, especially in rural areas such as Lufwanyama where school dropout rates are quite high. We further recommended that, beyond settling their tuition fees, the girls should be supported with the provision of sanitary towels and other basic needs that will make their stay in school more comfortable. In the long-term, building more boarding schools in rural and geographically spaced districts like Lufwanyama would ease the hardships of traveling many kilometers on foot and ensure that the girls spend most of their time in school. Taking benefiting girls to nearby boarding schools will help stimulate girl child school retention levels in the short term.

Ultimately, it will be key for Government to consider replicating the KGS model on the boy child too, especially in rural districts where the challenges facing both the boy and girl child are significantly homogeneous. Given the new administration's drive towards providing free access to education for all, it will be key to consider some of these recommendations in the implementation process because clearly, the essence of a free access to education goes beyond removing tuition and related fees.

About the author,

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