



IFPRI *Research Talks* Podcast Series

Episode 10- Working Amid War: Assessing Cash Transfers for Nutrition in Yemen

Sivan: Hi and welcome to “Research Talks”, a podcast series that explores how research is making an impact on people and policies (with a focus on the ‘how’), brought to you by the International Food Policy Research Institute, IFPRI. I’m your host, Sivan Yosef. In this episode, we’re talking about research being done right in the middle of one of the worst humanitarian crises in the world: the civil war in Yemen. What’s the best way of helping the millions of people impacted by intense fighting and conflict? Would it involve... giving them cash?

Sikandra: People are really happy now that they have this evidence that the cash transfers worked so well. And they're being expanded. I think, in part due to the fact that we were able to show that, which is a rarity in a conflict situation.

Sivan: That is IFPRI’s Sikandra Kurdi, a research fellow who works in Yemen.

Sikandra: So I am based out of the Egypt office and most of my work is in the MENA, Middle East North Africa region, especially related to social protection and child nutrition.

Sivan: In 2013, Sikandra was working on her PhD at the University of California, Berkeley.

Sikandra: So I actually got involved in work in Yemen originally during my PhD. I had been interested in studying Arabic because I enjoy studying languages. I ended up going back and forth to Yemen a number of times during my PhD. I fell in love with the country and got started kind of working on social protection issues there and kind of got a lot of my fieldwork background.

Sivan: In 2014, a semi-governmental organization called the Social Fund for Development got support from international donors to run a pilot program targeting child malnutrition.

Sikandra: There's a very high rate of child malnutrition in Yemen, and that's kind of been the case for a long time. Yemen's been a poor country for most of the 20th century, although in ancient history, it was quite wealthy. But there's a lot of especially stunting, and so there had been interest in doing something to reduce child malnutrition. And the model that they were going to take is kind of a combination of cash transfers with the behavioral change training. So, on the one hand, it's like a conditional cash transfer setup, where they're going to give people cash, but in return for meeting some conditions. And in this case, the condition was that

households were required to attend nutritional training sessions, on a monthly basis. The women who are receiving the cash would go to these meetings in the community where they would listen to a discussion about some topics related to child feeding, or sanitation, the importance of treating water, the importance of exclusive breastfeeding, or the initiation of breastfeeding.

Sivan: And the pilot was being implemented where in the country?

Sikandra: It's in Al Hudaydah. So, this was the governorate which had the highest rates of poverty and highest rates of child malnutrition. But it was projected to eventually be used in other parts of the country as well. So, it was implemented in three specific districts and Al Hudaydah governorate. This is right on the Red Sea.

Sivan: The Social Fund for Development figured out a clever way to run its pilot Integrated Nutrition Intervention. They piggybacked off of the Social Welfare Fund, which is the largest social protection program in Yemen. The women who were already getting social welfare funds, which were essentially cash transfers, were randomly selected to participate in the pilot.

Sikandra: So this was kind of like an extra top-up for women who are already getting some very small level of cash transfers in this much larger national program, but this was intended to be really targeted specifically at women with young children under two years old. And that in addition to giving them that extra cash, it was also going to give them the training and awareness about better care for their children.

Sivan: Sikandra, still doing her PhD, helped the Social Fund for Development design a questionnaire and randomize the intervention. In December of 2014, she and her colleagues collected baseline data for the pilot. And then the next month, the pilot program launched. But 2015 would turn out to be an historic year for Yemen.

News reporter: The UN envoy warning that Yemen is at quote the edge of civil war.

Sikandra: At the time there, we didn't feel anything. I told my colleagues, "Hey, I got this notification that they're going to evacuate me. They think that it's not safe for US citizens here anymore." And they were saying, "Yeah, but they've been saying this kind of warning for a long time and nothing has really changed. We know Yemen is always unstable." But then shortly after I came back, yeah, the airstrikes started. It exploded into a hot, hot war, hot, hot conflict with air strikes and involvement of kind of external political actors also.

Sivan: Yemen was suddenly in a full-on civil war between the North and the South, with involvement from a range of regional actors. But what did all of this mean for the pilot nutrition program?

Sikandra: At the beginning, we were kind of optimistic, maybe it's just gonna last a few months. It drags on; it gets worse. By the end of 2015, the Social Fund for Development no longer has any funding because of the rules for donors about transferring funds to countries in current conflict.

One of the actually inspiring stories here is that people in the Social Fund for Development kept showing up to work. They weren't receiving paychecks for months, and they kept the programs going in the hope that the conflict would end and the donors would come back. The conflict didn't end, but the donors did come back, and they recognized that the Social Fund for Development was working on the ground, and the program was still happening. They were still doing even some of these nutritional training sessions.

Sivan: Because of this break in external donor funding, in 2016, the Social Fund for Development wasn't able to continue actually giving the cash transfers, so they paused the program for 9 months. In October of 2016, it came back and was expanded. By this time, Sikandra had finished her PhD and had joined IFPRI.

Sikandra: When I joined IFPRI, this was after the conflict had started. I was thinking, Okay, I'm going to move on to working in maybe another country where there's no ongoing conflict, because things had become really difficult in Yemen. So it actually turned out that that I was still in touch with my colleagues at the Social Fund for Development, and they let me know that the program that had been a pilot when we were designing this evaluation, had now been expanded into this much larger program, not only in Hudaydah, but this model was being used in a lot of other governorates as part of the humanitarian response to the civil war.

Sivan: The expanded program, now called the Cash for Nutrition program, had to adjust for the new reality of protracted civil war.

Sikandra: When the pilot was designed, it was much more kind of in the standard design of conditional cash transfer programs. And they had kind of lists about, if you miss so many meetings, then your transfer will get cut off. And these are the things that in the context of the civil war ended up being considerably softened. Nobody was actually going and verifying that the women had completed all of these obligations before they gave them the cash. That was really kind of a reflection of the reality on the ground, is that they knew it wasn't the woman's fault that in the context of conflict situation where there's concerns about security, some women were internally displaced, they're moving to live with relatives and other areas because of the danger.

Sivan: The Social Fund for Development was still interested in an evaluation of this now expanded program. The original three districts where the pilot program had run had not been expanded, the pilot had just kept running, so Sikandra and her colleagues were able to interview more or less the same 2,000 women, to record any changes in their situation.

Sikandra We waited a couple of months and they weren't able to go to the fields because of the complications of the conflict situation. And this is all collected through the smartphone. So, we were able to see the data that was coming in, even though it was remotely and kind of being in close touch with the people in the field as they were collecting the data.

I mean, we were getting photos coming back from the field of the children who were malnourished and the babies. And the enumerators themselves were really kind of worried. And the enumerators were coming more from middle class families and hadn't seen how bad the conditions were. So, they were sending us a lot of photos and donating their own money and asking us what else can we do now? So, the situation was really bad.

Sivan: Even with all these hardships, the enumerators from the Social Fund for Development were able to finish collecting data for the impact evaluation. And the results were very hopeful.

Sikandra: What we found in terms of the impacts was that the cash transfers are really effective. And we're not sure to what degree it's the cash transfers themselves, what degree is the nutritional training, what's probably is the combination of the two of them, because that package, according to other research seems to be really important, and there's some definite synergies. You have to both have the knowledge and have the means to apply it. So, what we find is that that package intervention is increasing child dietary diversity very significantly.

And it's decreasing the probability that children have been diagnosed with malnutrition in the past year. It's also increasing consumption of non-staple foods by the family.

Sivan: Non staple foods are milk, eggs, fruits and vegetables.

Sikandra: In particular foods that they would have to buy in cash for families getting the cash transfers and the training. And that actually translated into even increases in height for age for the children who had been at the most critical age, during the period of receiving the transfers.

Sivan: Were the markets still functioning in those rural areas under conflict?

Sikandra: Yes. So, we collected data from the markets, and we see that the availability of food was pretty good at the time that we were collecting data. Of course, during very acute periods of the conflict when we weren't out there collecting data, there were probably price increases and issues with supply. But I think that's important for people to realize is that when you hear somebody say, okay, it's a civil war that's been ongoing for five years, it doesn't mean that for five years, everybody is locked down in their homes and terrified. People are terrified at the beginning, but then life goes on. There's a wartime economy. That's obviously a lot more inefficient. There's a lot of poverty, but markets are active. And I think that was a big lesson from this impact evaluation, is that there has been skepticism about the idea that cash transfers can work in humanitarian settings and conflict settings. Because people are worried that there might not be active markets. But in fact, in these kind of protracted conflict settings, you have to look at this specific context, but it's not impossible to do this type of intervention.

Sivan: Has the project yielded any insights on how nutrition interventions can work under humanitarian contexts?

Sikandra: There were a few lessons that we got from discussions with the Social Fund for Development about how they were able to adapt the program during the conflict. The fact that they were using locally trained women was important, firstly, it's important just because I think it helps to transmit the message better if it's from somebody who understands the kind of local culture and beliefs about childcare. But also, it meant that it was much more resilient to the conflict because the women kept working, and they kept working even if they weren't being paid. Because they were local there, they felt responsible for their communities.

And people are really happy now that they have this evidence that the cash transfers worked so well. And they're being expanded, I think, in part due to the fact that we were able to show that, which is a rarity in a conflict situation.

Sivan: Do you have any other lessons that you could share for other researchers trying to carry out work in conflict settings?

Sikandra: So, it's not a lesson that can be applied, once the country is already in conflict, but just the general importance of long-standing, trusting relationships with our implementing partners. I think it's important all the time, but especially in the case that it becomes suddenly difficult for whatever reason to travel to the country. Either in conflict situations, or what we see now with the COVID-19 situation where suddenly the travel becomes much more difficult. It's hard to start new partnerships by Zoom and Skype. But if you have established relationships, then you have the ability to keep that contact going. There's a lot of things that can be done

remotely, but the initial meeting people and building up trust and explaining the importance of evaluation and research and forming policy, a lot of that has to be done; it's groundwork that you do a few years earlier, and then you get your results later.

Sivan: Thanks so much to Sikandra Kurdi for her time. To learn more about IFPRI's work and the Social Fund for Development's work in Yemen, you can go to the IFPRI homepage I-F-P-R-I.org and type in Yemen cash transfers in the search box. It will lead you to so many interesting resources on this project and more. And don't forget to subscribe to our podcasts so you don't miss a single episode of *Research Talks* from IFPRI. Till Next Time!