

COVID-19, the SDG Agenda, and Implementation Paralysis: Cash Transfer Programs to the Rescue?*

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Abstract: The COVID-19 pandemic intensified global development needs and widened the funding gap for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG). The SDG Agenda, which represents the global commitment to achieving the SDGs, necessitates that implementation be cohesive and non-selective, ensuring that the goals are not treated as discrete entities but rather as interlinked objectives to be pursued simultaneously for the Agenda's full realization. However, we argue that responding to specific pandemic-driven development deficits requires recognizing limits to SDG indivisibility. By analyzing the pandemic's impact on food security (SDG 2) and primary and secondary education (SDG 4), we show how the widespread erosion of development progress on these goals threatens the Agenda as their attainment forms a foundation for durable progress on other SDGs. Cash transfer programs designed to address erosions of development progress could provide some direction in moving beyond the rigidity of non-selective realization and SDG implementation paralysis.

Résumé: La pandémie de COVID-19 a intensifié les besoins de développement à un niveau mondial, et a élargi les lacunes de financement pour la réalisation des objectifs de développement durable (ODDs). L'Agenda des ODDs, représentant l'engagement mondial en faveur de la réalisation des ODDs, exige que la mise en oeuvre soit cohérente et non sélective, en veillant à ce que les objectifs ne soient pas traités comme des entités distinctes, mais plutôt comme des objectifs interdépendants à poursuivre simultanément en vue de la pleine réalisation de l'Agenda. Cependant, nous soutenons que la réponse aux déficits de développement spécifiques dus à la pandémie exige de reconnaître les limites de l'indivisibilité des ODDs. En analysant l'impact de la pandémie sur la sécurité alimentaire (ODD 2) et sur l'éducation primaire et secondaire (ODD 4), nous démontrons comment l'érosion généralisée des progrès de développement sur ces objectifs menace l'Agenda, car leur réalisation constitue un fondement pour des progrès durables envers l'atteinte d'autres ODDs. Les programmes de transferts monétaires conçus pour remédier à l'érosion des progrès en matière de développement pourraient permettre de sortir de la rigidité de la réalisation non sélective et de la paralysie de la mise en oeuvre des ODDs.

Titre en français : COVID-19, l'agenda des SDG, et la paralysie de la mise en oeuvre: les programmes des transferts monétaires viennent-ils au secours ?

* We are grateful for the outstanding research assistance of Nicolas Kamaran.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Compelled by the need to protect the poorest from the economic shocks triggered by COVID-19, many States resorted to cash transfer (CT) schemes that rapidly put money in people's hands.¹ Largescale COVID-19 lockdowns in 2020 and 2021 prohibited the poor from earning their livelihood, exposing and exacerbating the vulnerability of people in precarious work situations.² Workers in the informal economy—who account for approximately 60 percent of workers globally—have had to be resilient and resourceful.³ Unlike workers in formal employment, those in the informal sector often cannot work remotely and have no social safety net on which to rely if they lose their livelihood.⁴ Without personal savings and employment insurance, or with more limited access to financial borrowing, CTs—a direct payment of money to individuals or households—have made the difference between life and death.⁵

Cash transfers have been a “core protagonist of the global COVID-19 response”⁶ for numerous reasons. The programs offer immediate liquidity to families, allowing them to address their most pressing needs, whether food, housing, or healthcare. Cash transfers empower recipients to prioritize expenditures based on their unique circumstances. These programs inject capital directly into local economies, supporting small businesses and services struggling under lockdowns and reduced consumer activity. In an era of unpredictability and widespread financial distress, CT programs stood out for their efficiency, direct impact, and respect for individual agency.

While CT programs provided immediate relief and local economic stimulation, the overarching ramifications of the pandemic were vast, touching on long-term global goals and initiatives. This article focuses on the 2015 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), a global framework of 17 goals for environmental, social, and economic development. The SDGs succeeded the 2000 Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), a set of eight international development goals established to address extreme poverty and health by 2015. Among other

¹ Ugo Gentilini et al, *Social Protection and Jobs Responses to COVID-19: A Real-Time Review of Country Measures*, COVID-19 Living Paper series (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2022) at 65–75, online (pdf): <hdl.handle.net/10986/33635>.

² See generally Risto Rönkkö, Stuart Rutherford & Kunal Sen, “The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the poor: Insights from the Hrishipara diaries” (2022) 149 *World Development* 1.

³ See UN, *The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2022*, (New York: UN, 2022) at 43, online (pdf): <unstats.un.org/sdgs/report/2022/The-Sustainable-Development-Goals-Report-2022.pdf> [UN Report].

⁴ See UN, *A UN framework for the immediate socio-economic response to COVID-19*, (UN, 2020) at 17, online (pdf): <unsdg.un.org/sites/default/files/2020-04/UN-framework-for-the-immediate-socio-economic-response-to-COVID-19.pdf> [UN immediate response].

⁵ See generally Aaron Richterman et al, “The effects of cash transfers on adult and child mortality in low- and middle-income countries” (2023) 618 *Nature* 575; see e.g. Sania Nishtar, “How cash transfers prevent lockdown tragedies”, *Bangkok Post* (31 August 2020), online: <bangkokpost.com/business/1977319/how-cash-transfers-prevent-lockdown-tragedies>.

⁶ Ugo Gentilini, *Cash Transfers in Pandemic Times: Evidence, Practices, and Implications from the Largest Scale Up in History* (Washington, DC: World Bank Group, 2022) at 6, online (pdf): <documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/099800007112236655/pdf/P17658505ca3820930a254018e229a30bf8.pdf>.

goals, the COVID-19 pandemic immediately impacted two core SDGs/MDGs: zero hunger (SDG 2, MDG 1) and universal education (SDG 4, MDG 2).⁷ The World Food Programme (WFP) estimates that the pandemic significantly contributed to the rise of acute hunger worldwide,⁸ which has been declining over the last 30 years.⁹ The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), meanwhile, remains concerned that the millions of children who were out of school due to COVID-19 are at risk of child labour, may fall behind in their education, or never return to school.¹⁰

Rising development needs in an increasingly complex context, driven by the pandemic and other crises, could create challenges for the envisioned non-selective implementation of the United Nations' (UN) 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Displacements and disruptions in food supply chains have exacerbated food insecurity.¹¹ Children have been forced out of education by lockdowns and violence.¹² The funding gap for achieving the SDGs has widened from approximately 2.5 trillion to 4.2 trillion USD annually, according to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).¹³ The SDGs remain, as conceived, an "integrated and indivisible" framework requiring implementation in a non-selective manner.¹⁴ The colossal price tag of the Agenda (the global commitment to achieving the SDGs) and the imperative of its non-selective implementation may put States and multilateral organizations in a state of implementation paralysis.¹⁵ The rigid approach to the Agenda requires States to simultaneously address all 17 SDGs, leaving little room for prioritization or targeted action on specific pressing issues, thereby hindering effective responses to challenges

⁷ Note that MDG 2 relates only to achieving universal primary education whereas SDG 4 relates to achieving universal primary and secondary education, see Sustainable Development Goals Fund, "From MDGs to SDGs," online: <sdgfund.org/mdgs-sdgs>.

⁸ See FSIN & Global Network Against Food Crises, *The Global Report on Food Crises 2023* (Rome: Food Security Information Network, 2023) at 8, online (pdf): <fsinplatform.org/sites/default/files/resources/files/GRFC2023-hi-res.pdf> [World Food Programme].

⁹ Our World in Data, "Prevalence of undernourishment in developing countries, 1970 to 2015" (2017), online (interactive chart): <ourworldindata.org/grapher/prevalence-of-undernourishment-in-developing-countries-since-1970>.

¹⁰ See UNICEF, *Where are we on education recovery?*, (New York: UNICEF, 2022) at 8–11, 24, online (pdf): <unicef.org/media/117626/file/Where%20are%20we%20in%20Education%20Recovery?.pdf>.

¹¹ See Michael Omotayo Alabi & Ojelanki Ngwenyama, "Food security and disruptions of the global food supply chains during COVID-19: building smarter food supply chains for post COVID-19 era" (2022) 125:1 *British Food J* 167 at 170; FAO et al, *The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World: Urbanization, agrifood systems transformation and healthy diets across the rural-urban continuum*, (Rome: FAO, 2023) at xviii, xxi, 2, 28, DOI: <doi.org/10.4060/cc3017en>.

¹² See Fouzia Munir, "Mitigating COVID: Impact of COVID-19 Lockdown and School Closure on Children's Well-Being" (2021) 10:387 *Soc Sciences* at 2, 4–5, 7–8.

¹³ See OECD, *Global Outlook on Financing for Sustainable Development 2021: A New Way to Invest for People and Planet*, (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2020) at 16, 27, DOI: <doi.org/10.1787/e3c30a9a-en>.

¹⁴ See *Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*, UNGA, 70th Sess, UN Doc A/RES/70/1 (2015) GA Res 70/1 at para 5, online: <sdgs.un.org/sites/default/files/publications/21252030%20Agenda%20for%20Sustainable%20Development%20web.pdf> [2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development].

¹⁵ See Cameron Allen, Graciela Metternicht & Thomas Wiedmann, "Initial progress in implementing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs): a review of evidence from countries" (2018) 13 *Sustainability Science* 1453 at 1460–61, DOI: <doi.org/10.1007/s11625-018-0572-3>.

like the COVID-19-induced setbacks. Countries keen on projecting their commitment to the Agenda might spread resources thinly across all goals, potentially at the expense of pressing national priorities. Rigidly pushing the Agenda's indivisibility has provided little guidance to low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) attempting to prioritize their responses to pandemic-induced regressions on development goals such as SDG 2 and 4. For the Agenda to fulfil its promise of advancing a people-centred approach to development, fundamental challenges to human well-being arising from the pandemic and other crises must drive adaptable and responsive policies.

We argue that the indivisible or non-selective implementation of the SDGs should be overridden to respond to specific pandemic-driven development deficits that, left unaddressed, would threaten the viability of the entire Agenda. Pandemic-era CT programs meant to address particular erosions of development progress could provide some direction in moving beyond the rigidity of non-selective implementation and, more generally, the SDG implementation paralysis that has carried into the COVID-19 era. These programs underscore the feasibility of prioritization while still honouring the interconnectedness of these objectives. Two candidates for prioritization by LMICs that we explore are SDGs 2 (no hunger) and 4 (education). We posit that CT programs can be harnessed to address urgent deprivations of development that could undermine the success of the entire SDG Agenda. Indeed, CT programs have a strong track record of curbing acute hunger and improving education outcomes among those living in extreme poverty¹⁶ and are being effectively used to target and mitigate specific deprivations linked to SDGs 2 and 4.¹⁷

Our analysis of these issues will be conducted in two stages. The first stage is a critique of the concept of indivisibility that underlie the SDGs. We suggest that treating the Agenda as an indivisible whole is not an effective solution for policymakers in LMICs, who have limited resources and are tasked with addressing the most severe deprivations brought on by COVID-19. We discuss how the hunger and education goals are strong candidates for prioritization because the pandemic has threatened to derail their achievement. In the second stage, we argue that the flexibility of CT programs—specifically regarding their ability to target and alleviate particular sources of vulnerability—should prompt us to rethink the concept of indivisibility that is purportedly central to the SDG Agenda. Indeed, without prioritization, these deprivations would leave the rest of the SDG Agenda out of reach for some of the world's poorest. Our review of CT programs for SDGs 2 and 4, supported by a comprehensive review of CT programs conducted by the Overseas Development Institute (ODI), points to the effectiveness and necessity of focused efforts to properly address serious development

¹⁶ See Marie Boulinaud & Martin Ossandon, *Evidence and practice review of the use of cash transfers in contexts of acute food insecurity*, (Rome, Italy: Global Food Security Cluster, 2023) at 4–5, online (pdf): <plan-international.org/uploads/2023/01/20230117_GFSC-Research-Final-Report-v2-final.pdf>; Rachel Slater, "Cash transfers, social protection and poverty reduction" (2011) 20 *Intl J Soc Welfare* 250 at 256, DOI: <doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2397.2011.00801.x>; see generally Michelle Morais de Sá e Silva, *Poverty Reduction, Education, and the Global Diffusion of Conditional Cash Transfers* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017) at 3–53; Anouk Patel-Campillo & VB Salas García, "Breaking the poverty cycle? Conditional cash transfers and higher education attainment" (2022) 92 *Intl J Educational Development* 1, DOI: <doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedudev.2022.102612>.

¹⁷ See Madison T Little et al, "Effectiveness of cash-plus programmes on early childhood outcomes compared to cash transfers alone: A systematic review and meta-analysis in low- and middle-income countries" (2021) 18:9 *PLOS Medicine* 1 at 17–18, DOI: <doi.org/10.1371/journal.pmed.1003698>.

deprivations.¹⁸ In particular, we reviewed 27 studies conducted from 2000 to 2020 on the impacts of CTs on the Agenda's hunger and education targets. The review was restricted to LMICs, as defined by the World Bank.

2. THE 2030 AGENDA AND ITS INDIVISIBILITY PROBLEM

2.1. GOAL INDIVISIBILITY

The SDGs are a global “plan of action for people, planet and prosperity” with 17 goals.¹⁹ United Nations agencies have been adamant that the SDGs should be implemented as a cohesive and integrated whole.²⁰ The principle of indivisibility is based on the view that each SDG is essential to achieving the social, economic, and environmental dimensions of sustainable development and the expectation that the Agenda's implementation requires developing interlinkages between goals that aim to capture these dimensions.²¹

Indivisibility was introduced in the Agenda to prevent countries from “cherry-picking” the SDGs and ensure that States make adequate progress on the different dimensions of sustainable development (e.g., economic, social, and environmental).²² However, the UN has provided little by way of a definition of indivisibility to guide how the SDG Agenda should be put into effect, interlinkages and all. We argue that indivisibility should not impede the ability to focus efforts to attend to specific and serious deprivations, especially if they put the entire development agenda in peril.

With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, no hunger (SDG 2, MDG 1) and primary and secondary education (SDG 4, MDG 2) came under immediate threat. The pandemic disrupted food supply chains globally, causing food prices to rise and making basic nutrition inaccessible for many.²³ Widespread school closures affected millions of students, with some in less developed areas lacking the infrastructure or tools to transition to online learning, widening the educational divide.²⁴ Deficits to Goals 2 and 4, which can be seen as “enabling goals” that underpin the realization of the Agenda more broadly, were immediately felt. Indeed, SDG success will depend on how attuned the Agenda is to the real-world circumstances it is meant to address. If not, it exists in a manner out of touch with urgent development priorities and oblivious to the resource, political and other considerations that constrain

¹⁸ See Francesca Bastagli et al, *Cash Transfers: What Does the Evidence Say? A rigorous review of programme impact and of the role of design and implementation features*, (London: Overseas Development Institute, 2016), online (pdf): <cdn.odi.org/media/documents/11316.pdf> at 266 [Bastagli et al, *What Does the Evidence Say?*].

¹⁹ See *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*, *supra* note 14 at Preamble.

²⁰ See UN, “Integrated Solutions” (2023), online (webpage): <sdgintegration.undp.org/integrated-solutions>.

²¹ *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*, *supra* note 14 at Preamble, paras 5, 18, 55, 71, 75.

²² See Oana Forestier & Rakhyun E Kim, “Cherry-picking the Sustainable Development Goals: Goal prioritization by national governments and implications for global governance” (2020) 28:5 Sustainable Development 1269, DOI: <10.1002/sd.2082>.

²³ World Food Programme, *supra* note 8 at 7, 14.

²⁴ M. Niaz Asadullah & Anindita Bhattacharjee, “Digital Divide or Digital Provide? Technology, Time Use, and Learning Loss during COVID-19” (2022) 58:10 J Development Studies 1934 at 1935. See also Robin Donnelly & Harry Anthony Patrinos, “Learning loss during Covid-19: An early systematic review” (2022) 51 Prospects 601 at 604–07, DOI: <doi.org/10.1007/s11125-021-09582-6>.

action on those priorities. A realistic approach to operationalizing the Agenda must square the interconnectedness of the Agenda's goals with the real opportunities, needs, and constraints on the ground in LMICs.²⁵

However, it is important to note that prioritizing some goals may not need to exist at the flagrant expense of other goals. The implementation protocol of addressing urgent needs can be tended to holistically in a fashion that is still responsive to the concerns of other goals. For example, Goal 4 of ensuring "inclusive and equitable quality education" includes Target 4.5 of eliminating "gender disparities in education and ensur[ing] equal access to all levels of education and vocational training for the vulnerable, including persons with disabilities, [I] ndigenous peoples and children in vulnerable situations."²⁶ The SDGs provide indicators and targets that incorporate equity considerations for reaching the hard to reach within each goal.

The emerging partnership between the UN and China's 2021 Global Development Initiative (GDI) in implementing the SDGs demonstrates that prioritizing certain goals, such as poverty alleviation and food security, is being recognized as a more strategic approach to SDG attainment. The GDI was presented as an accelerator for the SDGs, emphasizing a pragmatic, needs-based approach to global development.²⁷ The framework outlines eight priority areas which align closely with the SDGs. Every project undertaken by the GDI aims to relate to one of these priority areas. This notion of prioritization is taken to help "fast-track" development.²⁸ By prioritizing small projects targeted directly at material conditions of existence, the GDI recognizes that some goals may need to be prioritized over others due to urgency or practicality, especially in the face of global challenges like the pandemic. More than 100 countries and international organizations have expressed their support for the GDI, and 68 countries have joined the Group of Friends of the GDI at the UN.²⁹ Although it is too early to make an informed assessment of the GDI's effectiveness as an accelerator of the SDGs and the risk that this partnership could undermine the rights-based approach to development, its arrival signals a focus on core development needs.

2.2. AN URGENT CALL FOR RECALIBRATION

The UN began to recognize that recalibrated approaches to SDG implementation were needed before the COVID-19 pandemic began, given the world's sluggish and uneven progress toward the 2030 Agenda. In 2019, scientists appointed by the UN Secretary General proposed placing the SDGs into more general categories to highlight important interlinkages between them. They proposed categories for: "human well-being and capabilities" (including eliminating poverty and improving health and education outcomes), "sustainable and just economies,"

²⁵ See e.g. Nandini Ramanujam, Nicholas Caivano & Alexander Agnello, "Distributive Justice and the Sustainable Development Goals: Delivering Agenda 2030 in India" (2019) 12:2 L & Development Rev 495.

²⁶ See *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*, *supra* note 14 at Goal 4.

²⁷ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, "Global Development Initiative-Building on 2030 SDGs for Stronger, Greener and Healthier Global Development" (last visited 7 February 2024), online: <sdgs.un.org/partnerships/global-development-initiative-building-2030-sdgs-stronger-greener-and-healthier-global>.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*

“food systems and nutrition patterns,” “energy decarbonization and universal access,” and “global environmental commons” (combining biodiversity and climate change).³⁰ While the proposal might help highlight or emphasize complementarities amongst the goals, it simply reframes and reasserts the same 17 goals—all of which must still be fully met.

That said, the UN has begun to recognize that priority shifts brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic must be reflected in any rigorous SDG implementation strategy. Health (SDG 3) and social protection (arguably encompassing SDGs 1 and 2) were identified as critical development priorities in the 2020 *UN framework for the immediate socio-economic response to COVID-19*.³¹ For example, the UN identifies health (SDG 3) as a first-order priority (“[p]utting health first is critical”) during COVID-19 on the basis that “[w]hen health systems collapse, both direct mortality from the outbreak and avertable mortality from other conditions increase dramatically.”³² The second priority is to provide people with social protection and basic services.³³

The Framework and its priorities align with our proposal for context-specific prioritization of particular SDGs instead of the rigid, indivisible application of the Agenda as a mould for development across all contexts and situations. It is an indirect recognition from the UN that the SDG Agenda’s effective implementation may require the prioritization of certain SDGs over others depending on the most pressing needs in a country context. This point may have been brought out by the COVID-19 pandemic, given that it made health and well-being and social protection arguably the most important development priorities for many governments around the world. However, this indirect recognition by the UN does not yet reconcile the false tension between the need to prioritize some SDGs over others, as a matter of effective implementation, with the indivisibility of the 2030 Agenda. We explore and theorize this tension in greater detail in the section below.

2.3. THE NEED FOR PRIORITIZATION

Prioritizing development goals in certain situations involves a context-based assessment of which SDGs must be achieved to eradicate severe forms of human need that could have scarring effects on society and threaten the viability of the entire Agenda. In particular, implementing an integrated development agenda in different contexts may require prioritizing SDGs for which progress is trailing the furthest behind. Such a strategy may go against highly integrationist views of human development championed by Mahbub ul Haq and Amartya Sen, which regard human freedoms and rights as interconnected and accommodating interactions between them as key to their fulfillment and indispensable to a full picture of human development.³⁴

³⁰ See generally Peter Messerli et al, *The Future Is Now: Science for Achieving Sustainable Development*, Global Sustainable Development Report 2019 (New York: UN, 2019) at 127–35.

³¹ See *UN immediate response*, *supra* note 4 at 11, 13.

³² *Ibid* at 11–13, 41.

³³ *Ibid* at 13–16.

³⁴ See generally Mahbub ul Haq, *Reflections on Human Development* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995); Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom* (New York: Knopf, 1999).

The human rights framework emphasizes the equal importance of all rights, yet international law has recognized limits to the indivisibility of human rights.³⁵ The *Limburg Principles on the Implementation of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights* stress the urgency of implementing the *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights* (ICESCR) while highlighting the need for States to address subsistence requirements and provide essential services.³⁶ General Comment 3 by the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights views the “progressive realization” of the ICESCR as a necessary flexibility measure to address resource constraints.³⁷ While some argue that progressive realization only concerns temporal aspects of rights implementation, the Committee emphasizes that certain rights have immediate priority under the ICESCR, such as fair wages, equal remuneration, and the right to form trade unions.³⁸

2.4. IMPLEMENTATION PARALYSIS: COLOSSAL PRICE TAG, SERIOUS DATA GAPS, HALTED PROGRESS

Progress on the 2030 Agenda has been difficult to fully evaluate. We lack country-specific data on SDG attainment because many countries have not harmonized their data collection practices to adequately evaluate their progress on the goals. The UN found that countries in Africa and Asia, on average, have data to monitor only 40 of the SDG Agenda’s 232 different indicators.³⁹

Despite these data gaps, the available research suggests that the pandemic-driven SDG backslide is affecting dimensions of human development that are foundational to the achievement of the Agenda, including the alleviation of chronic hunger (SDG 2) and deficits in primary and secondary education attainment (SDG 4), which have rippling effects on a host of other SDGs including health (SDG 3) and decent work and economic growth (SDG 8). The WFP estimates that the number of people facing acute hunger has nearly doubled since 2019, from 135 million to 258 million.⁴⁰ Early evidence from the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) and the World Bank points to “significant learning losses” for children who have been forced out of the classroom and unable to return or establish other effective ways of learning, in addition to a potential widening of income inequality due

³⁵ See Theo van Boven, “Categories of Rights” in Daniel Moeckli, Sangeeta Shah & Sandesh Sivakumaran, eds, *International Human Rights Law*, 1st ed (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010) 173 at 178–79.

³⁶ *The Limburg Principles on the Implementation of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights*, ESC, 43rd Sess, UN Doc E/CN.4/1987/17 (1987) Annex agenda items 8 and 18 at paras 3, 28.

³⁷ *General Comment No. 3: The Nature of States Parties’ Obligations*, UNCESCR, 5th Sess, UN Doc E/1991/23 CESCR Dec at para 9.

³⁸ Katharine Young, “Waiting for Rights: Progressive Realization and Lost Time” (2019) Boston College Law School, Legal Studies Research Paper No 509 at 10.

³⁹ See UN, *The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2018*, (New York: UN, 2018) at 16, online (pdf): <unstats.un.org/sdgs/files/report/2018/TheSustainableDevelopmentGoalsReport2018-EN.pdf>. See also Jessica Espey et al, *Counting on the World to Act* (Sustainable Development Solutions Network, 2019) at 7, online (pdf): <countingontheworld.sdsntrends.org/static/files/19COTW.pdf>.

⁴⁰ See World Food Programme, *supra* note 8 at 7.

to uneven capacity to pursue education online.⁴¹ It is projected that students who have been unable to learn for five months would collectively miss out on at least 10 trillion USD in potential earnings.⁴² These projections are astonishing and may signal a lost generation in the making. Failure to meet targets related to hunger (SDG 2) and education (SDG 4) in a timely manner could jeopardize progress toward the entire Agenda.

Urgent needs require immediate solutions. The indivisible, non-selective implementation of the SDG Agenda may amount to a slow and formulaic response to dire and urgent development needs. Cash transfer programs hold the potential to specifically target these dire and urgent deprivations. They can make poor households more resilient to economic decline, encourage investment in a child's well-being and prospects, and help families escape the poverty trap.⁴³ Importantly, in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, CT programs performed a basic subsistence function by providing direct and rapid responses to resource deficits that would otherwise further erode people's prospects for a better life. Governments and international organizations have observed the positive impacts of CT programs on development indicators that contribute to SDG progress and are seeking creative solutions to finance these programs nationally.⁴⁴

Rising extreme poverty brought on by the pandemic is reflected in sharply rising rates of hunger and malnutrition. There are also serious concerns regarding the effects that the threats of poverty and hunger may have on school performance and education attainment. We made hunger and education our focus for this paper for two reasons. First is the particularly devastating global impact that COVID-19 has had on driving world hunger and preventing children from pursuing education. Second is the immediacy of these needs and the fact that they enable progress on a host of other goals. We explore both points below.

⁴¹ See Jaime Saavedra & Marguerite Clarke, "What Pisa for Development Results Tell Us about Education Access and Learning Levels in Developing Countries" (10 December 2020), online (blog): <blogs.worldbank.org/education/what-pisa-development-results-tell-us-about-education-access-and-learning-levels>; Jaime Saavedra, "A Silent and Unequal Education Crisis. And the Seeds for Its Solution" (5 January 2021), online (blog): <blogs.worldbank.org/education/silent-and-unequal-education-crisis-and-seeds-its-solution>. See also Donnelly & Patrinos, *supra* note 24 at 604–07; Dania V Francis & Christian E Weller, "Economic Inequality, the Digital Divide, and Remote Learning During COVID-19" (2022) 49:1 Rev Black Political Econ 41 at 50–55; Richard Blundell et al., "Inequality and the COVID-19 Crisis in the United Kingdom" (2022) 14 Annual Rev Econs 607 at 611–14.

⁴² See Joao Pedro Azevedo et al., "Simulating the Potential Impacts of Covid-19 School Closures on Schooling and Learning Outcomes: A Set of Global Estimates" (2020) World Bank Group, Policy Research Working Paper No 9284 at 25.

⁴³ See generally Francesca Bastagli et al., "The Impact of Cash Transfers: A Review of the Evidence from Low- and Middle-Income Countries" (2018) 48:3 J Soc Pol'y 569.

⁴⁴ See Joseph Kwasi Brenyah & George Domfe, "Relevance of Conditional Cash Transfers for the Implementation of Sustainable Development Goals in Developing Countries" (2019) 13:2 African Research Rev 38 at 44–46; Franziska Gassmann & Sri Wening Handayani, *Closing the Gap: Potential Contribution of Social Assistance for Achieving Sustainable Development Goals*, ADB Briefs No 80 (Manila: Asian Development Bank, 2017) at 1–3; David Chipanta et al., "Associations of Sustainable Development Goals Accelerators With Adolescents' Well-Being According to Head-of-Household's Disability Status: A Cross-Sectional Study From Zambia" (2022) 67:1604341 Intl J Pub Health 1 at 6–8. See also Kennedy A Alatinga, Marguerite Daniel & Isaac Bayor, "Community Experiences with Cash Transfers in Relation to Five SDGs: Exploring Evidence from Ghana's Livelihood Empowerment Against Poverty (LEAP) Programme" (2020) 47:1 Forum Development Studies 89.

2.5. NO HUNGER (SDG 2)

With respect to ending hunger (SDG 2), we zero in on Targets 2.1 and 2.2, to be achieved by 2030:

2.1: By 2030, end hunger and ensure access by all people, in particular the poor and people in vulnerable situations, including infants, to safe, nutritious and sufficient food all year round[.]

2.2: By 2030, end all forms of malnutrition, including achieving, by 2025, the internationally agreed targets on stunting and wasting in children under 5 years of age, and address the nutritional needs of adolescent girls, pregnant and lactating women, and older persons[.]⁴⁵

We focus on these targets because of their immediacy and urgency in the context of the post-COVID-19 pandemic recovery—specifically, the mortality of the most vulnerable is on the line in the most explicit ways if this particular goal and its targets are not met. Moreover, chronic malnutrition has rippling negative effects on other SDGs that are important in the context of social protection. It leads to serious deficits in health (SDG 3) and education (SDG 4), which affect work-related (SDG 8) outcomes, from impaired cognitive development and learning deficits in the short term to less economic output and worse reproductive outcomes in the longer term.⁴⁶ In selecting food security as its second priority area (after poverty), the GDI framework also emphasizes the importance of addressing global hunger and malnutrition, considering the disruptions caused by the pandemic.⁴⁷

The scope of our discussion does not encompass SDG Targets 2.3 and beyond, which center on the sustainability and viability of agricultural productivity and food production systems, delving into governance questions that extend beyond the household capacity of CT programs. In addition, the overall merit of CT programs should not be judged on whether they can achieve food security or solve child malnutrition by themselves. Universal access to food year round depends on factors beyond the disbursement of cash. For example, people can only have stable access to food if stable markets exist. While CT programs are only part of the solution, they can provide timely, basic protection in a crisis with regard to Targets 2.1 and 2.2.

2.6. EDUCATION (SDG 4)

With respect to progress on education (SDG 4), we zero in on SDG Target 4.1:

⁴⁵ See *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*, *supra* note 14 at Targets 2.1–2.2.

⁴⁶ See Jef L Leroy et al, “The Oportunidades program increases the linear growth of children enrolled at young ages in urban Mexico” (2008) 138:4 *J Nutrition* 793 at 793. See also Kathryn G Dewey & Khadija Begum, “Long-Term Consequences of Stunting in Early Life” (2011) 7:3 *Maternal & Child Nutrition* 5 at 11–16.

⁴⁷ Center for International Knowledge on Development, *Progress Report on the Global Development Initiative* (Tongzhou, China: Center for International Knowledge on Development, 2023) at 18, online: <www.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/xwtdt/202306/P020230627414336020074.pdf>.

4.1: By 2030, ensure that all girls and boys complete free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education leading to relevant and effective learning outcomes.⁴⁸

We focus on this target specifically to surface measures that ensure students complete primary and secondary education. Sustainable Development Goal Targets 4.2 to 4.c focus on quality, the overall accessibility of the education system, and future outcomes of education, which we consider to be beyond the scope and capabilities of CT programs.⁴⁹ These are highly dependent on broadscale, direct investments in the education system and thus cannot be improved merely by a simple transfer of cash to households.⁵⁰

To gauge SDG 4's enabling impact on the rest of the Agenda, policymakers must consider that for many children, schools are a sanctuary from domestic violence, a place where they can receive adequate meals, essential vaccines and other health services.⁵¹ Sen's capability approach frames education as an opportunity for individuals to live with dignity, ascertain their goals, and enrich their lives in ways that are meaningful to them.⁵² Beyond that, it carries several synergies with other SDGs. COVID-19 school closures meant that approximately 379 million children missed out on school-provided meals.⁵³ Malnutrition can compromise a child's immune systems and capacity to deal with disease.⁵⁴ Child stunting, often resulting from malnutrition, also has immediate effects on education outcomes due to the inability to concentrate during school, as well as longer-term impacts such as degree attainment, the ability to enter higher education and find decent work (SDG 8), and the perpetuation and deepening of poverty (SDG 1).⁵⁵ Fundamentally, education is a strong determinant for one's well-being in the future, from economic productivity, health, safe sex practices, reduction in child mortality, gender equality, and more.⁵⁶

Global health concerns make this discourse all the more pressing. The UN Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) estimates that a year after COVID-19 was declared a pandemic by the WHO (March 2020–2021), more than half of students in

⁴⁸ See *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*, *supra* note 14 at Target 4.11.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ See David Archer and Tanvir Muntasim, "Financing SDG 4: Context, Challenges, and Solutions" in Antonia Wulff, ed, *Grading Goal Four: Tensions, Threats, and Opportunities in the Sustainable Development Goal on Quality Education* (Leiden: Brill Publishing, 2020) at 171 at 191–93.

⁵¹ See UN DESA, *The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2020*, (New York: UN, 2020) at 23, 33, online (pdf): <unstats.un.org/sdgs/report/2020/The-Sustainable-Development-Goals-Report-2020.pdf>.

⁵² See Melanie Walker and Elaine Unterhalter, "The Capability Approach: Its Potential for Work in Education" in Melanie Walker and Elaine Unterhalter, eds, *Amartya Sen's Capability Approach and Social Justice in Education* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007) 1 at 7–8; Caroline Sarojini Hart, "The capability approach and education" (2012) 42:3 *Cambridge J Education* 275 at 276.

⁵³ *Ibid* at 23.

⁵⁴ *Ibid* at 33.

⁵⁵ See generally SM Chang et al, "Early childhood stunting and later behaviour and school achievement" (2002) 43:6 *J Child Psychology & Psychiatry* 775 at 38–41; Mark E McGovern et al, "A review of the evidence linking child stunting to economic outcomes" (2017) 46:4 *Intl J Epidemiology* 1171 at 1172.

⁵⁶ See Francesca Pongiglione, "The need for a priority structure for the Sustainable Development Goals" (2015) 11:1 *J Global Ethics* 37 at 39–41.

the world (over 800 million) still faced school closures or part-time learning.⁵⁷ On average, COVID-19 prevention measures led to the loss of two-thirds of a school year worldwide.⁵⁸ The long-term school leave, caused by isolation and blockade measures in developing countries, led to “decreased retention and graduation rates, which hurt the development of children and youth, the risks of child labor, child marriage, and child trafficking also increased.”⁵⁹ Sadly, UNESCO projects that at least 24 million primary or secondary school students are expected to drop out of formal education entirely.⁶⁰

Below, we discuss how CT programs have improved progress on these SDG Targets. But first, this paper examines one more methodological query.

2.7. WHY NOT OTHER GOALS?

Before examining the potential role of CT programs in SDG 2 and 4 implementation, we explain why we focus on these goals over others in this section. Progress achieved toward Goals 2 and 4 represents turning points in global society that require particular recognition and an immediate response due to pandemic-driven deficits that endanger the success of the Agenda. The attainment of Goals 2 and 4 and their synergies with other SDGs are determinative for the growth of human development across LMICs. Below, we outline other options for priority goals and our rationale for selecting Goals 2 and 4.

The COVID-19 pandemic has precipitated negative effects on all 17 SDGs.⁶¹ Goal 1, which imagines a world without poverty, has been severely impacted by the pandemic and its effect on financial markets, labour pools, and global financial institutions. Lockdown and isolation measures have been detrimental to the financial health of many families facing socio-economic hardship. Christopher Hoy and Andrew Sumner argue that the pandemic’s toll on developing nations will require them “to pursue historically unprecedented growth paths in order to achieve the poverty and inequality Sustainable Development Goals by 2030.”⁶² Such growth paths would significantly impact the SDGs and, more importantly, recovery from the pandemic for the well-being of vulnerable populations in LMICs. For these reasons, the GDI “puts poverty reduction at the top of its priority areas of cooperation.”⁶³

Goal 1 ties well into the economic discussions of human development in Goal 7. Goal 7 of Decent Work and Economic Growth is critical for many LMIC citizens to help themselves out of poverty. But the pandemic-induced global financial market shock, intertwined with

⁵⁷ See UNESCO, Press Release, “UNESCO Figures Show Two Thirds of an Academic Year Lost on Average Worldwide Due to Covid-19 School Closures” (1 March 2021), online: <en.unesco.org/news/unesco-figures-show-two-thirds-academic-year-lost-average-worldwide-due-covid-19-school>.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ See Qiang Wang & Rui Huang, “The impact of COVID-19 pandemic on sustainable development goals: A survey” (2021) 202:111637 *Envtl Research* 1 at 1.

⁶⁰ See UNESCO COVID-19 education response: *how many students are at risk of not returning to school?*, UNESCO, 2020, UN Doc ED/PLS/EDP/2020/07 at 5.

⁶¹ See Wang & Huang, *supra* note 59 at 12.

⁶² See Christopher Hoy & Andrew Sumner, “Growth with Adjectives: Global Poverty and Inequality after the Pandemic” (2020) Centre for Global Development, Working Paper No 53, abstract, online: <cgdev.org/publication/growth-adjectives-global-poverty-and-inequality-after-pandemic>.

⁶³ See Center for International Knowledge on Development, *supra* note 47 at 15.

wars in Ukraine and the Middle East, have caused “[f]inancial market turmoil,” “[i]ndustrial production interruption,” “[falling c]ommodity prices” and “[derailed e]conomic growth.”⁶⁴ These challenges are of particular relevance to the rationale of the goals listed, given the importance of preparing citizens of LMICs to be productive and meaningful actors in the economy by ascertaining their health and education to enhance their economic prospects. Similarly, in its framework, the GDI selects “industrialization” as one of its priority areas, which aims to provide stronger financial assistance and policy coordination, as well as support for talent training and capacity building in LMICs.⁶⁵

The “Shadow Pandemic,” or heightened rates of intimate partner violence as lockdown protocols sequestered women and girls indoors, has slowed the achievement of SDG 5 for Gender Equality.⁶⁶ Violent partners have inflicted brutalities and even fatalities as a result.⁶⁷ Additionally, many women and girls have faced job loss and wage cuts as many gendered industries, such as garment work, hospitality, retail and tourism, were disproportionately disrupted. For example, in Bangladesh, already at heightened rates of vulnerability due to their rural roots and possessing few other employment options, many women workers were inadequately paid, if at all, due to cancelled orders from clothing retailers.⁶⁸ A culture of violence and harm manifested as a result, with increases in “sexual and verbal abuse and symbolic violence mainly from line supervisors pushing women to work faster to meet unrealistic production targets.”⁶⁹ Similar findings were identified in other countries, including Ethiopia, Myanmar, and Cambodia.⁷⁰ Women and girls have taken substantial blows to their social development and economic empowerment throughout the pandemic on other issues. Many women-owned businesses operating with thin margins in sectors affected by the lockdowns could not weather the downturn.⁷¹

⁶⁴ See Wang & Huang, *supra* note 59 at 12.

⁶⁵ See Center for International Knowledge on Development, *supra* note 47 at 30.

⁶⁶ See Addisu Dabi Wake & Usha Rani Kandula, “The global prevalence and its associated factors toward domestic violence against women and children during COVID-19 pandemic—‘The shadow pandemic’: A review of cross-sectional studies” (2022) 18 *Women’s Health* 1.

⁶⁷ See Ramya Emandi et al, *Measuring the Shadow Pandemic: Violence Against Women During Covid-19*, (UN Women, 2021) at 5, online: <data.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/documents/Publications/Measuring-shadow-pandemic.pdf>; Kenneth Bitus David et al, “Increased Risk of Death Triggered by Domestic Violence, Hunger, Suicide, Exhausted Health System during COVID-19 Pandemic: Why, How and Solutions” (2021) 6 *Frontiers* 1 at 2.

⁶⁸ Muhammad Azizul Islam et al, *The Impact of Covid-19 on Women Workers in the Bangladesh Garment Industry* (Aberdeen, UK: The University of Aberdeen and the Modern Slavery and Human Rights Policy and Evidence Centre, 2022), online (pdf): <modernslaverypec.org/assets/downloads/Women-Bangladesh-garment-industry-report-final-smaller.pdf> at 3, 5–7.

⁶⁹ *Ibid* at 5.

⁷⁰ See Christian Johannes Meyer et al, “The market-reach of pandemics: Evidence from female workers in Ethiopia’s ready-made garment industry” (2021) 137:105179 *World Development* 1; Garrett D Brown, “Women garment workers face huge inequities in global supply chain factories made worse by COVID-19” (2021) 31:2 *New Solutions* 113.

⁷¹ Yu Liu, Siqi Wei & Jian Xu, “COVID-19 and women-led businesses around the world” (2021) 43:102012 *Finance Res Letters*; Faisal Mustafa et al, “Exploring the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on women entrepreneurs in Pakistan” (2021) 13:2 *Intl J Gender & Entrepreneurship* 187.

One might consider SDG 3 fundamental to the discourse of issue indivisibility in the SDG Agenda. This goal seeks to ensure healthy lives for all, including reducing global maternal mortality ratios, reducing newborn mortality, and ensuring universal healthcare coverage, among many other global health targets.⁷² Indeed, if this paper starts from the basis that fighting hunger is paramount because it ensures the health and well-being of vulnerable people in LMICs to achieve support to realize their fullest capacities, Goal 3 aligns with this reasoning. The GDI does not explicitly name health as one of its priorities, but its first three focus areas—poverty reduction, food security, and pandemic responses and vaccines—aim to improve health outcomes. In particular, the pandemic response priority is described as promoting international cooperation on vaccine supply and research and development, as well as building more resilient health systems in LMICs.⁷³

In outlining the toll the COVID-19 pandemic has taken on the realization of several other goals that showcase setbacks for global development, why does this paper still focus on Goals 2 and 4 as the threshold from which to assess development problems and solutions? Fundamentally, we posit that Goals 2 and 4, even among other critical SDGs, are enabling goals that allow for the realization of the Agenda in its entirety. Both the eradication of hunger and investment in education provide landmark, evidence-based progress in human development.

The eradication of hunger, the aim of Goal 2, provides a minimum baseline from which to reduce mortality and increase health promotion. Goal 3 of ensuring healthy living takes a more macro-level approach to issues of substance abuse, mental health, and global health policy, among others. Although these are pertinent to the discussion of development, hunger is a fundamental human biological need and requires immediate attention to build back better from the COVID-19 pandemic. Achieving zero hunger can provide a foundation for pursuing other health objectives. Critically, there are interdependencies between Goals 2 and 3 that are captured by Goal 2. For example, child and maternal malnutrition rose during the pandemic,⁷⁴ which can directly be resolved through meeting targets in Goal 2. This inadvertently addresses many maternal and neonatal health concerns addressed in Goal 3. The GDI also significantly emphasizes food security, positioning it as the second of eight priority areas.⁷⁵

Similarly, Goal 4 provides a starting point for addressing the effects of the pandemic on the economy and labour market. The issues addressed in some of the most ambitious Goals, like 1 and 7, require vast institutional restructuring and systems thinking. Prioritizing Goal 4 can target job losses through reskilling and upskilling, prepare workforces for remote work and the green economy, strengthen educational infrastructure, stimulate innovation and entrepreneurship, and contribute to breaking cycles of poverty.⁷⁶ An educated workforce can contribute to higher economic productivity, stimulating economic growth and reducing

⁷² See *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*, *supra* note 14 at Goal 3.

⁷³ See Center for International Knowledge on Development, *supra* note 47 at 23.

⁷⁴ See Ashu Tyagi & Abhishek Joshi, “Child Survival Crisis Due to Maternal Undernourishment During the COVID Era” (2022) 14:11 *Cureus* 1 at 3–4.

⁷⁵ See Center for International Knowledge on Development, *supra* note 47 at 18.

⁷⁶ See Ellen Boeren, “Understanding Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 on ‘quality education’ from micro, meso and macro perspectives” (2019) 65 *Intl Rev Education* 277 at 281–84.

poverty domestically—the aim of Goal 1.⁷⁷ Education plays a critical role in disseminating knowledge about preventive health measures and medical care, thus, supporting Goal 3.⁷⁸ Education increases the ability of women and girls to access opportunities, as educated women are more likely to participate in the labour force and to have a voice in family and societal decisions, outcomes that underpin Goal 5.⁷⁹ Universal access to quality education would create a ripple effect, enabling progress across other Goals and addressing the underlying causes of many global challenges.

The interdependencies between SDGs are a driving force for why this article has chosen to focus on Goals 2 and 4. Across LMICs, trends point to ensuring food security and education as critical factors in ensuring human development can progress. Moreover, the interdependencies of Goals 2 and 4 with other goals suggest that they must be implemented holistically to reach the most vulnerable. Targets 2.1 and 2.2 specifically outline this ethic in using the language of “all people” and also highlighting the increased vulnerabilities of specific groups, including women, girls, pregnant people, and older persons.⁸⁰ This intersectional approach that considers the nuances of each population’s needs ensures that solutions can be contextual and responsive to the different identities of different communities and the socio-economic repercussions of these realities, including race, class, creed, caste, rural living and sexual orientation.⁸¹ The SDGs do not necessarily have to be sought in isolation, as they intrinsically intersect, interweave, and develop in unison. But these interlinkages also allow us to argue that non-selective implementation should be overridden to respond to specific pandemic-driven development deficits that, left unaddressed, would threaten the viability of the entire Agenda. Hence the importance of Goals 2 and 4.

The GDI, in its framework setting out eight priority areas for achieving the SDGs, also illustrates an approach of focusing on enabling goals towards which progress has been rolled back considerably in recent years. It describes its approach to prioritization as one that focuses on “pressing challenges” that must be overcome to ensure that “all 17 [SDGs] of the 2030 Agenda are met.”⁸² For example, the latest progress report explains the framework’s focus on food security by detailing how “food systems around the world have become more vulnerable due to the intertwined and overlapping effects of COVID-19, regional conflicts [and] climate change.”⁸³ The GDI’s method of selective prioritization suggests that state proponents of the framework recognize the interdependencies within the SDGs but choose to direct their efforts to areas where they perceive the greatest need at a given time.

⁷⁷ See Idrissa B Mshoro, “Reducing Poverty Through Education – and How” *UN Chronicle* (2023), online: <un.org/en/chronicle/article/reducing-poverty-through-education-and-how>.

⁷⁸ See Padmini Murthy, “Health Literacy and Sustainable Development” *UN Chronicle* (2023), online: <un.org/en/chronicle/article/health-literacy-and-sustainable-development>.

⁷⁹ See United Nations, “Women and Girls: Closing the Gender Gap” *UN Chronicle* (2023), online: <un.org/en/un75/women_girls_closing_gender_gap>.

⁸⁰ See *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*, *supra* note 14 at Targets 2.1–2.2.

⁸¹ See generally Anuj Kapilashrami & Olena Hankivsky, “Intersectionality and why it matters to global health” (2018) 391:10140 *Lancet* 2589.

⁸² See Center for International Knowledge on Development, *supra* note 47 at 5.

⁸³ *Ibid* at 18.

Ultimately, among the SDGs, the enabling nature of Goals 2 and 4 are strong candidates for prioritization because of the way the pandemic has threatened to derail their achievement and for the opportunities they present to solve the wicked global problems that underlie Agenda 2030. We focus on Goals 2 and 4 to demonstrate how the sequence in which certain themes are implemented within the broader SDG agenda might have a catalytic effect on the rest of the SDGs. By fortifying the core, we may better support the structure of Agenda 2030 to be more resilient, sustainable, and attainable.

3. CASH TRANSFER PROGRAMS AND SDG PRIORITIZATION IN ACTION

3.1. CASH TRANSFER FOR OUTCOMES RELATED TO SDG 2 (NO HUNGER)

Cash transfers have a strong track record of improving household food access and dietary diversity. Our survey of studies from 2000 to 2020, building on a comprehensive review done by ODI⁸⁴ and covering statistically significant outcomes related to SDG Target 2.1, found that the vast majority of studies (25/27) report increases in spending on food items,⁸⁵ and all

⁸⁴ See Bastagli et al, *What Does the Evidence Say?*, *supra* note 18.

⁸⁵ American Institutes for Research, *Zambia's Child Grant Program: 36-month impact report*, (Zambia: Ministry of Community Development, 2014) [American Institutes for Research, 2014]; Manuela Angelucci, Orazio Attanasio & Vincenzo Di Maro, "The Impact of 'Oportunidades' on Consumption, Savings and Transfers" (2012) 33:3 *Inst Fiscal Studies* 305; Orazio Attanasio & Alice Mesnard, "The Impact of a Conditional Cash Transfer Programme on Consumption in Colombia" (2006) 27:4 *Inst Fiscal Studies* 421; Orazio Attanasio, Erich Battistin, & Alice Mesnard, "Food and cash transfers: evidence from Colombia" (2012) 122:559 *Econ J* 92; Luis HB Braido, Pedro Olinto & Helena Perrone, "Gender Bias in Intrahousehold Allocation: Evidence from an Unintentional Experiment" (2012) 94:2 *Rev Econ & Statistics* 552; Thomas Buser et al, "The impact of positive and negative income changes on the height and weight of young children" (2014) IZA, Discussion Paper No 8130; Benjamin Davis et al, "Conditionality and the impact of programme design on household welfare: comparing two diverse cash transfer programmes in rural Mexico" (2002) Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, Working Paper No 02-10; Celine Ferré & Iffath Sharif, "Can conditional cash transfers improve education and nutrition outcomes for poor children in Bangladesh? Evidence from a pilot project" (2014) World Bank, Policy Research Working Paper No 7077; Seth Gitter & Natalia Caldes, "Crisis, food security, and conditional cash transfers in Nicaragua" (2010) Towson University Department of Economics, Working Paper No 2010-07; Sudhanshu Handa et al, "Opening Up Pandora's Box: The Effect of Gender Targeting and Conditionality on Household Spending Behavior in Mexico's Progresa Program" (2009) 37:6 *World Development* 1129; Melissa Hidrobo et al, "Cash, food or vouchers? Evidence from a randomized experiment in northern Ecuador" (2012) 107 *J Development Econ* 144 [Hidrobo et al, "Cash, food or vouchers?"]; Karen Macours, Norbert Schady & Renos Vakis, "Cash Transfers, Behavioral Changes, and Cognitive Development in Early Childhood: Evidence from a Randomized Experiment" (2012) 4:2 *American Econ J* 247; John A Maluccio & Rafael Flores, *Impact evaluation of a conditional cash transfer program: the Nicaraguan Red de Protección Social*, Report No 141 (Washington: International Food Policy Research Institute, 2005); John A Maluccio, "Coping with the 'Coffee Crisis' in Central America: the role of the Nicaraguan Red de Protección Social" (2005) Food Consumption and Nutrition Division, Discussion Paper No 188 [Maluccio, "Coping with the Coffee Crisis"]; John A Maluccio, "The Impact of Conditional Cash Transfers on Consumption and Investment in Nicaragua" (2010) 46:1 *J Development Studies* 14; Sebastian Martinez, *Pensions, poverty and household investments in Bolivia* (PhD Dissertation, University of California at Berkeley, 2004) [unpublished]; Fred Merttens et al, "Evaluation of the Uganda Social Assistance Grants for Empowerment (SAGE) Programme: impact after one year of programme operations 2012–2013" (Oxford: Oxford and University of Makerere, 2015), online (pdf): <opml.co.uk/files/Publications/7265-uganda-sage/sage-evaluation-one-year.pdf?noredirect=1> [Merttens et al,

statistically significant results (8/8) showed an improvement in dietary diversity.⁸⁶ Thus, CT programs can improve households' food security by helping them consume more calories with a higher nutritional value.

These figures include recent studies on CT performance during COVID-19 lockdowns. Through monthly household surveys with households and merchants in rural Liberia and Malawi, Shilpa Aggarwal et al. found that CT programs improved people's dietary quantity and quality during the pandemic despite significant disruptions to local markets and food price increases.⁸⁷ However, it remains to be seen whether the disruption of market activity will affect food availability and access in the longer term.

Nevertheless, there are promising signs that CT programs have mitigated disruptions to food markets during the pandemic. Wyatt Brooks et al. found that a single cash injection equal to an average month's profit for small business owners involved in the food market in the Kenyan slum of Dandora led to a revival of their operations despite the cash injection coinciding with a sharp rise in COVID-19 infections.⁸⁸ Overall, inventory spending (such

"Uganda Social Assistance"]; Candace M Miller, Maxton Tsoka & Kathryn Reichert, "The impact of the Social Cash Transfer Scheme on food security in Malawi" (2011) 36 *Food Pol'y* 230; Kenya CT-OVC Evaluation Team, "The impact of the Kenya Cash Transfer Program for Orphans and Vulnerable Children on household spending" (2012) 4:1 *J Development Effectiveness* 9; Elizaveta Perova & Renos Vakis, "Five years in Juntos: New Evidence on the Program's Short and Long-Term Impacts" (2012) 35:69 *Revista del Departamento de Economía* 53; Marta Ruiz-Arranz et al, "More calories or more diversity? An econometric evaluation of the impact of the PROGRESA and PROCAMPO transfer programmes on food security in rural Mexico" (2002) UN FAO Agricultural and Development Economics, Working Paper No 02-09; Shilpa Aggarwal et al, "Did COVID-19 Market Disruptions Disrupt Food Security? Evidence from Households in Rural Liberia and Malawi" (2020) National Bureau of Economic Research, Working Paper No 27932; Emmanuel Skoufias, Mishel Unar & Teresa González-Cossío, "The Impacts of Cash and In-Kind Transfers on Consumption and Labor Supply: Experimental Evidence from Rural Mexico" (2008) World Bank Policy Research, Working Paper No 4778; Emmanuel Skoufias, Mishel Unar & Teresa Gonzalez de Cossio, "The poverty impacts of cash and in-kind transfers: experimental evidence from rural Mexico" (2013) 5:4 *J Development Effectiveness* 401; Wyatt Brooks et al, "Cash Transfers as a Response to COVID-19: A Randomized Experiment in Kenya" (2020) Economic Growth Center, Working Paper No 1082. For studies indicating overall statistically significant negative impacts, see Andrew Dabalén, Talip Kili & Waly Wane, "Social Transfers, Labor Supply and Poverty Reduction: The Case of Albania" (2008) World Bank Policy Research, Working Paper No 4783; Rafael P Ribas et al, "Beyond Cash: Assessing Externality and Behaviour Effects of Non-Experimental Cash Transfers" (2011) Poverty & Economic Policy Research Network, Working Paper No 2011-18.

⁸⁶ See Daniel O Gilligan et al, *Impact Evaluation of Cash and Food Transfers at Early Childhood Development Centers in Karamoja, Uganda: Endline Survey* (Boston: International Food Policy Research Institute, 2013); Gitter & Caldes, *supra* note 85; Melissa Hidrobo et al, *Impact Evaluation of Cash, Food Vouchers, and Food Transfers among Colombian Refugees and Poor Ecuadorians in Carchi and Sucumbios: Final Report* (Washington: International Food Policy Research Institute, 2012) [Hidrobo et al, "Impact evaluation"]; Hidrobo et al, "Cash, food or vouchers?", *supra* note 85; John Hoddinott & Doris Wiesmann, "The impact of conditional cash transfer programs on food consumption in Honduras, Mexico and Nicaragua", (Washington: International Food Policy Research Institute, 2008), online: <dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.1269417>; Miller, Tsoka & Reichert, *supra* note 85; Ruiz-Arranz et al, *supra* note 85; Aggarwal et al, *supra* note 85.

⁸⁷ See Aggarwal et al, *supra* note 85.

⁸⁸ See Brooks et al, *supra* note 85.

as food expenditures) and firm profits rose following a cash injection, and previously closed businesses reopened.⁸⁹

Some studies suggest that coupling CT programs with other forms of intervention can enhance the benefits of CT programs in crises. Little et al. found that coupling food-based CTs with a food transfer was more effective than a CT alone in reducing child malnutrition and stunting in a crisis scenario.⁹⁰ In rural Bihar, India, women received both CTs and food subsidies. Although the CT coverage was wider than the food subsidies, in circumstances such as a pandemic where supply chains break down, food subsidies can help alleviate food insecurity.⁹¹ This hybrid transfer of cash and food may be an important invention for food access if markets are unavailable or inaccessible due to crisis. Other studies have found that CT programs are ineffective at improving child nutrition if not paired with other interventions. Patrick Premand and Oumar Barry found that CT programs alone do not necessarily lead to higher dietary diversity among children, even if they improve dietary diversity at the household level overall, meaning that ensuring the right parental behaviours and interventions is important for ensuring children also benefit from CTs.⁹² Such a finding should not be read to imply that CT programs are not an important way to improve childhood nutrition. Rather, CT programs may need to be facilitated by other measures to remove barriers to their effective operation.

Overall, the results we canvassed seem promising and suggest that CT programs have had significant stabilizing effects for households and small business owners despite economic downturn and business disruptions due to COVID-19. These results suggest that some credit is due to the resourcefulness and ingenuity of CT recipients. Six out of seven pre-pandemic studies demonstrate increased use of agricultural inputs for crop production—fertilizer and seeds mainly—even if these programs were not designed to promote such investments.⁹³

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

⁹⁰ See Little et al, *supra* note 17 at 17.

⁹¹ See Zakir Husain, Saswata Ghosh & Mousumi Dutta, “Cash transfers versus food subsidies during COVID-19: dietary practices of rural women in Bihar, India” (2022) 33:8 *Development in Practice* 986.

⁹² See Patrick Premand & Oumar Barry, “Behavioral change promotion, cash transfers and early childhood development: Experimental evidence from a government program in a low-income setting” (2022) 158 *J Development Econ* 102921.

⁹³ For the studies reporting increases, see Silvio Daidone et al, *Lesotho's Child Grant Programme: 24-month impact report on productive activities and labour allocation*, (Rome, Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, 2014) [Daidone et al, *Lesotho's Child Grant Programme*]; Silvio Daidone et al, *Zambia's Child Grant Programme: 24-month impact report on productive activities and labour allocation*, (Rome, Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, 2014) [Daidone et al, *Zambia's Child Grant Programme*]; Sudhanshu Handa et al, *Livelihood Empowerment Against Poverty Program Impact Evaluation* (Chapel Hill: Carolina Population Center, 2014); Dean Karlan et al, “Agricultural Decisions after Relaxing Credit and Risk Constraints” (2014) 129:2 *Q J Econ* 597; American Institutes for Research, *Results of the three year impact evaluation of Zambia's cash transfer program in Monze District* (Washington: American Institutes for Research, 2011), online (pdf): <transfer.cpc.unc.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Zambia-Monze-Followup-Report.pdf> [American Institutes for Research, 2011]; Jessica Erin Todd, Paul C Winters & Tom Hertz, “Conditional Cash Transfers and Agricultural Production: Lessons from the Oportunidades Experience in Mexico” (2010) 46:1 *J Development Studies* 39. For studies indicating overall statistically significant negative impacts, see Solomon Asfaw et al, “Cash Transfer Programme, Productive Activities and Labour Supply: Evidence from a Randomised Experiment in Kenya” (2014) 50:8 *J Development Studies* 1172.

Moreover, 12/12 studies discuss livestock ownership, all showing a statistically significant increase in such ownership.⁹⁴ Such investments have been shown to promote more stable and diverse food consumption from home farming.⁹⁵

Less clear from the survey of studies is the impact of CT programs on child stunting (SDG Target 2.2). We identified five studies showing statistically significant impacts on height-for-age z score (HAZ), all of which were positive.⁹⁶ Peru's popular CT program *Juntos* (2005—) is widely regarded as a resounding success, reducing the prevalence of stunting of children under five in Peru from 31 percent in 2000 to 13 percent in 2016.⁹⁷

The limited evidence of significant impacts for child stunting perhaps speaks to the fact that food security is multilayered, not secured by implementing one or two discrete measures, and thus unlikely to be achieved by simply transferring cash to people in need. Hunger refers to the physiological condition resulting from inadequate food intake. Food security refers to the state in which all people, at all times, have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life.⁹⁸ Thus, food security is not just a question of stable availability and access but also whether and how people utilize food items. Accordingly, “[the International Food Policy Research Institute and the WFP] found that [CT programs] had a substantially larger impact on child stunting when combined with [education on nutrition].”⁹⁹

⁹⁴ See American Institutes for Research, 2014, *supra* note 85; Christopher Blattman et al, “The Returns to Microenterprise Support among the Ultrapoor: A Field Experiment in Postwar Uganda” (2016) 8:2 *Am Econ J* 35; Katia Covarrubias, Benjamin Davis & Paul Winters, “From protection to production: productive impacts of the Malawi Social Cash Transfer scheme” (2012) 4:1 *J Development Effectiveness* 50; Daidone et al, *Lesotho's Child Grant Programme*, *supra* note 93; Daidone et al, *Zambia's Child Grant Programme*, *supra* note 93; David K Evans et al, *Community-Based Conditional Cash Transfers in Tanzania: Results from a Randomized Trial* (Washington: World Bank Study, 2014); Paul J Gertler, Sebastian W Martinez & Marta Rubio-Codina, “Investing Cash Transfers to Raise Long-Term Living Standards” (2012) 4:1 *Am Econ J* 164; Johannes Haushofer & Jeremy Shapiro, “Household response to income changes: Evidence from an unconditional cash transfer program in Kenya” (15 November 2013), online (pdf): *Poverty Action Lab* <poverty-action.org/sites/default/files/publications/Haushofer_Shapiro_UCT_2013.pdf>; Fred Merttens et al, *Kenya hunger safety net programme monitoring and evaluation component impact evaluation final report: 2009 to 2012* (Oxford: Oxford Policy Management, 2013), online (pdf): <www.opml.co.uk/files/Publications/a0013-evaluation-kenya-hunger-safety-net-programme/impact-evaluation-final-report.pdf?noredirect=1>; Merttens et al, “Uganda Social Assistance”, *supra* note 85; American Institutes for Research, 2011, *supra* note 93; Todd, Winters & Hertz, *supra* note 93.

⁹⁵ See Todd, Winters & Hertz, *supra* note 93; Martinez, *supra* note 85; Asfaw et al, *supra* note 93; Covarrubias, Davis & Winters, *supra* note 94.

⁹⁶ See Orazio Attansio et al, “How Effective are Conditional Cash Transfers? Evidence from Colombia” (2005) Institute for Fiscal Studies, Briefing Note No 54; Luis Huicho et al, “Drivers of Stunting Reduction in Peru: A Country Case Study” (2020) 112:2 *American J Clinical Nutrition* 816; Leroy et al, *supra* note 46 at 795–6; Macours, Schady & Vakis, *supra* note 85; Maluccio, “Coping with the Coffee Crisis”, *supra* note 85.

⁹⁷ See Huicho et al, *supra* note 96.

⁹⁸ See *Rome Declaration on World Food Security*, 13–17 November 1996, Plan of Action, para 1.

⁹⁹ See Francesco Burchi, Margherita Scarlato & Giorgio d'Agostino, “Addressing Food Insecurity in Sub-Saharan Africa: The Role of Cash Transfers” (2018) 10:4 *Poverty & Pub Pol'y* 564 at 585 citing Akhter Ahmed et al, *Which kinds of social safety net transfers work best for the ultra poor in Bangladesh? Operation*

Food-related CT programs have had positive, rippling impacts beyond child nutrition, notably on education outcomes. Lorraine Sherr et al. found that food-related CTs significantly improved a child's cognitive abilities, including the ability to pay attention and retain and retrieve material, and helped ensure that the child was in the appropriate grade for their age.¹⁰⁰ This suggests that food-related CT programs can positively impact other SDGs that were not intentionally targeted, such as education (SDG 4).

3.2. CASH TRANSFER FOR OUTCOMES RELATED TO SDG 4 (EDUCATION)

Poor households often face challenges in investing in formal education, even though degree attainment can significantly enhance one's economic prospects. Such challenges are rooted in structural barriers. In particular, low-income families may struggle to access funds or obtain loans to invest in education. These economic challenges and societal pressures can lead to a self-fulfilling prophecy in which parents and children have constrained educational aspirations, not necessarily by choice but due to the systemic hurdles they face. CT programs help "break the intergenerational transmission of poverty" by covering the direct, indirect, and opportunity costs of educating children.¹⁰¹ CT programs can cover the direct (e.g., tuition and registration; school supplies, uniforms, and textbooks) and indirect costs (e.g., missed earnings for the household while the child is studying).¹⁰² CT programs can help relieve the financial strain on households due to COVID-19 and help ensure that children return to their classrooms when possible.

While CTs generally improve attendance, that has not necessarily translated to improvements in learning outcomes. Based on our survey of studies from 2000 to 2020, building on a comprehensive review done by ODI (2016) and covering statistically significant outcomes related to SDG 4.1, nine out of 13 studies found that CTs generally led to improved attendance and decreased absences.¹⁰³ However, in some circumstances, better school

and impacts of the transfer modality research initiative (Bangladesh: International Food Policy Research Institute/World Food Programme, 2016).

¹⁰⁰ See Lorraine Sherr et al, "Food Should Not Be Forgotten: Impacts of Combined Cash Transfer Receipt and Food Security on Child Education and Cognition in South Africa and Malawi" (2021) 25:9 AIDS & Behavior 2886.

¹⁰¹ See Sandra García, Arturo Harker & Jorge Cuartas, "Building dreams: The short-term impacts of a conditional cash transfer program on aspirations for higher education" (2019) 64 Intl J Educational Development 48 at 55.

¹⁰² See Bastagli et al, *What Does the Evidence Say?*, *supra* note 18 at 38.

¹⁰³ For the studies reporting improvements, see Richard Akresh, Damien de Walque & Harounan Kazianza, "Cash transfers and child schooling: evidence from a randomized evaluation of the role of conditionality" (2013) World Bank, Policy Research Working Paper Series No 6340; Felipe Barrera-Osorio, Andreas de Barros & Deon Filmer, "Long-Term Impacts of Alternative Approaches to Increase Schooling: Evidence from a Scholarship Program in Cambodia" (2018) World Bank, Policy Research Working Paper No 8566; Najy Benhassine et al. "Turning a Shove into a Nudge? A 'Labeled Cash Transfer' for Education" (2013) National Bureau of Economic Research, Working Paper No 19227; Evans et al, *supra* note 94; Deon Filmer & Norbert Schady, "Does more cash in conditional cash transfer programs always lead to larger impacts on school attendance?" (2011) 96:1 J Development Econs 150; Karen Macours & Renos Vakis, "Changing Households' Investments and Aspirations through Social Interactions: Evidence from a Randomized Transfer Program" (2009) World Bank, Policy Research Working Paper No 5137; Maluccio & Flores, *supra* note 85; Perova & Vakis, *supra* note 85; World Bank Office Jakarta Poverty

attendance did not guarantee better learning outcomes, as measured by test scores.¹⁰⁴ This could be explained, at least in part, by the fact that improved learning outcomes also greatly depend on broader institutional responses, such as adequate investments to improve the quality of the education received. In fact, low-quality education was among the most cited reasons for CT programs' low or no impact on cognitive development test scores.¹⁰⁵ The value of CT programs on education and future development, such as obtaining decent work and economic prospects, may take decades to come to fruition—a timeline that eclipses the study period of many (most) studies on CT programs. Still, formal education and more informal teaching and guidance are crucial to fulfilling the SDGs in their entirety, whether it is developing good habits concerning nutrition and proper hygiene (SDG 3) or obtaining the knowledge or skills to take part in an ever-evolving global economy (SDG 8).¹⁰⁶ We note that these findings predominantly pertain to the pre-pandemic period, and further research is needed to assess the effectiveness of CT programs in the context of the unique challenges posed by COVID-19.

The educational needs of young girls require specific attention. In a UNICEF study, the authors argue that social protection measures to overcome financial barriers through CTs can keep girls in school and uplift them from poverty.¹⁰⁷ Specifically, their study found that “six of the ten most effective interventions with robust impact evaluation evidence involved some form of cash transfer or stipend.”¹⁰⁸ Cash Transfers are critical during emergencies so that girls can either remain or eventually return to school with as little impediment as possible.

Cultural and gender norms must be addressed to ensure that greater social restrictions can be removed beyond financial barriers to enhance young women's economic and social progress. Lessons learned before the pandemic can provide insights moving forward. For instance, despite implementing a conditional CT scheme by the Government of Haryana, India, during the 2000s, educational disparities persisted between boys and girls despite the scheme's attempt to target both and achieve equal outcomes. Boys were more likely to complete

Team, *Program Keluarga Harapan: impact evaluation of Indonesia's Pilot Household Conditional Cash Transfer Program*, (Jakarta: World Bank, 2011), online (pdf): <documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/589171468266179965/Program-Keluarga-Harapan-impact-evaluation-of-Indonesias-Pilot-Household-Conditional-Cash-Transfer-Program>. For studies indicating overall statistically significant negative impacts, see Covarrubias, Davis & Winters, *supra* note 94; Handa, *supra* note 85; Merittens et al, “Uganda Social Assistance”, *supra* note 85; Miller, Tsoka & Reichert, *supra* note 85.

¹⁰⁴ See e.g. Teresa Molina Millán et al, “Long-Term Impacts of Conditional Cash Transfers: Review of the Evidence” (2019) 34:1 World Bank Research Observer 119 at 138–39.

¹⁰⁵ See Bastagli et al, *What Does the Evidence Say?*, *supra* note 18 at 113–15.

¹⁰⁶ See Robert J Didham & Paul Ofei-Manu, “The role of education in the sustainable development agenda: Empowering a learning society for sustainability through quality education” in Magnus Bengtsson, Simon Hoiberg Olsen & Eric Zusman, eds, *Achieving the Sustainable Development Goals: From Agenda to Action* (Hayama: Institute for Global Environmental Strategies, 2015) 95 at 96–97, 120.

¹⁰⁷ See Silvia Guglielmi et al, *Reimagining Girls' Education: Solutions to Keep Girls Learning in Emergencies*, (New York: UNICEF, 2021), online (pdf): <files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED612355.pdf>.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid* at 36.

greater levels of education and go to private schools, while girls were considered “paraya dhan,” or “another’s wealth,” because they were to be married and enter another family. As a result, the investment in girls was considered less valuable even with cash incentives.¹⁰⁹ Cash transfers do not exist in a vacuum, as has been learned throughout the pandemic, and must continue to be assessed through a gender lens to understand its impacts on education for all.

3.3. DESIGNING CT PROGRAMS TO SLOW DOWN THE DECELERATION OF THE SDGs DUE TO COVID-19

As discussed, the COVID-19 pandemic has had a particularly devastating impact on food security (SDG 2) and primary and secondary education (SDG 4). The widespread erosion of development progress on these SDGs spells disaster for the rest of the SDG Agenda, as their attainment is essential for making inroads on other SDGs. We have argued that treating the SDG Agenda as an indivisible whole is not a workable solution for policymakers in LMICs, who have limited resources and must concentrate on the most severe development deprivations brought on by COVID-19. Pandemic-era CT programs provide a frame of reference for addressing particularly dire erosions of development progress, moving beyond the rigidity of non-selective implementation. To effectively slow down the deceleration of the SDGs resulting from COVID-19, the design of such CT programs must be considered. In what remains, we will carefully consider how CT design choices affect the promotion of SDGs 2.1, 2.2, and 4.1, where evidence is available.

3.3.1. *TIMELY AND ACCESSIBLE*

The timeliness of CTs is critical in the immediate aftermath of economic shocks. When such shocks occur, poor households may lose their means of income and lack cash reserves to stay afloat. One way to provide a timely response is by alleviating conditionalities and other restrictions to access CTs if they do not serve an important functional purpose. It has been found that unconditional CTs (UCTs) are more effective than conditional CTs (CCTs) if the cost of food or education is the main barrier to access.¹¹⁰

By contrast, where a program’s objectives center on improving certain outcomes unrelated to a lack of funds, CCTs may perform better.¹¹¹ For example, CCTs have also been found to work better than unconditional ones when it comes to raising school enrolment and attendance. In a review by Baird, McIntosh and Özler, a clear trend emerged when the authors organized the programs they surveyed based on the relative strength of the conditionalities they applied to them.¹¹² Programs with explicit and enforced conditions led to a 60 percent increase in the likelihood of a student enrolling, compared to 25 percent for minimally enforced programs and 18 percent for unconditional ones.¹¹³ A subsequent systematic review by Baird et al in

¹⁰⁹ See Priya Nanda, Priya Das & Nitin Datta, “Education, Sexuality, and Marriageability: Overlapping Tropes in the Lives of Adolescent Girls in Haryana, India” (2022) 70:3 *J Adolescent Health* 28.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹¹ See Sarah Baird, Craig McIntosh & Berk Özler, “Cash or Condition? Evidence from a Cash Transfer Experiment” (2011) 126:4 *Q J Econ* 1709.

¹¹² *Ibid.*

¹¹³ *Ibid.*

2014 revealed that UCTs and CCTs positively affected school enrollment and attendance, with no marked difference in their outcomes.¹¹⁴

We note that there remains debate regarding the necessity of conditionality. Some argue that “labelling” a CT with a specific purpose could achieve similar or even superior results compared to conditional transfers.¹¹⁵ We also recognize the possibility of potential negative unintended effects; the conditions might inadvertently exclude the most vulnerable, barring those unable to meet them from continued access to support. Ultimately, the decision to impose conditions on the transfer should carefully consider the transfer’s core objective(s), who the would-be recipient is, and the obstacle(s) they face.

3.3.2. PEOPLE-CENTRED: REACHING THE HARD TO REACH

For CT programs to be effective, they must be people centred and able to reach the hard to reach. Key factors include targeting and selecting recipients, registering them, enrolling them, paying them, and ensuring the effective management of deficiencies. Among these factors, nuances and needs must be considered from both the operations and reception sides of programming.¹¹⁶ For example, a CT program needs to contemplate a transfer sum that is enough to lift people out of extreme poverty.¹¹⁷ To do so, the transfer must be reliable and predictable to help overcome the “scarcity mindset,” which is often responsible for underinvestment in essentials like nutritious meals and education vital to escaping the poverty trap.¹¹⁸

A CT should address the most severe forms of vulnerability and the most vulnerable people. Program planning must proceed with a robust understanding of would-be recipients, their living conditions, their problems, and how a CT would likely change their circumstances for the better. Mexico’s *PROGRESA* CT program makes women the direct recipients of CTs based on the idea that women are statistically more likely than men to make purchases and investments that benefit children and the household.¹¹⁹ *PROGRESA*’s design is also said to contribute to the promotion of women’s empowerment, particularly their social standing in the household.¹²⁰ However, it can have the unintended consequence of creating changes to dynamics in marital relationships that lead to higher occurrences of domestic abuse, although evidence suggests that CTs may also hold the potential to reduce intimate partner violence

¹¹⁴ See Sarah Baird et al, “Conditional, unconditional and everything in between: a systematic review of the effects of cash transfer programmes on schooling outcomes” (2014) 6:1 J Development Effectiveness 1.

¹¹⁵ See Ugo Gentilini et al, *Exploring Universal Basic Income: A Guide to Navigating Concepts, Evidence, and Practices* (Washington, DC: World Bank Publications, 2019) at 262.

¹¹⁶ See Boniface Owino, “Harmonising data systems for cash transfer programming in emergencies in Somalia” (2020) 5:11 J Intl Humanitarian Action 1 at 1.

¹¹⁷ See “Pennies from heaven”, *The Economist* (12 December 2013), online: <economist.com/international/2013/12/12/pennies-from-heaven>.

¹¹⁸ See generally Sendhil Mullainathan & Eldar Shafir, *Scarcity: Why Having Too Little Means So Much* (New York: Times Books, 2013).

¹¹⁹ See Quentin Wodon et al, *Mexico’s PROGRESA: Innovative Targeting, Gender Focus and Impact on Social Welfare* (Washington, DC: World Bank Publications, 2003) at 2.

¹²⁰ *Ibid* at 3.

overall.¹²¹ This example shows that it is important to consider how CT programs fit into already-existing social configurations, such as pervasive beliefs and practices that tend to subordinate women.

3.3.3. CONTEXT-DRIVEN

Context-driven interventions require an intimate understanding of the specific circumstances, environment, and conditions in which interventions are implemented. In particular, CT programs must be responsive and sensitive to the nuances of the populations they serve, which requires adequate data collection that reflects these details. Data must exist in “robust information system[s] [that] can facilitate the equitable and responsive distribution of humanitarian cash-based assistance while enhancing the effectiveness and efficiency of its delivery.”¹²² Data should be disaggregated based on gender, age, disability, and other features. This has been more intensely studied in the last decade in humanitarian assistance in attempts to employ more nuanced responses. Sometimes, these data are systematized through a sex- and age-disaggregated data (SADD) analysis.¹²³ These identity markers are important to ensuring that programs are applied intentionally to meet the unique needs of the populations the initiative aims to support.

A context-driven intervention should consider ways to overcome or offset unintended consequences. This can be done if inclusion and responsiveness to the priorities of specific communities are considered when planning CT programs. Consequences to be avoided are exemplified by a case in South Africa, where the COVID-19 pandemic was found to worsen the status of low-income women who were already food insecure and burden caregivers in their capacities to support themselves and their children. Through a Child Support Grant (CSG), researchers sought to determine if CTs made a difference but found that a CSG, which was already inadequate to meet the needs of recipients before the pandemic, was unable to fully mitigate the impact of COVID-19 on children’s diets, hunger, and food security. They found numerous design flaws in the program’s focus on chronic poverty, as it failed to challenge the broader economic issues that create vulnerability. They concluded that there needed to be a shift to socially transformative policies, incorporating production, redistribution, social cohesion, adequacy, and protection.¹²⁴

Moreover, to avoid criticisms of siloing SDGs while prioritizing certain goals over others, it is important to recognize and engage with their intersectionality, including by mainstreaming gender in policy design. “Gender mainstreaming” means “improving the effectivity of mainline

¹²¹ See Hidrobo et al, “Impact evaluation”, *supra* note 86; International Food Policy Research Institute, “Cash Transfer and Intimate Partner Violence Research Collaborative” (last visited on February 1st 2024), online: <ifpri.org/project/cash-transfer-and-intimate-partner-violence-research-collaborative>.

¹²² See Owino, *supra* note 116 at 4.

¹²³ See generally Dyan Mazurana, Prisca Benelli & Peter Walker, “How sex-and age-disaggregated data and gender and generational analyses can improve humanitarian response” (2013) 37:1 *Disasters* 68.

¹²⁴ See Wanga Zembe-Mkabile, Vundli Ramokolo & Tanya Doherty, “‘We should not have to choose between hunger and death’: exploring the experiences of primary caregivers of recipients of a South African child cash transfer programme during COVID-19 lockdown in Cape Town, South Africa” (2023) 31:2 *J Poverty & Soc Justice* 212.

policies by making visible the gendered nature of assumptions, processes, and outcomes,”¹²⁵ which can be a site of erasure for queer communities as well.¹²⁶ Gender mainstreaming requires reassessing all CT programs, not just those intended for women and girls, so that they respond to the lived realities of women, girls, and gender minorities. Gender mainstreaming can also catalyze the inclusion of individuals facing gender discrimination in CT program design decision-making.

Without a context-driven approach, certain vulnerable groups may be systematically excluded. In Latin America, persons with disabilities were not given explicit mention in 72 government documents relating to COVID-19-related policies. Because of these exclusions, official government responses taken by the governments examined did not fully address the needs of disabled people. For example, in Chile, “[d]isabled people who received a disability pension were not entitled to the COVID-19 cash transfer.”¹²⁷ To reach the target goals, CT programs must be informed by local contextual factors and designed to include all.

3.3.4. OPEN TO MONITORING AND REVISION

Cash Transfer programs should be open to monitoring for effectiveness continuously so that adjustments can be made, if necessary, to improve the program’s performance or relevance. The COVID-19 pandemic has made it very clear that development priorities can quickly shift, and thus, development programs and frameworks may need to be re-envisioned and readapted. One example is Pakistan’s decision to quickly expand a pre-existing CT program (Ehsaas Kafalat) to 7.5 million additional households to provide immediate relief to those hit hardest by the pandemic.¹²⁸ The government promptly prioritized women, a particularly vulnerable demographic, and innovatively employed SMS technology to bolster program accessibility.¹²⁹ Pakistan exemplifies the imperative of adaptability and continuous monitoring in development programs, especially during unforeseen challenges.

3.3.5. COORDINATED WITH BROADER INSTITUTIONAL RESPONSES

As stated earlier in the paper, the positive impacts of CT programs may be limited by the lack of additional measures to advance the delivery of services, such as broadscale economic investments to support quality education or stable access to food markets. The limited literature shows that coordinating institutional responses with CT programs may positively impact the success of CT programs with outcomes of interests related to SDG Targets 2.1, 2.2, and 4.1. A study on Ethiopia’s *Productive Safety Net Program* found that when CTs were combined with “agricultural supports,” such as improved seeds, irrigation systems, or the advice of an

¹²⁵ See Sylvia Walby, “Gender Mainstreaming: Productive Tensions in Theory and Practice” (2005) 12:3 Soc Politics 321 at 321.

¹²⁶ See e.g. Donna Baines, “Gender Mainstreaming in a Development Project: Intersectionality in a Post-Colonial Un-doing?” (2010) 17:2 Gender Work & Organization 119 at 138–40.

¹²⁷ See Dikaios Sakellariou, Ana Paula Serrata Malfitano & Elena S Rotarou, “Disability inclusiveness of government responses to COVID-19 in South America: a framework analysis study” (2020) 19:131 Intl J Equity in Health 1 at 7.

¹²⁸ See Amjad Zafar Khan, “Immediate relief for Pakistan’s pandemic-stricken poor” (4 May 2020), online (blog): <blogs.worldbank.org/endpovertyinsouthasia/immediate-relief-pakistans-pandemic-stricken-poor>.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*

agricultural expert, they were more likely to lead to better use of agricultural resources and even encouraged productive investments beyond the farming sector.¹³⁰ These findings suggest that complementing CTs with sector-specific interventions may amplify their impact. Combining CTs with even broader institutional responses, a topic on which further research is needed, can potentially have transformative effects on entire communities. While CTs alone might alleviate immediate financial constraints, combining them with broader institutional investments will likely support the broader ecosystem in which beneficiaries operate.

4. CONCLUSION

The pandemic has particularly damaged food security (SDG 2) and primary and secondary education (SDG 4). The widespread erosion of development progress on these SDGs spells potential disaster for the rest of the SDG Agenda, as their attainment is essential to making durable progress on the other SDGs. We have argued that treating the SDG Agenda as an indivisible whole is not a workable solution for policymakers in LMICs who have limited resources and must concentrate on the most severe deprivations brought on by COVID-19. Indeed, decelerating progress on core development concerns requires a recalibration of the 2030 Agenda with a flexible interpretation of the principles of indivisible or non-selective implementation of the SDGs. This interpretation recognizes that prioritizing some SDGs does not deny the interconnectivity of the goals but views certain SDGs as requiring immediate attention over others in certain situations as a matter of strategy. Pandemic-era CT programs provide a frame of reference for addressing particularly dire erosions of development progress in a flexible yet targeted and timely manner. The non-selective implementation of the SDGs may amount to a formulaic and rigid approach to development that is overly focused on preserving the integrity of the Agenda's framework. Meanwhile, CT programs have the potential to specifically target dire and urgent deprivations of development that could jeopardize the success of the entire SDG Agenda.

Further research is needed to assess the real impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the various aspects of life that the SDGs seek to improve and how the ambitious Agenda can be achieved. Cash transfer programs showcase promise but need to be contextually responsive in all circumstances in which they are applied. Our research shows general success trends, but this paper continues to caution for cultural sensitivity in all programming. The ability of certain goals to enable the achievement of others offers a promising framework for driving tangible action towards achieving the SDGs by 2030, reflecting evolving perspectives on global development.

¹³⁰ See Daniel O Gilligan, John Hoddinott & Alemayehu Seyoum Taffesse, "The Impact of Ethiopia's Productive Safety Net Programme and its Linkages" (2009) 45:10 *J Development Studies* 1684.