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COLLEGE OF HUMANITIES & SOCIAL SCIENCES

SCHOOL OF ECONOMICS

Policy Brief

NUMBER 2 MAY 2013

SHOCKS, VULNERABILITIES AND SOCIAL PROTECTION*

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Context

Social protection is expected to cushion households from shock, risks and vulnerabilities and thus provide relief from destitution for poor and vulnerable groups. It includes policies and actions aimed at enhancing capacity, and providing opportunities for the poor and vulnerable to improve and sustain their livelihoods and welfare, in addition to equipping them with the skills to better manage risks and shocks.

The study

A recent study investigated the shocks and risks faced by vulnerable groups and how social protection, among other strategies, is used to cope with shocks. A survey covering a sample of 968 households was conducted between October and December 2011 in two provinces in Kenya. The sample comprised of four groups representing beneficiaries of the orphans and vulnerable children's cash transfer programme (OVCT), beneficiaries of the old persons' cash transfer programme (OPCT), and the respective controls. The survey was supplemented by focus group discussions (FGDs) and expert opinion interviews.

* This policy brief is based on Kabubo-Mariara J. and Kiriti-Ng'ang'a T. (2013) The Impact of Social Protection on the Welfare of Vulnerable Communities in East Africa: A Case Study from Kenya. Project report presented to IDRC, Nairobi, 2013.

Findings

- (i) In order of importance, the main shocks affecting households were economic shocks (high prices for goods and inputs, low prices of farm produce, unemployment, and business failures); life cycle shocks (death of family member or household head or cash earner); and natural shocks (drought). Vulnerable groups, in particular women, the poor, and the elderly were more likely to suffer natural shocks. Recipients of cash transfers were less likely to experience shocks (especially social shocks) than their non-beneficiary counterparts.
- (ii) The main coping strategies used by households when faced with shocks were formal and informal social protection, consumption adjustment, putting in more hours of work, and establishing/operating a business.
- (iii) Households that received cash transfers, especially those under the OPCT programme, were more likely to use formal social protection and crop-related adjustments to deal with risks. Such households were less likely to use the options of borrowing money or migrating as responses to shocks.
- (iv) Informal social protection (membership in village social groups) increased the probability of adopting all types of coping mechanisms under consideration.

Policy Recommendations

- (i) It is important to enhance as well as broaden the coverage of cash transfers in order to cushion households from shocks and related vulnerabilities.
- (ii) Informal social protection is as important (it can be more important sometimes) as formal social protection in supporting the livelihoods of vulnerable groups through empowering households to cope with shocks. There is need to sensitise the poor and vulnerable groups to participate in informal social protection activities.
- (iii) In a devolved government system, local institutions are expected to play a significant role in fighting poverty at the grassroots level. The devolved government should work closely with NGOs and CBOs in this regard. Some households in the study reported that they had received assistance from CBOs and NGOs after suffering shocks. Community-based organisations and NGOs should be encouraged to go beyond social assistance and also mobilise local communities to participate in informal social protection activities. One strategy would be to encourage vulnerable households to organise themselves into groups which could then be supported through small grants for investment. Community based organisations and NGOs can provide further support to such groups by providing advisory services and by way of monitoring and evaluation of the investments.