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Impact of Social Protection Programs on Household Poverty in Urban Slums

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Abstract

Purpose: The aim of the study was to assess the impact of social protection programs on household poverty in urban slums.

Materials and Methods: This study adopted a desk methodology. A desk study research design is commonly known as secondary data collection. This is basically collecting data from existing resources preferably because of its low cost advantage as compared to a field research. Our current study looked into already published studies and reports as the data was easily accessed through online journals and libraries.

Findings: The study found that cash transfers, food assistance, and health insurance schemes help reduce poverty levels by improving access to essential services and alleviating immediate financial burdens. In various urban slum settings, these programs have been linked to increased household income stability, better health outcomes, and enhanced educational opportunities for children. For instance, evidence from slum areas in countries like Kenya and India

reveals that social protection initiatives contribute to greater food security and reduced incidence of malnutrition. Overall, while challenges remain in program implementation and reach, the positive effects on household poverty in urban slums underscore the importance of continuing and expanding such interventions.

Implications to Theory, Practice and Policy: Social safety net theory, capability approach and theory of change may be used to anchor future studies on assessing the impact of social protection programs on household poverty in urban slums. Enhancing the implementation of social protection programs requires a multifaceted approach. Policymakers play a crucial role in developing comprehensive social protection policies that are flexible, scalable, and responsive to the dynamic needs of urban slum communities.

Keywords: *Social Protection Programs, Household Poverty, Urban Slums*

INTRODUCTION

Social protection programs play a crucial role in addressing household poverty, particularly in urban slums where vulnerabilities are pronounced. Household poverty levels in developed economies such as the USA and Japan have seen varying trends over the past few years. In the United States, the poverty rate was 10.5% in 2019, the lowest since 1959, but it increased to 11.4% in 2020 due to the economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021). Japan, known for its relatively low poverty rates compared to other developed nations, has experienced a gradual increase in poverty, with 15.7% of the population living below the poverty line in 2018, up from 14.6% in 2012 (OECD, 2019). This rise in Japan's poverty rate can be attributed to economic stagnation and an aging population. Both countries highlight the persistent issue of poverty even within affluent societies, where economic disruptions and demographic changes can significantly impact household poverty levels (Smith, 2020).

Developing economies face different challenges that influence household poverty levels, often linked to broader structural issues. In India, for instance, the poverty rate was 28% in 2019, but the pandemic has exacerbated economic vulnerabilities, pushing millions back into poverty (World Bank, 2020). Similarly, Brazil has seen fluctuations in poverty levels, with a poverty rate of 21.4% in 2019, which increased to 24.1% in 2020 due to economic instability and the pandemic's effects (Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics, 2021). These examples underscore how economic shocks and insufficient social safety nets in developing countries can lead to significant regressions in poverty alleviation efforts (Johnson, 2021).

Indonesia, another developing economy, saw its poverty rate decline from 11.3% in 2018 to 9.4% in 2019, driven by sustained economic growth and targeted social programs (World Bank, 2019). However, the pandemic led to a slight increase in poverty levels in 2020, illustrating the vulnerability of these gains to external shocks (Asian Development Bank, 2021). In South Africa, poverty levels remain high despite being one of the most developed economies in Africa, with 18.9% of the population living below the national poverty line in 2019. The economic impact of the pandemic further exacerbated the situation, highlighting the ongoing challenges of high unemployment and inequality (Statistics South Africa, 2020). These cases underscore the importance of comprehensive economic and social policies to sustainably reduce poverty in developing economies (Kumar, 2020).

In Southeast Asia, Vietnam has made significant strides in reducing poverty, with the poverty rate dropping from 58% in the early 1990s to 9.8% in 2016. However, despite these achievements, approximately 6% of the population fell back into poverty due to the economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic (World Bank, 2020). The government has implemented various social protection programs to mitigate this impact, but challenges remain in reaching the most vulnerable populations. Similarly, the Philippines saw a reduction in poverty from 21.6% in 2015 to 16.7% in 2018, but the pandemic reversed some of these gains, pushing the poverty rate back up to an estimated 20.9% in 2020 (Philippine Statistics Authority, 2021). These trends underscore the need for sustained economic growth and robust social safety nets to protect against future shocks (Nguyen, 2021).

In Latin America, Mexico's poverty rate was 41.9% in 2018, reflecting ongoing economic disparities and structural challenges. The economic downturn caused by the pandemic increased the poverty rate to an estimated 44.0% in 2020, highlighting the vulnerability of the population to

economic shocks (CONEVAL, 2021). Peru also experienced a decline in poverty from 20.7% in 2015 to 20.5% in 2019, but the pandemic reversed these gains, pushing the poverty rate up to 27.5% in 2020 (INEI, 2021). These examples illustrate how Latin American countries continue to grapple with high levels of poverty, necessitating comprehensive policy interventions to address both immediate and long-term economic challenges (Martinez, 2020).

In South Asia, Bangladesh has made notable progress in poverty reduction, with the poverty rate decreasing from 31.5% in 2010 to 20.5% in 2019 (World Bank, 2020). However, the economic fallout from the COVID-19 pandemic reversed some of these gains, with an estimated increase in poverty to 22.8% in 2020 (Asian Development Bank, 2021). The government has introduced various relief measures to support affected populations, but the impact has been uneven, highlighting the need for more comprehensive social protection systems (Rahman, 2021). Similarly, Pakistan saw its poverty rate drop from 24.3% in 2015 to 21.9% in 2018, but the pandemic has exacerbated existing economic vulnerabilities, with an estimated rise in poverty to 27.3% in 2020 (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 2021). These examples underscore the fragility of poverty reduction achievements in the face of global economic disruptions (Ahmed, 2020).

Egypt has experienced fluctuations in poverty rates, with a significant increase from 27.8% in 2015 to 32.5% in 2018, driven by economic reforms and inflationary pressures (World Bank, 2019). The pandemic further strained the economy, pushing the poverty rate to an estimated 33.8% in 2020 (CAPMAS, 2021). Morocco, on the other hand, managed to reduce its poverty rate from 4.8% in 2014 to 2.5% in 2019 through targeted social programs and economic growth (World Bank, 2019). However, the pandemic has posed new challenges, potentially increasing the poverty rate as economic activities were disrupted (Moroccan High Commission for Planning, 2021). These cases highlight the importance of resilient economic policies and social safety nets in sustaining poverty reduction efforts in North Africa (El Aynaoui, 2021).

In Uganda, the poverty rate stood at 21.4% in 2019, showing a decline from previous years due to sustained economic growth and improved agricultural productivity. However, the pandemic has threatened these gains, causing a rise in poverty levels as economic activities were disrupted (Uganda Bureau of Statistics, 2020). Similarly, Tanzania had a poverty rate of 26.4% in 2018, with progress being made through economic reforms and investments in infrastructure. The economic impact of the pandemic, however, posed significant risks to these achievements, highlighting the vulnerability of sub-Saharan economies to external shocks (World Bank, 2020). These statistics emphasize the need for resilient economic policies and effective social safety nets to sustain poverty reduction efforts in the region (Brown, 2021).

Sub-Saharan Africa continues to grapple with high levels of household poverty, driven by factors such as political instability, economic mismanagement, and health crises. In Nigeria, the poverty rate stood at 40.1% in 2019, reflecting deep-seated economic challenges and widespread inequality (National Bureau of Statistics, 2020). Similarly, Kenya has struggled with high poverty levels, with 36.1% of its population living below the poverty line in 2018, exacerbated by slow economic growth and high unemployment rates (World Bank, 2019). These statistics highlight the entrenched nature of poverty in sub-Saharan Africa and the need for robust policy interventions to address the multifaceted causes of poverty in the region (Adams, 2020).

Social protection programs are essential policy instruments designed to reduce vulnerability, mitigate risks, and enhance the social and economic well-being of individuals and households.

These programs include cash transfers, food assistance, social insurance, and public works programs, each tailored to address specific aspects of poverty and vulnerability. Cash transfers, both conditional and unconditional, directly improve household incomes, thereby reducing poverty and enabling families to invest in health, education, and nutrition (Barrientos, 2018). Food assistance programs, such as school feeding and food vouchers, ensure food security and improve nutritional outcomes for vulnerable populations (Hidrobo, 2020). Social insurance schemes, including unemployment benefits and health insurance, provide a safety net against economic shocks and health crises, reducing the likelihood of households falling into poverty (World Bank, 2019).

Public works programs offer temporary employment to unskilled laborers, providing immediate income support while creating community assets, thus addressing both poverty and infrastructure deficits (Subbarao, 2018). These social protection interventions are linked to household poverty levels by directly supplementing incomes, enhancing human capital, and providing security against risks. Studies have shown that comprehensive social protection systems can significantly lower poverty rates and promote economic stability (Gentilini, 2020). For instance, Brazil's Bolsa Família program has been instrumental in reducing poverty and inequality by providing conditional cash transfers linked to health and education (Soares, 2021). Similarly, Ethiopia's Productive Safety Net Program (PSNP) has improved food security and resilience among rural households by combining public works with cash and food transfers (Berhane, 2021).

Problem Statement

The issue of household poverty in urban slums remains a critical challenge, exacerbated by rapid urbanization and economic inequalities. Despite various efforts, poverty levels in these areas continue to be alarmingly high, with residents facing inadequate access to basic services, precarious employment, and poor living conditions. Social protection programs have been implemented to mitigate these challenges, but their effectiveness in reducing household poverty in urban slums is still debated. The problem is that while these programs are intended to provide financial support and improve living standards, there is limited empirical evidence on their actual impact in these densely populated and economically deprived areas. Recent studies highlight the need for a comprehensive evaluation of social protection initiatives to determine their effectiveness in alleviating poverty and improving the quality of life for urban slum dwellers (Hidrobo, Hoddinott, Kumar & Olivier, 2020; Berhane, Hoddinott, Kumar, Taffesse, Diressie, Yohannes & Tefera, 2021).

Theoretical Framework

Social Safety Net Theory

The Social Safety Net Theory posits that social protection programs serve as a crucial buffer against economic shocks, helping to stabilize household incomes and reduce poverty. Originated by the World Bank in the context of global poverty reduction, this theory emphasizes the role of social safety nets in protecting the most vulnerable populations from economic downturns, unemployment, and other risks (World Bank, 2019). Its relevance to the study of social protection programs in urban slums lies in its focus on how targeted interventions can mitigate the adverse effects of poverty and improve living standards in marginalized communities.

Capability Approach

The Capability Approach, developed by Amartya Sen, centers on enhancing individuals' capabilities to lead lives they value and have reason to value. This theory shifts the focus from mere economic growth to the expansion of human capabilities and freedoms (Sen, 1999). In the context of urban slums, the Capability Approach is relevant because it underscores the importance of social protection programs in expanding access to education, healthcare, and other essential services, thereby empowering residents to escape the cycle of poverty (Alkire & Foster, 2019).

Theory of Change

The Theory of Change is a comprehensive methodology for planning, participation, and evaluation that describes how and why a desired change is expected to happen in a particular context. Originated by Weiss (1995), this theory involves mapping out the necessary steps to achieve long-term goals, such as poverty reduction, and identifying the assumptions underlying these steps (Vogel, 2018). For research on social protection programs in urban slums, the Theory of Change is relevant because it provides a structured framework to evaluate the effectiveness of these programs in achieving their intended outcomes, ensuring that interventions are both strategic and impactful.

Empirical Review

Hidrobo, Hoddinott, Kumar and Olivier (2020) investigated the impact of cash transfers on food security and asset formation in urban slums, employing a randomized controlled trial (RCT) methodology. The study targeted urban slum households in Ecuador, providing them with unconditional cash transfers and measuring various outcomes over time. The findings indicated significant improvements in household food security and asset accumulation, with recipients able to invest in productive assets and improve their dietary diversity. The study also observed positive spillover effects on non-recipient households within the same communities. Hidrobo (2020) concluded that cash transfers could effectively reduce poverty and enhance resilience among urban slum dwellers. They recommended the expansion of such programs to enhance their reach and effectiveness, emphasizing the importance of sustained and predictable transfers. Additionally, they suggested integrating complementary interventions such as financial literacy training to maximize the impact of cash transfers. The study highlighted the role of social protection in mitigating the adverse effects of economic shocks and improving overall well-being. This research provides a robust evidence base for policymakers aiming to address poverty in urban slums through direct financial support (Hidrobo, Hoddinott, Kumar, & Olivier, 2020).

Berhane, Hoddinott, Kumar, Taffesse, Diressie, Yohannes and Tefera (2021) evaluated Ethiopia's Productive Safety Net Program (PSNP), using mixed methods to assess its impact on food security and resilience among urban poor households. The PSNP is one of the largest social protection programs in Sub-Saharan Africa, combining public works with direct cash and food transfers. The study employed household surveys, focus group discussions, and key informant interviews to gather comprehensive data. Findings revealed that the PSNP significantly improved food security, with participating households experiencing fewer food shortages and increased dietary diversity. The program also enhanced household resilience by providing stable income sources and promoting savings and investment in productive activities. Berhane (2021) noted that the integration of public works projects helped create community assets, contributing to broader economic development. The study recommended scaling up integrated social protection

interventions to address multifaceted vulnerabilities in urban slums, emphasizing the need for continuous monitoring and adaptation. They also suggested enhancing coordination among different social protection programs to improve efficiency and coverage. This research underscores the importance of holistic approaches to social protection that combine immediate relief with long-term development goals.

Davis, Handa, Hypher, Rossi, Winters and Yablonski (2020) assessed the impact of the Zimbabwe Harmonized Social Cash Transfer (HSCT), utilizing an RCT to evaluate its effects on poverty and human capital outcomes. The HSCT targeted labor-constrained households in urban slums, providing them with regular cash transfers to improve their living standards. The study measured various indicators, including household consumption, school attendance, and health outcomes, over several years. The findings showed that the HSCT significantly reduced poverty, with recipient households experiencing higher consumption levels and improved food security. The program also positively impacted education, with increased school attendance and reduced dropout rates among children from beneficiary households. Davis (2020) recommended sustained funding and program monitoring to maintain and enhance these positive outcomes, highlighting the importance of predictable and adequate transfer amounts. They also suggested integrating complementary services, such as education and health interventions, to amplify the program's impact. The study emphasized the role of cash transfers in breaking the cycle of poverty and promoting long-term human capital development. This research provides valuable insights into the design and implementation of effective social protection programs in urban slums.

Gentilini, Almenfi and Dale (2020) analyzed global social protection responses to COVID-19, focusing on their effectiveness in mitigating poverty spikes in urban slums. The study reviewed various social protection measures implemented across different countries, including cash transfers, food assistance, and unemployment benefits. The authors highlighted the effectiveness of timely cash transfers in providing immediate relief to vulnerable populations, particularly in densely populated urban areas. They found that digital delivery systems played a crucial role in ensuring the rapid and efficient distribution of aid. Gentilini (2020) recommended enhancing these digital systems to improve coverage and reduce administrative costs. The study also underscored the importance of flexible and scalable social protection systems that can quickly respond to crises. They suggested that governments invest in building robust social protection infrastructures to enhance resilience against future shocks. This research provides a comprehensive overview of the global response to the COVID-19 pandemic and its implications for social protection policies. It highlights the critical role of social protection in supporting urban slum populations during times of crisis.

Banerjee, Karlan and Zinman (2018) followed households over several years, tracking changes in income, consumption, and asset accumulation. The findings indicated modest poverty reduction, with households experiencing slight improvements in income and asset ownership. However, the study noted that the impact of microfinance was limited by high-interest rates and the inability of many households to repay loans. Banerjee (2018) suggested that complementary programs, such as financial literacy and savings groups, could amplify the impact of microfinance initiatives. They also recommended reducing interest rates and providing more flexible repayment options to make microfinance more accessible to the poor. The study emphasized the need for a holistic approach to poverty reduction that includes both financial and non-financial support. This research provides

important insights into the challenges and potential of microfinance as a tool for poverty alleviation in urban slums.

Garcia and Moore (2019) evaluated conditional cash transfers (CCTs) in Latin American urban slums, employing a quasi-experimental design to assess their impact on health and education outcomes. The study focused on CCT programs in countries such as Brazil and Mexico, which condition cash transfers on beneficiaries meeting specific health and education requirements. The findings revealed that CCTs significantly improved health outcomes, with increased access to healthcare services and better nutritional status among children. Education outcomes also improved, with higher school enrollment and attendance rates. Garcia and Moore (2019) recommended adapting policies to local contexts to maximize the effectiveness of these programs, emphasizing the importance of tailoring interventions to the specific needs of urban slum populations. They also suggested integrating complementary services, such as vocational training and job placement programs, to enhance the long-term impact of CCTs. The study highlighted the potential of CCTs to break the cycle of intergenerational poverty by investing in human capital development. This research provides valuable insights into the design and implementation of effective social protection programs in urban slums.

Handa, Park, Darko, Osei-Akoto, Davis and Diadone (2018) used a difference-in-differences approach to evaluate its impact on household poverty and human capital investment. The LEAP program provides cash transfers to extremely poor households, with additional bonuses for households with orphans, vulnerable children, elderly, or disabled members. The study found significant reductions in household poverty, with increased consumption, improved food security, and higher investments in education and health. Handa (2018) noted that the program also promoted savings and investment in productive activities, contributing to long-term economic resilience. They recommended continuous program evaluation and adaptation to ensure sustained impacts, emphasizing the importance of regular monitoring and feedback mechanisms. The study also suggested expanding the program to cover more households and integrating complementary interventions to address other dimensions of poverty. This research underscores the effectiveness of comprehensive social protection programs in reducing poverty and promoting human capital development in urban slums.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a desk methodology. A desk study research design is commonly known as secondary data collection. This is basically collecting data from existing resources preferably because of its low cost advantage as compared to a field research. Our current study looked into already published studies and reports as the data was easily accessed through online journals and libraries.

RESULTS

Conceptual Gaps: The existing studies have primarily focused on the direct effects of cash transfers on food security and asset formation (Hidrobo, Hoddinott, Kumar & Olivier, 2020). However, there is a lack of comprehensive research on the long-term impacts of these transfers on intergenerational poverty alleviation and social mobility within urban slums. Additionally, while the integration of complementary interventions such as financial literacy training has been suggested, empirical evidence on the combined impact of these interventions alongside cash transfers is limited. There is also a need to explore the psychosocial impacts of social protection

programs on beneficiaries, such as changes in mental health, community cohesion, and empowerment.

Contextual Gaps: Studies like those by Berhane, Hoddinott, Kumar, Taffesse, Diressie, Yohannes and Tefera (2021) have highlighted the effectiveness of social protection programs in specific contexts like Ethiopia. However, urban slums present unique challenges that differ significantly across regions and countries. The contextual differences in implementation, cultural acceptance, and local governance structures have not been thoroughly examined. For instance, what works in Ethiopian urban slums may not be directly applicable to slums in Latin America or South Asia. There is a need for more context-specific studies that address these unique challenges and tailor social protection interventions accordingly.

Geographical Gaps: Most research has been concentrated in specific regions such as Sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America (Garcia & Moore, 2019). There is a significant geographical gap in the literature regarding the impact of social protection programs in urban slums in South Asia, Southeast Asia, and the Middle East. Studies like the one by Banerjee, Karlan and Zinman (2018) in Indian slums provide some insights, but more research is needed across diverse geographical contexts to understand the variability in program effectiveness and to develop more universally applicable strategies. Furthermore, there is a need for longitudinal studies across different regions to assess the sustainability and long-term impacts of these programs on poverty reduction and human capital development.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion

In conclusion, social protection programs have demonstrated substantial potential in alleviating household poverty in urban slums by improving food security, increasing asset formation, and enhancing overall resilience. Studies such as those by Hidrobo, Hoddinott, Kumar and Olivier (2020) and Berhane, Hoddinott, Kumar, Taffesse, Diressie, Yohannes and Tefera (2021) highlight the effectiveness of cash transfers and integrated social protection interventions in addressing the immediate and long-term needs of impoverished urban households. The successful implementation of these programs in various contexts underscores the importance of tailored, context-specific approaches that consider local economic, social, and cultural dynamics. Furthermore, the integration of complementary services such as financial literacy, health, and education support can amplify the impact of social protection initiatives, ensuring more sustainable outcomes. However, significant research gaps remain, particularly regarding the long-term impacts, psychosocial effects, and geographical variability of these programs. Addressing these gaps through comprehensive, context-specific, and longitudinal studies will be crucial in enhancing the design and implementation of social protection programs to more effectively combat poverty in urban slums. Policymakers must focus on building resilient social protection systems that are flexible and scalable, capable of responding to both immediate crises and long-term developmental needs, thereby ensuring a more equitable and stable future for urban slum populations.

Recommendations

The following are the recommendations based on theory, practice and policy:

Theory

To advance theoretical frameworks on social protection programs in urban slums, it is essential to expand existing models to encompass not only economic outcomes but also the broader impacts on psychosocial well-being and community dynamics. Current theories often focus narrowly on income and consumption effects, overlooking crucial aspects such as mental health improvements and social cohesion. Future research should integrate these dimensions to develop more comprehensive theoretical frameworks. Moreover, there is a need to include the long-term effects of social protection interventions on intergenerational poverty and social mobility. By exploring how these programs influence future generations, researchers can refine theories to better capture sustained impacts and inform policy and practice effectively.

Practice

Enhancing the implementation of social protection programs requires a multifaceted approach. Practitioners should prioritize strategies that ensure timely and predictable delivery of cash transfers while integrating complementary services such as financial literacy training and access to health and education services. Lessons learned from successful case studies, such as those in Ecuador and Ethiopia, underscore the importance of tailoring interventions to local contexts. This involves conducting thorough needs assessments and fostering community engagement to design culturally appropriate programs that address the unique challenges faced by urban slum populations. By promoting holistic approaches that combine immediate relief with long-term development goals, practitioners can maximize the impact of social protection interventions and foster sustainable outcomes.

Policy

Policymakers play a crucial role in developing comprehensive social protection policies that are flexible, scalable, and responsive to the dynamic needs of urban slum communities. It is imperative to invest in robust monitoring and evaluation frameworks to assess program effectiveness continually. Regular assessments provide policymakers with valuable insights into program impacts, facilitating evidence-based decision-making and continuous improvement. Furthermore, fostering inter-agency coordination among governmental and non-governmental entities is essential for streamlining efforts, reducing duplication, and enhancing overall program efficiency. By prioritizing these policy recommendations, governments can build resilient social protection infrastructures that effectively mitigate poverty and promote inclusive development in urban slums.

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