

# Stomach Infrastructures in African Children

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Child labour remains a prevalent global concern, and progress toward eradicating harmful children's work appears to have stalled in the African continent and henceforth, integrated social policy intervention is still required to address the problem. Among several forms of social policy interventions, stomach infrastructure (i.e., in-kind and/or cash transfers) have been a key policy approach to support vulnerable families to lighten households' resources burden, which forces them to consider child labour as a coping strategy. There is growing evidence on the impacts of these programs in child labour. However, this evidence is often mixed regarding children's work outcomes, and the existing studies hardly describe such heterogeneous outcomes from the child-sensitive approach. To this end, a systematic literature search was conducted for studies in African countries. From 743 references retrieved in this study, 27 studies were included for the review, and a narrative approach has been employed to analyse extracted evidence. Results from the current study also demonstrate a mixed effect of in-kind and cash transfers for poor households on child labour decisions. Hence, the finding from the current review also demonstrates reduced participation of children in paid and unpaid work outside the household due to in-kind and cash transfers to poor households, but children's time spent in economic and non-economic household labour and farm and non-farm labour, which are detrimental to child health and schooling, has been reported increasing due to the program interventions. The question remains how these programs can effectively consider child-specific and household-related key characteristics. To this end, a child-sensitive social protection perspective has been applied in this study to explain these mixed outcomes to inform policy design.

child labour

social transfer

social protection

child-sensitive

cash transfer

## 1. Introduction

Child labour is described as work that deprives children's potential, dignity, and childhood is detrimental to physical and mental development and interferes with schooling <sup>[1]</sup>. It remains a prevalent social problem in low- and middle-income countries <sup>[2]</sup>. According to the latest global estimates, 160 million children—63 million girls and 97 million boys—were in child labour at the beginning of 2020, accounting for almost 1 in 10 of all children worldwide. The same sources report that global progress against child labour has stagnated since 2016, and the percentage of children in child labour remained unchanged over the four-year period while the absolute number of children in child labour increased by over 8 million. Similarly, the percentage of children in hazardous work was almost unchanged but rose in absolute terms by 6.5 million children <sup>[3]</sup>.

In Asia and the Pacific, Latin America, and the Caribbean, child labour has curved down over the last four years in percentage and absolute terms. However, in the Sub-Saharan African region, an increase in both the number and

percentage of children in child labour has been recorded since 2012. There are now more children in child labour in Sub-Saharan Africa than in the rest of the world combined, where 86.6 million (23.9%) are child labourers in this sub-region. To this end, global child labour goals will not be achieved without a breakthrough in this region <sup>[3]</sup>.

While ending child labour is one of the key targets of sustainable development Goal 8.7, evidence suggests that the progress toward ending child labour by 2025 is still insufficient to meet the target and, henceforth, integrated social protection investment is a key to achieve the target <sup>[4]</sup>.

Hence, social protection programmes have been increasingly recognised as a key strategy for reducing poverty and vulnerability <sup>[5]</sup>. However, only 35 per cent of global children enjoy effective access to social protection, whereas almost two-thirds of children are not covered with any forms of social protection; most of these children are from Africa and Asia <sup>[6]</sup>, which suggests the need to increase social protection coverage for most vulnerable children in these parts of the world. Additionally, in most parts of Sub-Saharan African countries, children's work is a normal part of their development, and a useful component of their everyday socialisation, sources of livelihood, schooling, and social relationships. To this end, it is most challenging to draw a strict boundary between children's work and child labour, as children's participation in economic activities in the African context, in general, is alleged to be useful for children's well-being <sup>[7]</sup>, and yet conceptualisation of harms on children's lives rarely incorporate children's and parents' perspective. In the context of Africa, in particular, vulnerability is multidimensional, and childhood is not a time free from responsibility; hence, many children continue to make economic contributions to their households through their work while also attending schools <sup>[8][9]</sup>.

On the other hand, stomach infrastructure in the form of social protection support for vulnerable and poor families has been a key policy instrument that has been implemented in most parts of African countries to support poor families to reduce their reliance on child labour as a coping strategy. Hence, the effects of these programs on child labour decisions have been widely recognised in the existing literature <sup>[10][11][12]</sup>. However, these studies on the effects of in-kind and cash transfer to vulnerable families rarely incorporate child-specific and household-related factors which determine social policy effects on child labour decisions. In addition, in the context of Africa, as child work is also the result of household-specific, school-related <sup>[13]</sup>, and community factors, examining whether such interventions have given emphasis to such interconnected factors is an important question to ponder.

## 2. Stomach Infrastructures on Children's Work and Child Labour in Africa

Results from the studies inform a mixed effect of in-kind and cash transfer to vulnerable families on child labour/child work outcomes. In support of this finding, a review and meta-analysis by <sup>[14]</sup> on the impact of cash transfer on child labour found that cash transfer programmes reduced child labour by 7 per cent on average, yet reported that these findings were moderated by gender and that the program reduced work participation for boys by 7 per cent, but had no significant impact for work undertaken by girls.

Moreover, the other review on the effect of unconditional cash transfer in low- and middle-income countries also reported uncertainty in the effect of unconditional cash transfer on the likelihood of children engaged in child labour [11]. Similar results were also presented in a review by [15] on Latin America and African countries, who identified contrasting effects of cash transfer on child labour. In this review, a study from Colombia reported a decline in the amount of time spent on work by the student due to program intervention; whereas a study from Malawi, on the other hand, reported a significant increase in child labour among students receiving cash transfer [16].

Thus, contrary to the conclusion by [12], who contends that the cash transfer program does not increase child labour, [17] his study in Bolivia provided evidence that shows the probability that such programs can lead to increases in child labour. On this point, the study from India on the safety net mechanism also found evidence indicating an increase in child labour as unintentional adverse effects of such social protection programs [18].

The other review in Sub-Saharan African countries by [19] also reported varied results of social transfer programs, such as the decline in child labour due to social transfer programs in Malawi and Kenya, limited impact of social transfer programs in Lesotho, Uganda, and Zimbabwe, and increase in child labour in terms of children's participation in unpaid work in Zambia's social transfer programs. One study from Zambia also reported an increase in child labour irrespective of the program, which shows that social transfer programs would not necessarily reduce child labour [20]. This was also reflected in a study [21] which reported that an increase in household wealth through a cash transfer does not necessarily lead to a decrease in child labour, and even an increase in school participation due to program intervention does not directly translate into child labour reduction, as children may end up being engaged in both. Likewise, the study from Burkina Faso also witnessed that programs that reduce both the time and the monetary costs of education are not necessarily sufficient to reduce child labour, even if they effectively increase school attendance [22].

The study from Malawi and Zambia on the impact of cash transfer programs also reported a mixed and inconclusive result, as it was found that the program had a positive contribution on children's school attendance and material well-being on the one hand, and an increase in children's engagement on works that may be detrimental to their health, such as activities that expose children to hazards in Malawi and excessive working hours in Zambia [23]. Additionally, a study from Ethiopia's social cash transfer programme also reported a mixed result that, in rural areas, the transfer led to a half an hour reduction in the total number of hours children worked, while in urban areas, transfers had the opposite impact, worsening the child labour situation [21].

The possible explanation for such mixed reports in the literature regarding social protection intervention and child labour has a two-fold implication [24]. These include, on the one hand, many of the dimensions of children's well-being often not heard or taken into account and on the other hand, social transfer programs design insufficiently consider possible risk factors which may lead to adverse impacts for children such as increases in child work, domestic violence, inequalities, and/or the disruption of schooling or childcare arrangements [25].

Moreover, an approach that targets households with the assumption that all members of the household (including children) will benefit equally usually overlook children's specific vulnerability and, thus, a range of components of

social protection aimed at addressing the multidimensional vulnerability of children is required [26]. To this end, the child-sensitive social protection approach has been stressed as having the potential to address the dual needs of children by protecting them from risks and vulnerability and responding to their developmental needs.

## 2.1. Child Sensitive Approach to Mixed Outcome in Child Labour

### 2.1.1. Children's Age

Stomach infrastructure to poor families has been found to produce various effects for children within different age groups. A child-sensitive approach is stressed to describe such heterogeneity in the current study. The impacts of social transfer on child labour vary by the age group and gender of children. Among studies included in the current review, age-specific child labour outcome has been reported in most studies, and child labour has been reported to increase with an increase in child age [16][27][28][29]. This implies that older children are more likely to participate in child labour than younger children, which social transfer programs need to consider.

### 2.1.2. Child Gender

Gender variation among children in the household is also an important factor for heterogeneity in child labour outcomes. Among eleven ( $n = 11$ ) studies included in the current review which reported a reduction in child participation in labour, four studies reported that in-kind and cash transfers reduced participation for boys [30][31][28] than for girls, and one study reported reduced participation of both boys and girls in labour due to transfer programs [32]. The remaining eight ( $n = 8$ ) studies did not report gender-related variation on the effects of social transfer programs on child labour. On the other hand, social transfer programs increased both boys' and girls' participation in economic activities [16][26][33] and increased the participation of boys as opposed to girls [22]. Hence, such heterogeneous effects of stomach infrastructure remain unexplained in the existing literature. Thus, adopting a child-sensitive approach would acknowledge the socio-cultural context of children's work, in addition to a mere increase in transfer size and ascribing conditions on transfers, so that desired results can be achieved for both gender categories.

### 2.1.3. Forms and Intensity of Work

The impact of a social transfer program also varies with the form of activities in which children are involved, such as farm work, child work outside the household (paid and unpaid), and household chores. Among studies reporting a reduction in child labour and child work, seven studies reported a decline in children's involvement in work (either paid or unpaid) outside the household [34][32][31][28][35][29][36]; two studies reported a decline in child labour in household activities [37][38], and two studies reported a decline in extensive child labour on farms due to social transfers [32][30]. However, in terms of child labour and child work forms, these lists are not exclusive, as a decrease in household activities, labour outside the household, and child work on the farm has been reported to a varying degree in most studies.

Moreover, studies reporting an increase in child labour and child work intensity also reported an increase in child work outside the household, intensive farm work, and working in the household. These also show that a decline in one form of child work also increased other forms. Social transfer programs have been found to contribute to the reduction in child work outside the household. However, additional income transferred to the household was invested in productive activities, which increased child labour demand and work intensity in the household, exposed them to hazards, and affected their schooling [16][21][22][39]. Social transfers also increased household investment in productive activities in Malawi, which increased children's exposure to hazardous work which exposed them to dust, fumes, gas, extreme heat, cold, or humidity [16]. This implies that, in addition to transfer size and modality, which have been key factors for heterogeneity in impacts of social transfer programs on children's participation in labour, the current review also must stress the need to consider the nature and intensity of work that children would be involved in due to social transfers to vulnerable households, as these programs have been found to reduce a given form of child work while increasing children's participation in other forms of works which are still detrimental to their health.

#### 2.1.4. Children's Agency and Work

Children's agency, which is conceptualised as the capacity to act on their own [40][41], and their decision to engage in work to earn money, are key factors determining participation in economic activities, though have been rarely documented in the literature as key determinants of child work. The current review also found that children's decision to be involved in work, irrespective of its detrimental effect, has been reported in few studies. Despite resource transfer to their caregivers, boys increasingly participate in economic activities to finance their education [22]. The perceived opportunity cost of attending schools among boys has been found a determining factor for children's decision for increased involvement in farm work, which suggests that a child's role in the decision to involve in work is also a key factor that might also contribute to increased participation of children in labour [42].

#### 2.1.5. Gender of the Household Head

In addition to child-related factors (age, gender, and children's agency), the gender of the household head has been reported with variation in child labour outcome after program support. As [27] reported, as female-headed households invest the transfer in productive activities, for children in female-headed, children's participation in non-household labour reduced (−9%), and engagement in household chores increased by 15% and with 0.42 h spent in labour due to the income transfer program. Moreover, [21] also reported a similar effect of social transfer in a female-headed household that the transfer used to pursue productive opportunities increased child work time in the household. Therefore, the current study illustrates that addressing child labour decisions through resource transfer to vulnerable families has to give significant emphasis to the context in which the children live and decide to work.

## 3. Conclusions

Social transfer programs have a potential role in reducing children's work outside the household for pay. However, they could not remove children from labour altogether, as the transfer size is generally too small to make a big

difference, and not enough to take children out of work entirely. The current study found that stomach infrastructure would be an effective policy strategy to reduce child labour if they could give sufficient attention to child-specific and household-related factors determining the effects of policy intervention. Consequently, in addition to commonly stated factors creating heterogeneous results in child labour outcomes, such as program design, targeting strategies, and transfer size, emphasis on child-specific and household-related factors equally play a substantial role in the pathway in which the social transfer programs can work effectively to address adverse child labour outcome.

Evidence suggests that child and household-specific factors such as age, gender, children's agency, gender of the household head, and forms and intensity of work require considerable attention to achieve a positive outcome from the social transfer program. To this end, adopting a child-sensitive approach in designing and monitoring social transfer through context-specific and in-depth inquiry into children's perspectives and household characteristics is an important pathway. Therefore, policymakers and program managers need to emphasise such factors, clarifying how and why social transfer programs would either reduce or increase child labour and intensive child work in different contexts.

Furthermore, the existing studies on the role of social transfer on child labour primarily report the economic impacts of increased household income as contributing factors for reducing child labour. However, as most of these studies adopt a quantitative measurement, they rarely involve the perception, expectation, and experiences of caregivers, children, and the community regarding the actual benefits of the transfer program regarding reducing children's vulnerability into labour works. To this end, as the child-sensitive social protection approach considers the voices and perspectives of children and their caregivers, future studies on these issues should involve multiple perspectives to understand factors contributing to children's vulnerability to child labour beyond the economic aspects. Moreover, the lack of standard measurement regarding child sensitivity of social protection should also be addressed by integrating child-sensitive social protection principles with a rights-based perspective.

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