Background

Universal Child Grants (UCGs) are increasingly discussed as a policy instrument to achieve universal social protection and progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals. At present, 385 million children live in extreme poverty. This has devastating impacts on children in the shorter and longer term, as well as broader implication for societies and economies. Social protection has proven an effective instrument in addressing poverty. However, social protection coverage of children worldwide is low and highly uneven.

Cash transfers have been increasingly adopted by countries worldwide. There is growing interest in the potential of transfers to make a significant difference in the lives of children. They also constitute an important element in countries’ efforts to build national social protection systems, including floors, that guarantee income security and access to health and other services across the life cycle. In addition, the global discussion on universal basic income demonstrates a growing appetite for universal approaches to direct support. At the same time, debates on the effectiveness and trade-offs of alternative policy options remain alive. Key issues around targeting and universalism, conditionality, policy financing, the positioning of cash transfer schemes within wider social and fiscal policy, variations in cash transfer core design features (such as the level of transfers, duration of participation) and their implications for policy impact on children’s outcomes and policy sustainability are widely debated.

International Conference on UCGs

This conference, convened by UNICEF, the International Labour Organization (ILO) and the Overseas Development Institute (ODI), brings together national governments and policy practitioners, researchers and representatives of multilateral and international organisations and civil society, to explore the arguments and the evidence emerging from the implementation of alternative cash transfer schemes and their implications for UCGs. It aims to promote informed policy debate and decision-making with regards to cash transfers, social protection and the objectives of reducing child poverty and improving wider outcomes for children.

The conference provides a platform for practitioners and researchers to exchange knowledge on and debate both the wider policy questions associated with UCGs and the specifics of policy design and implementation. Conference panels and roundtable discussions will tackle key questions such as whether now is the time for UCGs, what are the lessons learned to date and what will it take to translate these into practice? Conference parallel sessions will hone in on design and implementation details of alternative child grants, their positioning and role within wider social and fiscal policy, and their effectiveness in tackling child poverty and promoting child wellbeing.

Themes covered in the conference parallel sessions include:

- Rights and legislation: how do UCGs contribute to realising human rights compared with other types of transfers? The advantages and disadvantages of different policy options are discussed in relation to the international normative framework, including human rights instruments and social security standards, which guides decision makers and practitioners in the design, implementation and evaluation of social protection programmes. How do UCGs contribute to progress with regard to the principles of equality and non-discrimination as well as other critical issues such as the best interests of the child? Why are privacy and data protection and access to information critical to the implementation of UCGs?

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1 Typically assume the form of non-contributory instruments characterised by no means-test, paid in cash or as a tax transfer without behavioural conditions, on a regular basis to the primary caregiver, for children between the ages of 0-18 years or longer if children in full time higher education/training or with a disability.
• **Political economy of UCGs**: it has been argued that universal approaches can help secure public support for and the political legitimacy of social protection compared with narrowly targeted approaches. In principle, a universal approach could support the establishment of a broad-based consensus and the principle of solidarity and risk pooling that underpins social protection. This, in turn, may contribute to reducing social instability. To what extent does/would a UCG contribute to public support for social protection policy and possibly social cohesion?

• **UCG positioning within wider policy context**: how are UCGs linked to wider social and fiscal policy? Why does the wider social and fiscal policy context matter? What are the opportunities for strengthening the links between cash transfers, education, health and fiscal policy and ensuring these reinforce each other in the pursuit of social protection and wider development objectives?

• **UCG affordability and financing**: universal approaches to social protection are commonly labelled as more financially costly than targeted approaches. What are the costs of a UCG and how do these compare with alternative cash transfers? How have UCGs been financed in practice? From the perspective of policy sustainability, is a universal approach more likely to secure financial resources when compared with targeted interventions (e.g. are targeted interventions more likely to be discontinued on a crisis)? What does the evidence tell us?

• **UCG administration**: one of the arguments in support of universal approaches is their administrative simplicity (e.g. easier and cheaper to administer and more user friendly) compared with interventions with elements of targeting and conditionality. Is this the case for UCGs? What are the potential or actual observed advantages in terms of policy administration of a UCG compared with alternative schemes?

• **UCG design features and policy effectiveness**: the categorical and unconditional nature of a UCG displays potential advantages in terms of population coverage and minimising the social costs associated with narrow targeting and conditionality, yet may have implications for the adequacy of provision and policy impact. What are the trade-offs associated with different policy design and implementation options for policy impact on child poverty and wider child outcomes including education, health, labour, dignity and shame?

The conference will link high quality research on these topics with the experience of policy delivery and operationalisation in practice. To this end, a Call for Papers was issued earlier this year, attracting submissions from academics and researchers from countries worldwide, and national practitioners working on the design and delivery of such schemes were invited to share their experience. Country experience, including the challenges, practices, issues moving forward, covering a range of high-, middle- and low-income countries will be shared and discussed throughout the conference.

**Conference participation**

This three-day conference will be held on the 6-8 February at the ILO headquarters in Geneva (4 route des Morillons, CH-1211, Genève 22, Switzerland).

Approximately 300 participants representing governments from over 40 countries, regional, multilateral and international organizations, civil society and academia are expected to participate.

Please note that this conference is by invitation only. The access to the formal e-registration platform and invitation will be sent to participants by email.

The conference includes high-level panels, roundtable discussions, thematic parallel sessions and speed networking sessions.

**Contact**

UCG Conference Secretariat

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